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Group coaching: the new 'Wild West of coaching'?

Abstract

Literature on group coaching is scarce, but growing evidence points to an area ripe for further exploration. Group coaching is scalable, cost-effective and arguably better suited to promoting collective understanding and thinking than one-to-one and team coaching. However, this is an area fraught with challenges. In the limited existing literature, group coaching is usually bundled with team coaching and there is no consensus on what group coaching is. This confusion is reflected in the wide, sometimes contradictory, approaches used in the limited number of empirical studies available. Despite that, emerging evidence points to the potential benefits of group coaching in a range of settings. This article explores the extant literature on group coaching and argues for a definition of group coaching that is firmly based on the group process. Finally, it makes the case for group coaching to be considered on its own merit to support the development of the theory, research and practice of this misunderstood coaching modality.

Keywords: group coaching

“Like the Wild West of yesteryear, this frontier is chaotic, largely unexplored, and fraught with risk, yet immensely promising”. This was how, nearly two decades ago, Sherman and Freas (2004) described the landscape of executive coaching. The same can be said about current group coaching research, theory and practice. Whilst emerging research points to the potential benefits of group coaching across different contexts, literature remains scarce, and the field is fraught with confusion. The challenges are many: there is no consensus on group coaching definition(s); group coaching is practically absent from scholarly books on coaching psychology, except for when it is mentioned alongside team coaching, almost as an afterthought, and discussions around ethics and competencies specifically pertinent to group coaching are equally lacking. Therefore, it is not surprising that, when it comes to the practice of group coaching, coaching psychologists' approaches are at best haphazard, usually guided by their experience of dyadic coaching and personal preferences, rather than based on empirical evidence and sound theoretical underpinnings. As

interest in group coaching increases, so does the need for more research, to develop our understanding of group coaching, and how it can be deployed to meet the needs of individuals and organisations.

Blurred landscape

Defining group coaching remains a challenge for researchers and practitioners. Having some sort of common ground is important for the development of robust and coherent evidence. As it stands, the field is still a 'bag of nails'. The term group coaching has been used to describe a range of disparate interventions, from facilitation, training and peer-to-peer coaching, to small group processes (O'Connor & Cavanagh, 2017). The confusion has been compounded by definitions that combine both team and group coaching, without clarifying fundamental differences and similarities between these two coaching modalities. For example, Brown and Grant (2010) defined group coaching as pertaining "to any group of individuals, including but not limited to teams, whether participants are working towards specific goals or not" (pp. 31-32).

To add to the confusion, individual coaching in a group has also been added to the plethora of group formats labelled group coaching (Gyllensten et al., 2020). This approach shares a few features of action learning sets, as each group member takes turns being coached. This format was adopted by Flückiger *et al.* (2017), who developed a leadership model based on individuals being coached in a group, with other group members in the role of co-coaches.

Coaching individuals, one at the time, in a group setting fails to fully leverage group dynamics, which is a crucial factor in group coaching (Nacif, 2021). As Ward (2008, p. 71) posited: "Group dynamics is a unique differentiator from the usual dyadic coaching relationship...Skilfully utilised, a good grasp of group dynamics accelerates the transformation process." The domain of group coaching is the group itself and "the purpose of group coaching is to engage each individual on their own respective goals by using the vehicle of group process"(Van Dyke, 2014, p. 76). Promoting research and practice of group coaching that acknowledge the importance of the group process, whilst differentiating this modality from team coaching and other types of group interventions, would support the development of a body of knowledge that is more coherent than the scarce evidence currently available. As such, it is suggested that group coaching is defined as "a collaborative and time-limited small-group process in which a professionally trained coach uses coaching principles and approaches to work with a group of individuals on their own personal goals and/or outcomes" (A. Nacif, 2021, p. 172). It has also been suggested that using theme (s) in group coaching programmes, around which clients can develop their own goals, is useful to create a platform for group discussions and

interactions (Kets de Vries, 2014; Thornton, 2016). Some studies have adopted this format with positive results for clients (Mbokota & Reid, 2022; A. Nacif, 2021; Sutton & Crobach, 2022). Other important required characteristics for group work to be considered group coaching include size of the group, length of coaching programme, and the skills and experience of the coach.

