

Virtual Group Coaching: A Curriculum for Coaches and Educators

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Virtual group coaching exists at the intersection of coaching and the group experience. At a high level, virtual group coaching can be defined as exploring the coaching process with a group of individuals who are being coached by a professional coach utilizing the vehicle of group process to accomplish the goals and objectives of the individual. Currently, there exist no guidelines or standards for group coaching regarding approach or educational curriculum. As the field of coaching matures and evolves, investigating and gaining an understanding of what coaches need to know in order to effectively coach a virtual group will be not only helpful but necessary. Insights found in this article have been gained from both the author's research and experience as a group coach.

Coaching is an emerging and evolving field, complex and dynamic, integrating the ideas, theories, and approaches of many theorists and researchers both past and present. Coaches, for decades, have been sought to help improve performance (Short & Short, 2005). Although athletic coaches initially paved the way (Gallwey, 1976), coaching has expanded to a variety of fields for many years to assist individuals to improve performance and reach goals in a plethora of areas such as, music, language, and drama, all employed with the express purpose of enhancing performance. The expansion has also reached to the business environment for the express purpose of enhancing performance and reaching goals (Weller & Weller, 2004).

As organizations have become more complex in this global realm, enhancing one's performance and achieving effectiveness has become more complicated. One way organizations are choosing to assist in enhancing leader effectiveness is through the intervention of executive coaching (Weller & Weller, 2004). It is a performance strategy that has become more widely accepted and utilized by corporations and as a result has

increased the level of interest of researchers (Kampa-Kokesch & Anderson, 2001). Although the literature has grown significantly in the past decade with the growth of the field, there still remain many empirical gaps, one of which is the study of group coaching environments. Much work remains before the field of coaching will be seen as a stand-alone profession.

The first step in enhancing one's performance in any area is to acknowledge and identify the need for improvement. Such self-knowledge can be extremely difficult to come by alone. It is often through the help of others that our insight is increased (Kets de Vries, 2005). Although one-on-one coaching can be very effective, it is often through approaches that utilize group techniques that lead to greater commitment and increased accountability at the individual level (Cohen & Bailey, 1997; Hogg & Tindale, 2003; Kets de Vries, 2005). The group to which an individual belongs is the grounding for his perceptions, feelings, and actions (Lewin, 1945). Participating in exercises as a group can lead to improvement and results that individuals have difficulty achieving on their own (Kets de Vries, 2005). Developing an accurate self-assessment is one of the most basic challenges most of us face (Kaplan, 1991).

One approach that has been used to help raise awareness in others is the *vehicle of group*. Groups can help individuals get to a deeper, more meaningful level, often more quickly than one-on-one experiences (Lewin, 1945). Being a part of a group can evoke feelings and behaviors often more quickly than in a one-on-one setting. Whether formally planned or not, groups can be very powerful vehicles for evoking change in others. Formal groups, informal groups, family groups, organizational groups, task groups, survival groups, therapy groups, and so on, can all be used as trans-

formational, effective experiences (Bion, 1961). Being a part of a group gives individuals a sense of being larger, greater, and better than they really are. Group membership is a way of fulfilling our ego ideal (Kets de Vries, 1991). Groups have changed the lives of people and have been an impetus for change in personal and organizational productivity. In contrast, one-on-one interventions do not have the same level of impact (Stober & Grant, 2006). With the development of information technology how we gather together in groups has changed.

Virtual Communities

According to the Council for Research Excellence (2013), the average person spends over 8.5 hours a day involved in some aspect of virtual media; smartphones, computers, TV, global positioning system, and so on (see <http://www.researchexcellence.com/news.php>). In 2013, Pew Research reported that 91% of American adults owned a cell phone and utilized it for a variety of purposes (text, take pictures, etc.). Of the 91% who own a cell phone, 67% are checking their phone even when it is not chiming or vibrating (see <http://www.pewinternet.org/2013/12/30/social-media-update-2013/>).

