

# Group Coaching

## The growing application in developing aspiring leaders

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Coaches and coaching companies are feverishly responding to the latest issue of requests from large global organizations now soliciting best ideas for how to offer coaching to aspiring leaders. Those who lead learning organizations or leadership development programs are seeking ways to scale initiatives to develop and retain key employees at every level, from the executives who typically receive one-to-one coaching, to the front line where the investment options are thinner and the need for creativity is greater. This expansion presents lots of opportunities, as well as a few challenges. The presenting question is this: “When is group coaching the best application?”

Underscoring the focus of group coaching in organizations, the following case will illustrate a few key advantages and also illuminate some potential challenges or pitfalls for coaching leaders or aspiring leaders in groups. These ideas come from a collection of personal and collegial experiences of working with groups and teams through various partnerships over the past 15 years. What we have learned is that most successful

group coaching experiences have these elements:

**1. Group Think:** Participants come together for specific reasons – affinity groups, project groups, executive teams and networking groups – where the individuals can leverage the group’s best thinking and the wisdom of their colleagues while taking time for personal reflection and applications of learning.

**2. No Competition:** There is a lack of competition among the group members for specific job openings that might occur while they are in the group coaching experience, so aspiring leaders feel safe to share full stories about a new position they are going for, create options for career paths, or seek advice from the other members about best approaches.

**3. Cultural Awareness:** Members are seeking new ways to communicate across cultures to gain better understandings, create new partnerships, drive new strategies, or innovate a global approach.

**4. Community:** In the time allocated for coaching, typically one hour, the groups are small enough for everyone to participate, offer suggestions, speak about their personal insights, share stories and shift perspectives and energy by laughing together.

With that as the foundation for success, consider the case below:

### Scaling coaching for aspiring leaders and diverse candidates

Proposal request reads, “Large global organization seeks to expand key and diverse talent developmental opportunities to aspiring front line professionals.” This is a great idea conceptually for numerous reasons, with benefits including retention strategy, reserve of talent, and diversity initiative to broaden the base of new applicants for leadership roles.

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# Feature

## Advantages vs. Disadvantages

Consider these advantages and disadvantages for conducting a front line diversity program for leadership development as part of an expansion strategy:

### ADVANTAGES

Group coaching offers the opportunity for members to create small networks and get beyond the individual contributor role in how they view their role and their potential.

Intimacy – participating in this type of conversational environment makes possible having a best friend at work, with partnerships and relationships being built quickly in a facilitated conversation with the coach.

People learn from each other, as their colleagues reveal vulnerabilities – there is always the possibility that what someone else is discovering for her/himself is exactly what the rest of the group needs to hear or learn.

Problem solving for the organization – if attention is paid to the ideas that originate in these groups, there is a powerful opening for best practices to be adopted.

Cost savings – offering group coaching where six to eight people work with a single coach has built-in efficiencies of time for the coach, resulting in cost savings for the organization.

### DISADVANTAGES

Some participants may withhold their full contribution – or hide out – if the coach is not skilled at engaging each member.

Some may take longer to find personal paths of leadership or a deep connection to their own wisdom, if they are habitual and comfortable followers.

When the group's members aspire to and apply for a limited number of job openings at the next level, there is an unspoken competition which may prohibit members from sharing fully what they need and want to accomplish in the interview process.

### How to address the disadvantages:

1. Select a coaching company or cadre of internal or external coaches to conduct the group coaching. Think in terms of six to eight people per coach and a minimum of six months for the initiative.
2. Create a foundation for the individual participants – match each individual to a coach who will conduct two months of individual coaching to set a plan.
3. Those same people will work with the coach for a group experi-

ence, beginning in month three. Supplement the group coaching with an individual check-in on progress update – 30 to 60 minutes, depending on the contract and the needs of the individuals.

4. Set the ground rules for the group in the first session – how they will participate, where they will focus, what they keep for the individual sessions. Allow the group to determine these agreements.

5. Now, coach – focus the group calls on what each person is learning about their capabilities, leveraging their

strengths, closing development gaps, growing and contributing. Keep the job application moves and goal attainment around the positions in reserve for the individual sessions.

6. Have an end game in mind. What will the group accomplish in the coaching experience? When should it end?

### To further answer when to “group” or not, consider these questions:

1. Is this an intact team? Intact teams are applications for team coaching, not group coaching. The dynamics are different and the coach’s focus is different. With a group, the focus is on a facilitative approach and individual agendas and learning. The participants have chosen to participate and have a choice in the coach matching. In team coaching the team’s leader typically chooses the coach – typically someone they trust and have worked with, often selected in a coach matching process. The team members are enrolled to participate in a process that is not their own design and has a mandate, a common goal or need, whereas the coach’s role is to accelerate how they work together, learn together and accomplish extraordinarily successful outcomes.

2. Is this an action learning challenge, where participants are assigned to action teams? This application is more difficult to assess. ‘Action teams’ has become another buzz phrase much like ‘quality circles’ was in the 1980s, yet there are many interpretations for how to design and execute an action team and what the starting point and end game are. Action learning teams originated out of a need to address short-term

dilemmas for global or cross-cultural understanding. Team and group coaching done well both have action learning as one of the key drivers for success. The truth is that action learning is always at the heart of great coaching, so perhaps the better approach is to help clarify for the project lead or learning officer what is really needed and if group or team coaching is the more specific application for the needs of the team.

## “With a group, the focus is on a facilitative approach and individual agendas and learning.”

3. Would this initiative be better focused on developing the key individuals and grooming them personally for contribution at the next or higher level leadership position? Remember the beauty and power of one-to-one coaching for individual leadership development. Often, it is not worth trying to save a moderate amount of money when the desire is to develop an executive to become balanced, revealing, self-aware, mindful, gracious, present, flexible – or when coaching has been prescribed as an intervention to help someone save their job.

Answering these questions can give both coaches and the organizations we serve a place to start, to determine if the initiative is driven by an application for groups, for teams, or for individuals.

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