Longevity of the group

Practitioner literature suggests that group coaching takes place over time (Thornton, 2016). There are no studies that specifically discuss the ideal length of group coaching programmes but, if group dynamics is considered an important part of the group coaching process, then it follows that it would be more effective for the coaching to be delivered over a period of time, as opposed to as a one-off intervention. Yalom (1995), an American psychiatrist renowned for his work in groups, amongst others, described how the “nature of the relationships between the parties involved” in the group can shift their attention from the ‘what’ to the ‘how’ (p. 250). In other words, while the content and achieving goals may be important to group progress, it is even more important for group members to focus on the process of participation and learning together. This seems also to be true of group coaching, with research highlighting the impact of the group through relational and interpersonal interactions (Gyllensten et al., 2020; Nacif, 2021). In addition, delivering coaching over a number of sessions has been instrumental in leadership-focused programmes (Aas & Flückiger, 2016; Aas & Vavik, 2015), in supporting young people (Stelter et al., 2011), and in fostering wellbeing (Nacif, 2021).

Group size

Group coaching takes place in small groups of up to 10 clients. There is no empirical data that establishes the optimum size of coaching groups. In therapeutic groups, “it is generally accepted that a 7-10 member therapy group is the ideal size” (Cohen & Rice, 1985).

Coach

The coach should be conversant with group dynamics and skilful in supporting a group. Ward (2008) emphasises that group coaches should be trained and supervised in group work. The experience of coach is likely to influence the outcome of the group. O'Connor, Studholme and Grant's (2017) research into the experience of participants in group coaching within the Australian healthcare system to improve performance and develop leadership and management capability revealed that the “most effective groups were those that had greater goal focus, a robust structure to the coaching sessions and a coach who was experienced in conducting group coaching” (p.11).

Growing field of research and practice

Despite the challenge in defining group coaching and how it should be delivered, the past few years have seen an increase in the number of peer-reviewed empirical studies published in academic journals pointing to the benefits of group coaching and its impact in and outside organisations, some of which confirm the views shared in practitioner-led books and articles.

Practitioner literature (Britton 2009) suggests that among the benefits of group coaching to organisation are scalability, cross-functional fertilisation and support for culture change, as well as “fostering long-term sustainable change, happier and healthier employees, cost efficiencies, and more integrated thinking and connections across the organization” (2009, p. 36).

Some of these benefits are intrinsic to the nature of group work itself, which provides a space for inter-relational exploration of the human experience. By bringing people together, from different teams and across the organisational structure, group coaching creates a space for collective awareness to emerge, where clients are able to foster human connections and relationships, and explore perspectives otherwise inaccessible to them via team or individual coaching. In fact, research into group coaching has demonstrated how, due to its collective nature, it is conducive to the exploration of different perspectives (Gyllensten et al., 2020; Nacif, 2021; Varley, 2021). Outside organisational settings, studies point to positive outcomes of group coaching in health (Whitley, 2013), social care (Chenoweth et al., 2016), and education (Torbrand and Ellam-Dyson, 2015; McDowall and Butterworth, 2014; Fetting and Artman-Meeker, 2016).

Group coaching in organisations

Most of the available literature on this topic is on organisational settings and leadership development. Studies have been conducted on group coach interventions for executive support and leadership development, showing mainly positive results (Bonneywell, 2016; Fusco et al., 2016; Gyllensten et al., 2020; Kets de Vries, 2012; Mbokota & Reid, 2022; Passmore & Fillery-Travis, 2011; Reid, 2012; Ward, 2008). Fusco and colleagues, for example, reported that “leadership coaching-groups are an effective form of authentic leadership development” (p. 12, 2016).

Some of the common themes that have emerged from these studies include increased self-awareness, self-confidence and shared support. Gyllensten et al’s (2020) empirical study into executive group coaching highlighted that it “can be useful in helping managers to develop skills that are useful in leadership practice, and can also provide an opportunity for managers to give and receive well needed peer support” (Gyllensten et al., pp.42-43).

The collective environment and interpersonal interactions help leaders explore their sense of self

and learn from interpersonal dynamics (Florent-Treacy, 2009; Ward, 2008). In Reid's study (2012), which investigated the impact of group coaching on leadership effectiveness in women managers, the main effects of group coaching were "an increased awareness of self (and what matters to self); learning through external input and feedback; sharing and support (through safety, empathy and identification); and a sense of direction or 'game-plan'" (p. 80). Similar results were reported in other studies. Bonneywell (2016), whose study explored the impact of a group coaching intervention delivered over 14 months alongside one-to-one coaching, pointed to increased self-esteem, confidence and self-appreciation among participants of group coaching. Mbokota & Reid (2022) reported that participants of a group coaching programme that ran alongside a leadership development training over six months increased participants' leadership effectiveness, enhanced their sense of direction, self-awareness and self-confidence, and improved understanding of relationships with others.