Over the past decade a new type of human society has emerged—one that is based on technology. This new type of human society can be referred to as a virtual society. How we think, act, and feel is impacted by this virtualness (Duoduo, 2013). A virtual community can be defined as a social network of individuals who are geographically dispersed yet cross geographic boundaries to pursue mutual interests or goals (Rheingold, 1993). People in virtual communities have become very sophisticated and very creative at doing everything that anyone else can do in real life: talk,

make plans, laugh, cry, argue, brainstorm, provide emotional support, date, fall in love, play games, produce work, and so on. The only difference is that it is done without a physical body present in the same space. What has been discovered as virtual communities have evolved during the past decade is that a lot can happen within the boundaries of a virtual community. To the millions who engage in a virtual community, the results have been rewarding and rich and in some cases even addictive (Rheingold, 1993). As more and more organizations and businesses have understood the impact that virtual communities can have on their bottom line, interest in *virtual methodologies* as a way to get business accomplished has increased.

Virtual Coaching

These technology changes have impacted all areas of our lives, both professionally and personally. This includes the world of coaching: (a) how both the coach and the client are obtained or recruited, (b) how coaching is designed, and (c) what methodology or medium will be used. As more and more organizations and businesses have understood the impact virtual communities can have on their ability to be productive, interest in *virtual methodologies* as a way to accomplish business has increased. As technology has engulfed every aspect of our lives, we are all discovering what aspects we prefer about being in a virtual community and those that we don't. However, in some circumstances, we are realizing we don't always have a choice about being a part of a virtual community.

It is therefore only judicious that those who are in the practice of coaching others explore the impact that our present-day society is having on our methodologies. In the sections that follow,

three different methodologies will be explored: team coaching, peer coaching, and group coaching, both face-to-face and virtual.

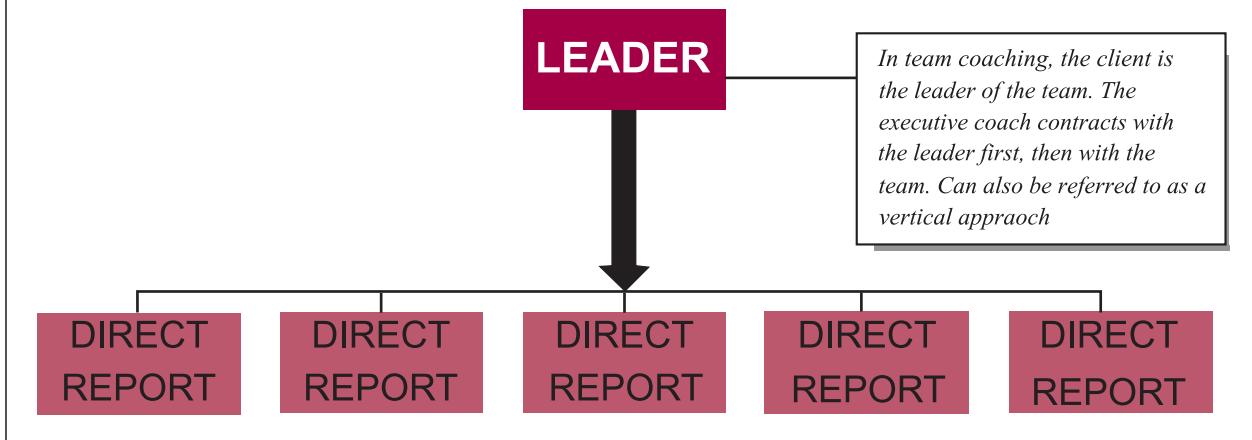
Coaching Methodologies

Although the field of coaching has been established for years, the concepts of team coaching, peer coaching, group coaching, or coaching within a group setting have only emerged since the late 1990s (Sherman & Freas, 2004). Although there is an increasing awareness among coaches of a need to ground their coaching practices in solid theoretical understanding and agreed-upon definitions, there still exists a "one-size-fits-all" mentality (Grant & Cavanagh, 2004). This one-size-fits-all mentality has slowed down the maturation process for the coaching community both in theory and in practice (Brock, 2008).

The term *group coaching* when found in literature is most often reflective of *team coaching*, a leader working with his or her intact team which are all focusing on the same goal and outcome (Appleby & Phillips, 2007; Barrett, 2006; Brock, 2008; Goldsmith, Morgan, & Ogg, 2004; Kets de Vries, 2005; Showers, Murphy, & Joyce, 1996; Thorn, McLeod, & Goldsmith; 2007). These approaches, although beneficial to the client(s), had more of a top-down or *vertical* approach with the emphasis on accomplishing one leader's objective.

