

Energising teams to drive change towards sustainability through coaching

Coaching has experienced rapid and continuing growth as a flexible and effective means of achieving individual and team development outcomes within organisational contexts. The increasing relevance of sustainability challenges is a compelling driver for developing teams that can lead organisations to performing against all three bottom lines. It is the link between collective transformation and collaborative leadership, and the capability of organisations to innovate and take steps towards sustainability that highlights the role that coaching can play in team, organisational and sustainable development.

While leading individuals in organisations are often the focus of accolades, the dynamic in leadership teams has been found to be essential to the long-term organisational success.¹ Ensuring that teams work effectively together is especially important given the trans-disciplinary nature of sustainability, complexity of markets and challenges, and the cultural diversity within organisations and their stakeholders. Other researchers similarly advocate that for innovation in sustainability the focus is better placed on teamwork, than the actions of particular individuals.²

Our research extended beyond the normal boundaries of what is normally considered 'coaching'. We found that the same inter-subjective dynamic to develop skills and knowledge, and align behaviour with values, and support definition and progress towards goals can be created within groups and teams just as much as it can in the traditional one-on-one context. In practical terms, our consideration of team coaching practices such included:

- Action learning sets, or groups for cooperative inquiry, and dialogue,
- Peer support groups for sustainability change agents, such as breakfast clubs,
- Teams of eco-champions,
- Carbon rationing groups and carbon clubs to share specific skills and knowledge and
- Cross-departmental teams to break down silos and increase idea generation.

Interviewees and respondents to our surveys identified benefits from group and team coaching processes such as: enhanced team performance and development, increased effectiveness, commitment, and productivity, greater leadership and awareness, more effective learning and sharing, and stronger understanding of strengths and weaknesses of strategies and alternative approaches. One of our interviewees explained the logic behind his preference for team coaching rather than individual, emphasising that nothing can be achieved in the sustainability field alone: .

"I agree that the capacity of individuals to transform their values and perspectives is the primary constraint on how fast organisations can transform. For me, this translates into leadership capacity and that in turn, for me, means the capacity of individuals to accept that they are members of a community of interdependencies that can only be transformed through collaboration....."

The nature of the sustainability challenge shifts the emphasis of coaching and leadership development away from the performance, role or happiness of the individual towards the contribution that individual can make within the team, communities or the organisation itself. Sustainability initiatives in leading organisations are increasingly focusing on transformational and systemic change, rather than incremental improvements. It is this link between transformation, and the shift to new levels of collaborative, creative and visionary leadership that highlight how can coaching is critical for innovation and sustainability. Our research supports these assertions with details of over a dozen different characteristics that coaching approaches can have, and relates them to the organisational attitudes to sustainability and intended purpose of the coaching.

¹ McKinsey and Co, *Teamwork at the Top* [Online]. Available: [http://www.mckinseyquarterly.com/Teamwork at the top 1022 abstract](http://www.mckinseyquarterly.com/Teamwork_at_the_top_1022_abstract).

² Blowfield, M, Visser, W, Livesey, F. (2007) *Sustainability Innovation: Mapping the Territory* University of