Group coaching in communities

Some of these themes, such as enhanced self-awareness, self-confidence and support, are also present in the literature on group coaching outside organisations, which is equally scarce, with only a small sample of studies exploring group coaching in different settings, such as health (Whitley, 2013), social care (Chenoweth et al., 2016), and education (Fettig & Artman-Meeker, 2016; McDowall & Butterworth, 2014; Torbrand & Ellam-Dyson, 2015; Varley, 2021). In social care, Chenoweth and colleagues (2016) carried out a comparative study among carers. Results showed that those attending group coaching found it easier to develop goal-focused behaviour and were more successful in achieving short and long-term goals, compared with those who received individual coaching. Other studies highlight the positive impact of group coaching on specific groups, such as individuals going through gender transition (Grajfoner, 2009), young people (Barry et al., 2017; Pritchard & van Nieuwerburgh, 2016; Stelter et al., 2011), and people living with long-term health conditions (Whitley, 2013).

Wellbeing is another emerging theme, featured as an outcome of group coaching in community settings even in studies whose focus was not wellbeing. Stelter et al. (2011), for example, who set out "to investigate the influence of narrative-collaborative group coaching on career development, self-reflection and the general functioning of young sports talents" (p.123), found that group coaching had a significant positive impact on participants' scores for social recovery and general wellbeing. Studies whose aim was to support wellbeing reported encouraging findings (Nacif, 2021, Varley, 2021). In addition Thurmon et al. (2022), who conducted a randomised control trial involving 101 female resident physicians, reported a statistically significant reduction in the emotional

exhaustion subscale of burnout among group coaching participants compared with the control group. Some evidence of the positive impact of group coaching on wellbeing also exists in organisational settings. A quasi-experimental study in group coaching involving 31 participants (Gyllensten & Palmer, 2005) found that levels of anxiety and stress decreased more in the coaching group compared to the control group. In a separate study, paramedics reported feeling less stressed and more confident after taking part in a group coaching programme (Barody, 2016). Furthermore, emerging group coaching evidence in health and wellbeing seems to be aligned with the existing body of knowledge in group psychotherapy, which shows that group work can be effective in improving self-efficacy, self-care and quality of life (Deblinger et al., 2016; Lucre & Corten, 2013; Ramírez et al., 2015).

Group impact

The benefits of working in groups have been explored in the existing group coaching literature, which emphasises the group's role as a catalyst for clients' growth and development. For example, Ward (2008) posits that "groups often take on a life of their own during group coaching sessions...participants challenge each other, provide context in the form of their own experiences and make suggestions for change and improvement...Most importantly they share each other's journey" (p. 77).

Group coaching allows clients to bear witness to others' emotions, feelings and experiences, which can be reassuring, inspirational and propelling. Keyes' (1998) taxonomy of five dimensions of social wellbeing can help to understand how well-functioning groups can produce a supportive and positive environment for clients. Keyes defined social wellbeing as "the appraisal of one's circumstances and functioning in society" (p. 122) and postulated that social wellbeing comprises five dimensions, namely social coherence, social actualisation, social integration, social acceptance and social contribution.

A coaching group can be perceived as a microcosmos of society, where social acceptance enables a successful group coaching interaction. Individuals who demonstrate social acceptance trust others and hold favourable views of human nature (Keyes, 1998). Research (A. P. Nacif, 2021) shows that when clients value being in a group and feel accepted, they can develop trust. "Because group experiences are based on self-narration – telling one's own story – they're journeys of self-discovery and offer validation of personal experiences...The acceptance and support given by other members of the group help instil a sense of hope and change for the future" (De Vries, 2011, p. 177).