In contrast, group is based on an equalitarian or *horizontal* approach, with individuals at a comparable professional or personal level. The horizontal approach, in the context of virtual group coaching, are not interrelated by the *same* goals or objectives, but yet still have the express purpose of gaining insight into their individual areas of needed improvement, which may overlap or be similar in nature. As a way to understand the similarities and distinctions that exist, the graphics

Figure 1
Team Coaching Approach



included here help to further define these different approaches (see Figures 1 through 4).

Team Coaching

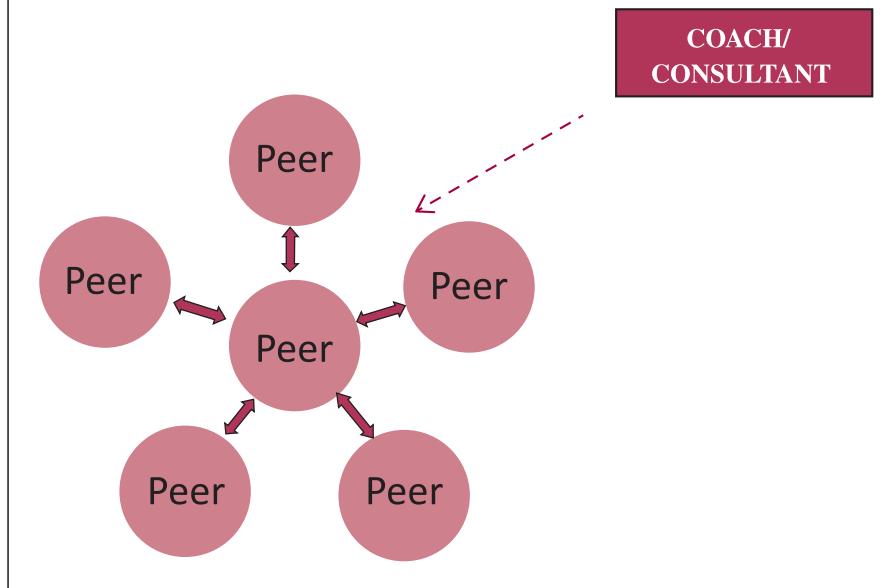
In team coaching, the purpose and entry of the coaching engagement is driven by the leader of an intact team or *team lead* (Barrett, 2006; Skiffington & Zeus, 2008). The coach focuses on the goal of the leader, not on the goals of each individual. The purpose of the coaching engagement is generally on improving the effectiveness of the *team* as a whole. It is a *vertical* approach to coaching, meaning everything is focused upward on the leader and their specific goals for obtainment. The team is focused on accomplishing the *same* goals and objectives as outlined by the leader of the team. It is often used in team building, developing a newly established team and increasing productivity of the team overall and so on. Sometimes team coaching can involve the use of peer coaching to help enhance team effectiveness (Appleby & Phillips, 2007; Barrett, 2006; Brock, 2008; Goldsmith et al., 2004; Kets de Vries, 2005; Showers et al., 1996; Skiffington & Zeus, 2008; Thorn et al., 2007).

Peer Coaching

Peer coaching was originally developed as a cost-effective way to provide quality coaching to midlevel, high-potential, and emerging leaders (Thorn et al., 2007). In this approach, each participant acts as both the coach and the coachee. Peers perform the role of trusted thinking partners to their peers. They also help to provide objective support to their peers and hold each other accountable on selected goals. The coach, or organization development consultant, intervenes informally and acts as a *guide*, usually at the beginning of the process. The coach or consultant may also assist in helping the group get established or may help in managing the overall process. In organizations, a coach or consultant is often identified as someone the peers may contact and may be internal to the organization (Thorn et al., 2007). Members may consult with a coach or consultant on a particular area or topic related to the specific topic, communication, delegation, and the like.

