



# THERE IS MAGIC IN NUMBERS: THE POWER OF GROUP COACHING

There is commonly confusion about what group coaching is, and what it is not, says [Ana Paula Nacif](#), who here outlines the potential benefits of this approach, along with some guidelines for its application.

*'I feel embraced'*: This was the response of a client when I asked about her experience of group coaching. These words imprinted in my memory as they closely reflect the concept of 'holding', coined by the British psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott to represent the safe space that is needed for successful psychological interventions. When working with groups, coaches strive to foster safe, embedded group dynamics so that individuals can explore topics, share experiences, and reflect in a collective environment.

Clients report that this collective experience helps them consider different perspectives; they feel more connected and supported, and improve their self-awareness and self-confidence.<sup>1</sup> There is growing evidence of the benefits of group coaching in organisational contexts, as well as in other settings, such as education, healthcare, and communities. In organisations, most of the existing research is based on group coaching programmes designed to support leadership development,<sup>2</sup> with studies showing a positive impact on self-awareness, self-confidence and leadership effectiveness<sup>3</sup>. We also find studies exploring group coaching in health<sup>4</sup>, social care<sup>5</sup> and education<sup>6</sup>. In addition, there is a growing body of evidence on the positive impact of group coaching on clients' wellbeing in a variety of other settings<sup>7</sup>.

At a time when resources are limited, group coaching also offers a more cost-effective way of working, along with scalability. However, it is not always easy for practitioners to articulate what group coaching is nor the value it can add.

## GROUP COACHING: A UNIQUE PRACTICE IN A CONFUSING LANDSCAPE

There is confusion around the definition of group coaching, and the similarities and differences when compared to other group-based interventions, such as team coaching, action learning sets, psychoeducation sessions, and training. Sometimes these terms become conflated. This can lead to a lack of clarity about the purpose of group coaching, and how it adds a unique value to clients that can be coherently articulated to those designing, commissioning and evaluating coaching services.

Team coaching, for example, is used primarily within organisations and has the team as a focal point, with the coaching programme being aligned to a collective goal and/or outcome. The group of individuals involved are part of the same team and work towards a common goal, and often towards improving their capabilities as a team; a collective entity. This does not mean that individuals are not engaged in their individual learning and development. However, the focus of the coaching is firmly placed on 'we' rather than 'I'. Group coaching, on the other hand, brings together people who are not necessarily part of a team, and who may be meeting each other for the first time. Although the work takes place in a collective space, individuals are invited to reflect on their specific personal needs and expectations.

These differences mean that the group dynamics will be experienced in a profoundly different manner than the team dynamics by the coach and clients. In a team, there will be an existing dynamic between members, which is manifested in patterns of behaviours and interactions. These can be informed by several factors, including individuals' personalities, hierarchy, power dynamics, and tenure. The coach will join the team as an 'outsider' and will adapt to and affect the existing dynamic. By contrast, group coaching happens in newly formed groups with no existing dynamics - everyone starts from the same frame of reference.

Other group interventions that are sometimes compared with group coaching include action learning sets and psychoeducation programmes. Action learning sets are small peer groups that meet regularly, over a set period, to discuss workplace challenges. Each individual takes their turn to present a topic, and peers are encouraged to ask open questions to help the person arrive at an action/solution for the subject they presented. Because the focus is on one individual at a time, classroom dynamics are not as important as when group coaching takes place.

Psychoeducation programmes can be flexible in frequency and group size and are primarily educational. The sessions often combine content sharing and group work; they are designed to provide practical information on specific topics. Action learning sets and psychoeducation programmes are useful to group practices, but they are distinct from group coaching, both in their purpose and in process.

## ADDING VALUE TO INDIVIDUAL CLIENTS AND ORGANISATIONS

Group dynamics and the relational space are at the heart of group coaching. This can be defined as a collaborative and time-limited small-group process led by a coach to support a group of individuals on their quest to attain personal goals and/or outcomes<sup>8</sup>. This powerful group combination can have a wider impact than when made by the individuals separately. For example, in organisations, group coaching can foster connections and cross-fertilisation of knowledge and ideas by bringing together people from different teams, functions and across hierarchies. This is where group coaching adds value as a space for collective awareness to emerge. Clients can foster human connections and relationships, exploring perspectives otherwise inaccessible to them via team or individual coaching.

Moreover, for some clients, it can provide a safe space for professional reflection and vulnerability, away from their teams and daily pressures. Research shows that one of the features of group coaching is the power of shared narratives<sup>9</sup>.

As group members see their stories reflected in the experiences of others, they realise they are not alone in their challenges. This helps them normalise uncomfortable and difficult experiences, which can contribute to feelings of stress, anxiety and inadequacy.