Both trust-building and acceptance are developed through the coaching process itself and the dynamics present in the group. Yalom (1995, p. 24) stated that the interpersonal and relational focus

“is a defining strength of group therapy”. The same can be said about group coaching. The coach plays a key role in holding the space for effective contracting, throughout the whole process, as well as role-modelling behaviours conducive to creating a safe and supportive environment for clients. Further understanding and exploration of theoretical underpinnings of group coaching and more research into group coaching processes would be helpful, alongside the development of a more robust body of knowledge on this topic. As previously stated, evidence in group coaching remains limited. Most of the existing studies are small-scale studies, with a focus on specific demographics. No large-scale, comparative or longitudinal studies have been carried out in this field yet. Moreover, the diversity of definitions and approaches to group coaching means that evidence has been gathered using disparate designs, making it difficult to compare and/or categorise the findings. For example, research in this field has varied from investigating a single 45-minute (McDowall and Butterworth, 2014) or one-hour group intervention (Mühlberger & Traut-Mattausch, 2015) to group coaching programmes delivered over several sessions (Bonneywell, 2016; Chenoweth et al., 2016; Gyllensten et al., 2020). Collectively, existing studies indicate that group coaching can be useful as an organisational tool for professional, personal and interpersonal growth, as well as in other settings.

Potential challenges

However, there is no research available on the challenges of coaching in groups, the limitations of this practice as well as specific factors that can contribute to or diminish its effectiveness. Where practice of group work is concerned, practitioners’ literature offers extensive explanations of problem behaviours and critical incidents often present in groups that can have an adverse impact on group dynamics and, therefore, negatively impact the outcome for the group and its members. Common issues include lack of engagement, absence/lateness, non-participation, aggressiveness, monopolisation, intimidation, rescuing, conflict avoidance, and intolerance/prejudice (Kottler & Englar-Carlson, 2014). Dysfunction in groups can be explained by different theories, commonly based on psychotherapy models from different traditions, for example Freudian/new Freudian, group as a whole/group analysis (Foulkes), existential (Yalom), psychodrama (Moreno), and group as a whole (Bion, Kurt Lewin). According to Wilfred Bion, the group is both an external object and an active psychological element in the psyche of individuals (Froggett, 2005). In other words, the group’s mental life is a reflection of member’s unconscious processes, with the group’s welfare trumping individual’s needs. He suggests that membership of any group is inherently conflicted: we long to be part of something bigger than ourselves, whilst wanting to develop our individuality. If the group is under pressure and experiences survival anxiety, it operates from what Bion calls basic assumptions: dependency, fight/flight, and pairing. Bion posits that individuals have different valency

or tendency towards a group; each person has tendency towards one of the assumptions, in different degrees (Bion, 2003). These can be manifested in member's behaviours and interactions, including the aforementioned negative dynamics. The stages of group development are also likely to have an impact on how members interact, from the initial stages where anxiety and uncertainty may be high through to constructive collaboration (Heron, 1999; Schutz, 1958). Schutz's theory of group development posits that people in groups have three interpersonal needs: inclusion (be part of the group), control (have a role in the group) and affection (be liked by the group). In his work he observed that these needs are manifested in the stages of group development, namely inclusion, control and openness, which occur cyclically during the life of the group. Group interactions can be interpreted using these different phases to understand the dynamics among members. It has been suggested that Schutz' stages of group experience could be used to inform the design and development of sessions and training programmes (Minahan & Hutton, 2002); it would be useful to test if a similar approach group coaching could help mitigate the pitfalls described above.

Reflecting on group coaching

Despite potential challenges, group coaching has much to offer clients across sectors. It is arguably better suited to bring about collective thinking and awareness that cut across silos and boundaries, in a way that one-to-one and team coaching are not equipped to deliver. In community settings, such as health and social care and education, among others, group coaching is a cost-effective intervention that can be scaled up to meet the needs of wider populations. Although nascent literature in this area is encouraging, if group coaching is to move on from the Wild West to the 21st century, it must be considered on its own merit, as opposed to being a tag along to other coaching modalities.

Group coaching is "by its very nature, more complex than individual coaching. Groups can be far more than the sum of their parts" (O'Connor, Studholme and Grant, 2017, p. 2). Therefore, in terms of practice, coaching psychologists need a better understanding of what group coaching is, the knowledge, skills and competencies required to deliver it competently, and ethical considerations pertinent to groups. From an academic perspective, more research is clearly needed, and so is the need for more theoretical and scholarly engagement focused on group coaching. Existing theories and approaches in coaching psychology could be fertile ground for further exploration and understanding of group coaching theory and practice. For example, psychodynamic, Gestalt and existential coaching, to name just a few, regularly feature in coaching psychology scholarly and practitioner's literature. These could easily be explored using a group's perspective.

The case for group coaching is a compelling one. Developing practices that are based on sound

theoretical and empirical evidence will ensure this frontier is less chaotic, less risky and, ultimately, positively impactful to coaches and their clients.

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