The emphasis in peer coaching is feedback from each other, as it fosters a sense of companionship, friendship, and belonging. It allows

Figure 2
Peer Coaching Approach



others to recognize their strengths, weaknesses, and areas of needed improvement safely with the help of their peers. The benefit of nonevaluative feedback is that it helps to maintain the enthusiasm and engagement in the process (Skiffington & Zeus, 2008). This approach should not be confused with *group therapy*, which views participants through a medical or pathological model, while the peer coaching approach views participants as naturally whole, creative, and resourceful and able to generate their own solutions.

Group Coaching

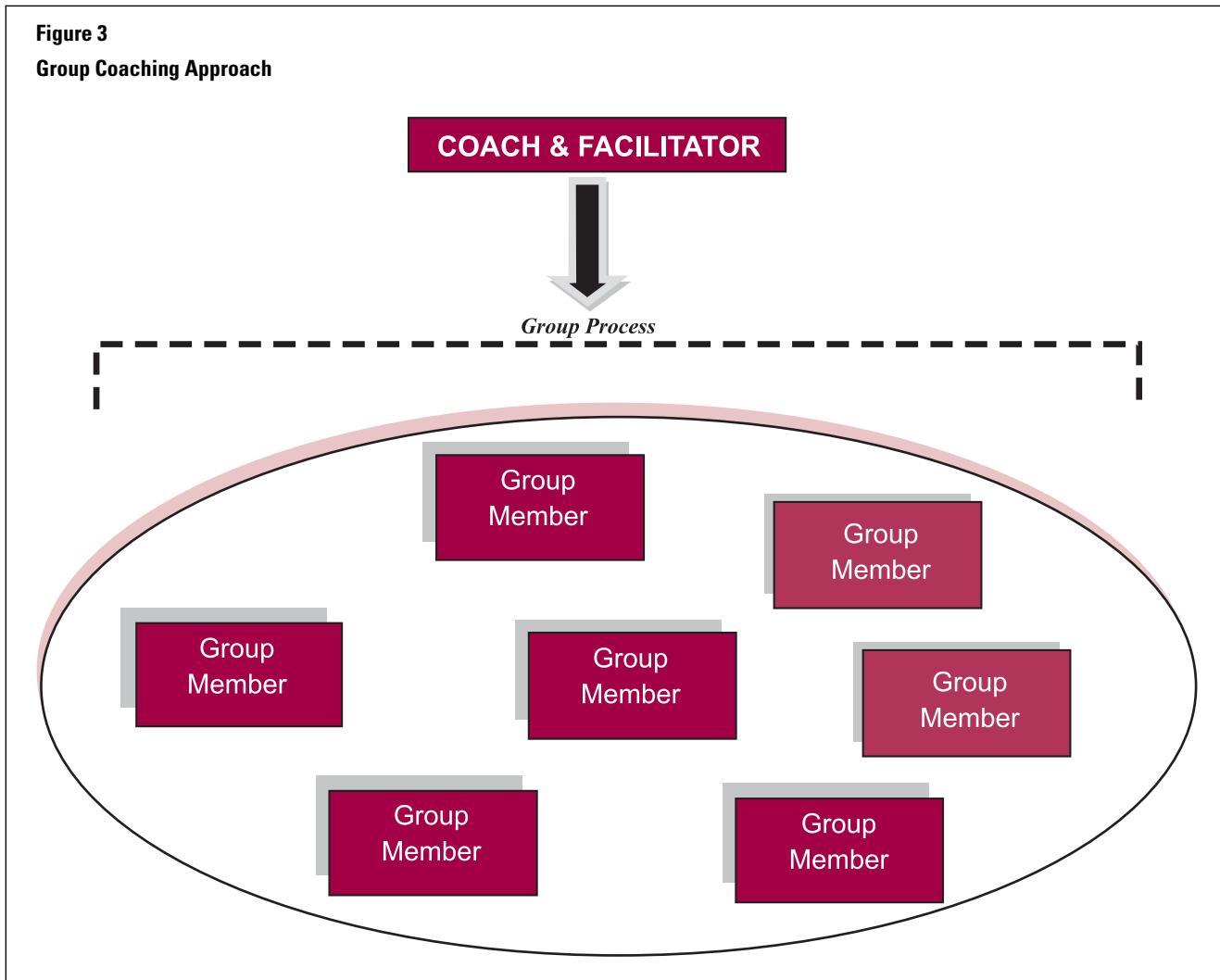
Although some similarities exist between team, peer, and group coaching, the purpose in group coaching is to engage each individual on their own respective goals by using the *vehicle* of group process. Leveraging the input of other members in the group, individual awareness can be increased (Corey, 1990; Forsyth, 2006; Lewin, 1951). This ap-