*As group members see their stories reflected in the experiences of others, they realise they are not alone in their challenges. This helps them normalise uncomfortable and difficult experiences, which can contribute to feelings of stress, anxiety and inadequacy.*

## PURPOSEFUL AND COHERENT PRACTICE

As with other coaching programmes, it is important to align the group coaching to fit with organisational objectives and consider how the outcomes can be evaluated over time. Group coaching programmes can be used strategically to support business and organisational objectives, such as talent development, equity and equality, staff engagement and wellbeing, among others. Programmes are usually designed around a theme (for example wellbeing, career or leadership) and/or targeted at a specific demographic, such as emerging leaders, managers, carers, those returning to work after a long period of absence, women experiencing menopause, graduates and parents, etc.

Group coaching is well placed to explore and address systemic issues and challenges by fostering new thinking that emerges from the group process and collaboration. Unlike training and other awareness-raising initiatives, which may focus on information sharing and intellectual discussions, it encourages participants to reflect on their personal experiences, identity and the impact they have on workplace practices, as well as their role in shifting perspectives and behaviours at individual and collective levels.

In communities, group coaching programmes may focus on specific themes such as health and wellbeing, employment, and education and/or they may be targeted at improving outcomes and the experience of particular populations, such as young people, carers, people living with a long-term health condition, women, and older people. It is also a more economical intervention, when compared to one-to-one alternatives, and can be scaled up to meet the needs of wider populations.

In group coaching, the group becomes the catalyst for change, a place where individuals engage with other's experiences, thoughts and emotions while wrestling with their personal challenges. At the heart of this practice is our ability to hold the space for every member of the group, and for the work they do together so that everyone feels safe to explore and grow in the presence of others. Something magical and powerful happens when people get together and truly embrace themselves and each other.

## Group coaching guidelines

For those interested in exploring this coaching modality further, here are some quick guidelines on how to set up and run a group coaching programme.

**Group size:** small groups of between 6 and 8 participants, and up to a maximum of 10 people.

**Theme:** Programmes work better when they address a topic/theme that is of interest to all participants.

**Length/frequency of sessions:** Sessions can be delivered weekly, fortnightly or monthly, depending on the context in which the work is being delivered and the desired outcomes. It is helpful to have momentum and the group should meet with a suitable frequency to develop a sense of cohesion and safety.

**Goals/outcomes:** Each participant defines their personal objective for coaching, whilst the overall impact of the programme should be aligned to fit with organisational/community aims and objectives.

**Process:** Coaches may use various tools and techniques. The sessions involve creating a safe space for group members to interact with each other. The tutor coaches the group simultaneously.

*[Adapted from Nacif, A. P. (2023) Coaching for Wellbeing: An Evidence-Based Guide for Practitioners, Open University Press.]*

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Dr Ana Paula Nacif is an experienced executive and group coach, consultant and supervisor. She has over 17 years of coaching experience in the private, public and not-for-profit sectors. Her passion for group coaching has led her to become an active researcher in this field. She has also developed ICF-accredited training focused on group coaching skills and practice.

Ana is a part-time senior lecturer at the Master of Positive Psychology and Coaching Psychology at the University of East London and co-editor of the Philosophy of Coaching Journal.

- Gyllensten, K., Henschel, C., & Jones, G. (2020). The experience of executive group coaching—A qualitative study. *International Coaching Psychology Review*, 15(1), 37-43
- Bonneywell, S. (2017). How a coaching intervention supports the development of female leaders in a global organisation. *International Journal of Evidence Based Coaching & Mentoring*, 15.
- Mbokota, G., & Reid, A. (2022). The role of group coaching in developing leadership effectiveness in a business school leadership development programme. *South African Journal of Business Management*, 53(1), 10.
- Whitley, S. (2013). Group coaching as support for changing lifestyle for those diagnosed with a long-term condition. *International Journal of Evidence Based Coaching and Mentoring Special Issue No. 7*, 82-99.
- Chenoweth, L., Stein-Parbury, J., White, D. et al. (2016). Coaching in self-efficacy improves care responses, health and wellbeing in dementia carers: a pre/post-test/follow-up study. *BMC Health Services Research*, 16, 166.
- Torbrand, P., & Ellam-Dyson, V. (2015). The experience of cognitive behavioural group coaching with college students: An IPA study exploring its effectiveness [Article]. *International Coaching Psychology Review*, 10(1), 76-93.
- Pope-Ruark, R. (2023). Running a Burnout Support Group for Women Faculty at a STEM Institution. *The Journal of Faculty Development*, 37(1), 66-68.
- Nacif, A.P. (2021). Group Coaching for Wellbeing in a Community Context. ProfDoc Thesis, Oxford Brookes University.
- See Nacif, A. P. (2021), above