proach can be referred to as a *horizontal* approach because each individual is at the same level and is not interrelated organizationally or otherwise. It is one coach working with a group of individuals who share similarities personally or professionally. In group coaching, the group is used as the vehicle to accomplish awareness and effectiveness within the individual. The coach acts as a facilitator of the group process (McGrath & Argote, 2003).

Virtual Group Coaching

A new way of communicating with each other has emerged, which has sophisticated and complicated the art of communicating with each other without being in the same physical location. Teleconferencing, videoconferencing, instant messaging, webinars, GoToMeeting, Skype, Instagram, and Chat, in conjunction with the use of e-mail, websites, and texting, has provided a

Figure 3
Group Coaching Approach



whole new perspective as a way to understand and get to know each other as people (Brake, 2006). We have become a wireless world, bombarded by technological advances in some instances on a daily, even hourly, basis. This intrusion into our psyche allows and *forces us* to connect with each other through a variety of methods (Walther, Bunz, & Bazarova, 2005).

The advent of the various technological options mentioned earlier offer both an opportunity and a challenge for coaches. Delivering group coaching virtually can be both effective and necessary if the coach understands the uniqueness of the process. Spending time to educate oneself on

the uniqueness and the challenges would be a wise investment of time.

Group Coaching Literature

Although virtual group coaching can be found at the intersection of coaching and group dynamics, we can increase our understanding by looking into the well-established and researched disciplines such as psychology, sociology, social psychology, and education. Coach researchers have identified other areas for consideration, such as communication studies, the self-help movement, social systems theory, athletic motivation,

the holistic movement, and management and leadership (Barrett, 2006; Brock, 2008; Herr, 1998; Stein, 2003).

In order to understand the context in which this methodology sits, it is important to understand the two main bodies of knowledge that inform this work: coaching and group dynamics. Both have influenced developmental activities in work and personal behavior (Axelrod, 2005). The developmental and theoretical framework for the study of clients in a virtual group coaching process is based on the collective contributions of several different theories, models, and approaches from both coaching and group dynamics. This is due in large part to the fact that coaching programs, whether individual or group based, are an emerging educational and developmental process. They are designed to focus on the performance improvement of individuals and are grounded in adult learning theory (Hudson, 1999).

Group Dynamics

Group dynamics began as an identifiable field of inquiry in the United States toward the end of the 1930s and is primarily associated with Kurt Lewin, who is known to have popularized the term. Lewin (1951) described group dynamics as the way groups and individuals act and react to changing circumstances. He made significant contributions to the field in both research and theory.

Although Lewin's contributions were significant, group dynamics was not the creation of one person but the development of many over a period of several years and from several different disciplines and professions. Lewin is credited with facilitating a philosophical change in group theory, but he is also accompanied by the work of Homans (1950), Bales (1950), and Thibaut and Kelley (1959). Together, these researchers saw

the group as a system of interrelated parts, each providing a necessary function, each reliant on the group's task activity. As the idea of interdependency was redefined, field theory and systems theory emerged as the two major orientations of group dynamics during this time period (Cartwright & Zander, 1968). Group dynamics today has spread far beyond the initial disciplines of psychology and sociology and is now considered to be much more interdisciplinary, with branches in other social sciences (Forsyth, 2006).

Group Facilitation

Whereas group dynamics is focused on the study of the individual's behavior in the group, facilitation is more about process and is most often mentioned in conjunction with decision making. There is a distinct difference in presenting information, teaching content, and facilitating process. Facilitation is designed for groups, organizations, networks, and communities. It is focused on *how* you do something rather than the content that is being discussed in the group. The facilitator is facilitating from a neutral place and involves helping the individuals in the group move from A to B, toward an agreed destination. "Facilitation enables a group of people to achieve their own purpose in their own agreed way" (Hunter, 2007, p. 19).

At its core, facilitation is concerned with ways to help everyone in the group participate in the decisions that affect them. Facilitation starts from the premise that everyone in the group has an equal say and has a right to participate, the ground is equal, and decisions are made by the group. This is a natural complement to coaching in that the client/coachee creates and drives the agenda. What underlies facilitation is cooperation, consensus, and the collective wisdom of the group and the inherent value of each individual (Hunter, 2007).

Facilitation is focused on encouraging individual self-expression and building authenticity with others in the group. One of the key differentiators of facilitation is its focus on consensus decision making, also known as collective decision making, which is based on the belief that everyone has the right to be involved in decisions that affect them (Hunter, 2007). Facilitation theory and skills correlate closely with group coaching theory and skills in that the group is empowered to make decisions on the focus and direction of the coaching process, not the coach or one particular client/coachee.

Although group coaching takes place in small groups and relies on the facilitation competency of a coach, there are some main differences between group coaching and group facilitation. One key difference lies in the objectives and goals of the group, as well as the expectation of the participant involved. Coaching groups are individuals brought together specifically for the purposes of learning about themselves; the members are not part of an intact team. The purpose of group coaching is the *individual* learning of its members (Thornton, 2010).

There can also be a network of relationships already established. The group's goal is more self-directed, resulting in a variety of individual goals with a commitment to aid in each other's learning. This results in a deep, cross-fertilizing learning experience (Thornton, 2010). Group coaching is more focused on individual self-discovery and individual learning, whereas group facilitation is more focused on consensus and group problem solving.

Virtual Group Coaching Curriculum

I have spoken widely on virtual group coaching both face-to-face as well as virtually and I have found that coaches, coaching educators, re-

searchers and coaching programs are still warming up to the idea of virtual group coaching. This is understandable since the term is still fairly new in coaching circles. However, as technology continues to impact our daily existence, learning new and different methodologies such as virtual group coaching to reach our audience will become more important to the coaching community.

The coaching program I attended several years ago, as well as several other coaching programs with which I am familiar, focus on training students on the fundamentals of coaching. These fundamentals may include:

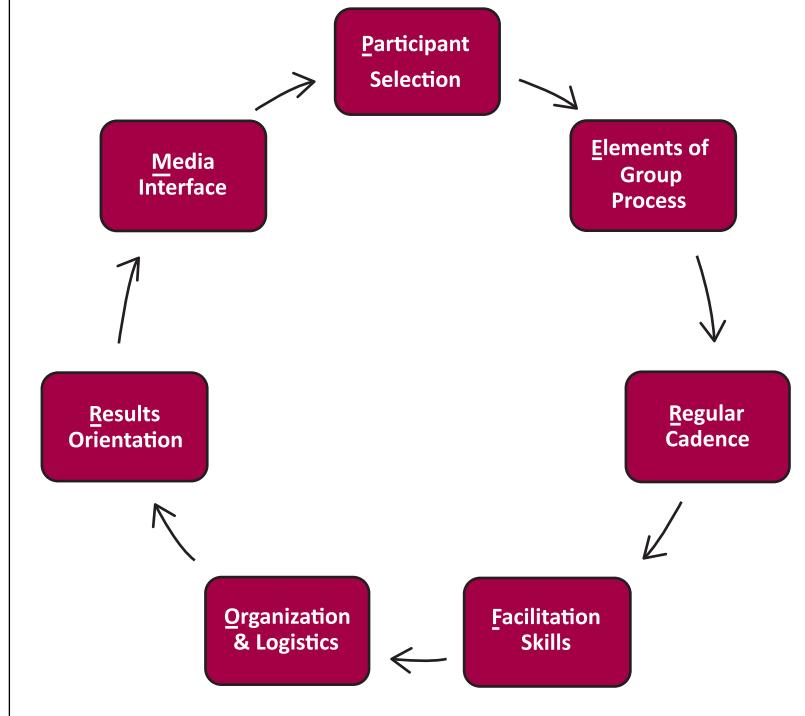
- Principles of coaching
- Communication models
- Coaching competencies
- Reflective listening
- Coaching and assessments
- Marketing and practice development

In the past few years (2012–present day), there have been a few *individuals* that have begun to offer training in group coaching or offer a “certification” in group coaching. Very few, if any, coaching programs have a specialization in group coaching.

Group Coaching Curriculum Components

There is a dearth of topics that focus on effectively equipping coaches on *how* to conduct group coaching, whether face-to-face or virtually. An article published by the American Management Association (2008) entitled “Coaching: A Global Study of the Successful Practices: Current Trends and Future Possibilities 2008–2018” briefly mentioned how coaching will become more virtual but

Figure 4
Virtual Group Coaching Training Model: PERFORM™



failed to mention any practices related to coaching virtually. Additionally, coaching programs often deliver their courses face-to-face when the majority of coaching occurs virtually.

There are several components necessary for group coaching to be effective, whether it is virtual or face-to-face. I have outlined the *main components* for a virtual group coaching model in Figure 4.

Participant Selection

One of the key components necessary for a group of any kind to be effective and accomplish the objectives it has established, is for the group to create a sense of trust and openness among its members (Van Dyke, 2010). Group dynamics is about the interactions that transpire in a group of people. The individuals that compile the group are key to understanding how the group will function and ul-

timately how and if they will bond together. Will trust occur? Will the individuals involved be open and vulnerable with each other?

The members who are selected for a given group should be interviewed for group fit. How they view *group* contributes greatly to *how and if* trust and openness will develop. Through my experience and research, I have determined two distinct preferences: (a) those that are comfortable being in a group process and therefore will participate and remain open, and (b) those that are not and as a result disengage in the process. The fact that the group is virtual or not becomes a secondary issue in creating group trust and openness as much as the comfort level one feels about being *in a group* versus being *in a one-on-one* coaching setting (Van Dyke, 2010).

The importance of virtual group selection is the critical first step in becoming an effective

group. A working knowledge of psychology, the targeted audience, and a healthy amount of coach intuitiveness should be used to develop a client screening tool to help make sure that each member of the virtual coaching group is appropriate for both the group and its primary focus. An interview tool will help the coach establish the right group composition. The following are sample questions that should be asked to help create such a tool. It should include but not be limited to the following key questions:

1. What is the challenge they would like to address? Is it in alignment with the group's focus?
2. Does the client have a clear understanding of what happens in a group setting versus in one-on-one coaching?
3. Does the client have a comfort level with technology?
4. Is the client able to remain open to feedback from others and express themselves in a group setting?

Experience and research has led me to postulate the efficacy of a virtual group profile. Learning about oneself with the assistance of a group feels comfortable and natural to those who have an affinity to group and its process.

Elements of Group Process

Coaches need to have an understanding of group process and believe in the efficacy of group in order to be an effective group coach. Group process can be defined as the various stages of group development and the interactions that are evident at each stage (Corey et al., 2014). Understanding your own personal coaching style and how it needs to be adjusted in order to adequately facilitate the group

process will be necessary. Essential elements that are unique to understanding group process are:

- Belief in group process
- Group process theory
- Stages of group development
- Linking and interactional bias
- Group dynamics
- Group cohesion

Regular Cadence

Coordinating several clients to convene at one time can be challenging, but with today's technology it has become much easier. Establishing a regular meeting time for the group so that it becomes a part of the client's standard cadence will help to keep group members engaged. A good understanding of software programs will help with scheduling. Some of the most notable software programs can be found at <http://scheduling-software-review.toptenreviews.com/>.

Facilitation Skills

There exist both an art and a science to effective facilitation. Whereas group dynamics is focused on an individual's behavior in the group, facilitation is more about the process. There is a distinct difference in presenting information, coaching for awareness, and facilitating process. Facilitation is designed for groups, organizations, networks, and communities. It is focused on how you do something rather than the content that is being discussed in the group. The facilitator also needs to be aware of the client's need for autonomy while at the same time considering the group's need for collaboration. Most coaching programs do not offer a course in facilitation. However, in order to be

effective in group coaching, coaches should have a working knowledge of:

- ◆ Purpose of facilitation
- ◆ Role of the coach facilitator
- ◆ Distinctions between the process and content of the group dialogue
- ◆ Dealing with distractions and disruptions
- ◆ Role of feedback
- ◆ Linking
- ◆ Adult learning
- ◆ Synthesizing and summarizing

A delicate balance exists between facilitating the virtual group and coaching individuals in a group setting. When coaches fully understand the benefits that can be gained from facilitating process versus coaching for content, a true virtual group coaching process emerges.

Organization and Logistics

Most coaches have learned (usually the hard way) how to be organized in their coaching practices. However, one must be disciplined when embarking on group coaching. Coaches need to possess the knowledge of establishing structure in the group coaching process. Despite geographical distance and time zone restrictions, meaningful human connection can happen. Just as with determining the right scheduling software for your practice, utilizing other organizing software can also prove helpful. Google Docs, Picasso, Drop Box, Excel spreadsheet, and so on are just a few of the free programs that are available by simply downloading their programs or apps onto your electronic devices. Creating and establishing tools, guidelines, and processes that are specific to each

virtual group will help to replicate those who work in close proximity. Although not an exhaustive list, the following are items that should be addressed when organizing a virtual group coach:

- ◆ Focus of the group
- ◆ Coaches' role in the process
- ◆ Group demographics
- ◆ Group expectations
- ◆ Group charter—rules of engagement
- ◆ Cadence/frequency of sessions
- ◆ Session length
- ◆ Session duration (3 months, 6 months, etc.)
- ◆ Delivery method for collateral, materials, handouts, etc.
- ◆ Virtual medium specifics (see Media Interface)

With today's busy schedules and multiple competing agendas, successfully organizing virtual groups will help to ensure long-term engagement. Good organization and effective logistics coordination, once established, become the backdrop of the virtual group instead of a frequent topic at every meeting.

Results Orientation

Understanding return on investment for coaching today is continuing to evolve. In today's competitive environment, understanding the effectiveness of coaching is directly tied to a coach's success and longevity. Being able to clearly articulate the virtual coaching group's return on investment will create a line of sight to the end goals. It has been my experience that most coaches struggle in this area.

Coaching programs often provide tools and best practices to help a coach launch and market his or her business, but quantifying coaching's impact is often overlooked.

A study conducted by the *Manchester Review* (2008) postulated that:

- Coaching translates into doing.
- Doing translates into impacting the business.
- This impact can be quantified and maximized.

The strongest business case for virtual group coaching in today's environment is that we have become a global society in which major business decisions are often reached through cross-functional teamwork (Zofit, 2011). This imperative necessitates the ability to work collaboratively with what can often be a diverse mix of colleagues. Developing a results orientation includes:

- Effective goal setting
- Effective problem-solving skills
- Overcoming obstacles
- Reflection and evaluation

This again underscores the importance of participant selection from the onset of a virtual group coaching process. In a group coaching environment there can be divergent goals, but the group is used as a vehicle to accomplish those goals. Coaches need to be able to work within a divergent setting, which can be accomplished by helping the group stay focused on the collective whole.

Media Interface

Technology is much like a fast-moving current of water. It is consistently moving forward, and if you step out for a brief period of time, it will bypass you. A virtual coaching group will often use more than one type of technology during the group's duration. Coaches need to have an understanding of the various media available to them and their clients and understand how each works along with each of their advantages and disadvantages.

Several factors need to be understood and evaluated:

- Geographical location of clients
- Time zones
- Niche or area of focus
- Internet connection speed
- Bandwidth
- Material adaption, Word, PDF, SlideShare, etc.
- Visual white boards/visual vision board
- In-depth technological knowledge of Web-Ex, Skype, GoToMeeting, Twitter, e-mail, etc.
- Virtual presence

Coaches who coach a virtual group need skills to maintain engagement during the group coaching session. There is both an art and a science to creating a *virtual presence* both during the session and in between meetings. Understanding all the various media available and making them work to the group's advantages will help to ensure a successful virtual group.

Conclusion

As the field of coaching continues to mature and evolve, coaching programs must as well. In order to remain viable, it is imperative that coaching programs pace the changing needs of the clients they hope to attract. Virtual group coaching is one area in which coaching programs should strongly consider including in their curriculum. It should be considered a viable coaching methodology that should be studied and taught. ♦

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