

Team coaching and reflecting teams

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¹ Edited version of Hornstrup et.al. 2005

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In systemic leadership and a systemic approach to organisational development, it is crucial to apply multiple positions or perspectives that make it possible to view and approach a given topic from a variety of angles or positions. When working with team coaching, reflecting teams can be an important means of discovering new ideas and options. Reflecting teams can be used in a variety of ways and settings. The choice depends on the context – and a sound choice requires a well-defined task.

In the context of coaching the reflecting team is a group of colleagues (typically 3-6) or other relevant individuals who are asked to assume an observational position vis-à-vis the conversation between coach and focus person. The reflecting team adds a meta-position to the coaching so to speak; a position that aims to help the coach and the focus person achieve a productive dialogue that promotes development (Schilling 1998).

The use of the reflecting team was developed within the therapeutic field. Tom Andersen describes the use of the approach in a therapeutic context in his book "Reflekterende teams. Samtal och samtal om samtalen" from 1991. The method has spread from the original therapeutic context and is now applied in a wider organisational context. In our work, the approach is particularly common in connection with team coaching and team appraisals (Hornstrup & Loehr Petersen 2003, Hornstrup et.al. 2005).

When a method is transferred from one context to another (from therapy to coaching), it is necessary to pause and 'renegotiate' the meaning of the concept and its practical application. Below, we describe possible ways to understand and work with reflecting teams in an organisational coaching context.

² Edited version of Hornstrup et.al. 2005

The ethics behind reflecting teams

Leaders or consultants wishing to implement this approach must keep in mind the basic ethics behind the use of a reflecting team in team coaching. The method is more than just a coaching technique: We view reflecting teams as a special mental/ethical position in the team-coaching process.

The ethics can be stated on the basis of seven elements:

1. **Focus on the job/task.** In an organisational context, one must adopt an organisational point of view and only include elements that relate to the private sphere to the extent that they are vital to the coaching. Here, the leader *and* the reflecting team have a shared responsibility to safeguard the professional context.
2. **Confidentiality.** At the outset of the coaching, the coach and the members of the reflecting team agree to treat the contents of the coaching as confidential. In this context, confidentiality means that the parties, at the end of coaching session, establish what the members of the reflecting team are **not** allowed to disclose from the coaching³. In practice, this means that we see confidentiality as a way of ensuring that the coaching takes place in a closed forum where statements made by any of the interlocutors are not disclosed to outsiders. Another important point is that the coaching should be viewed as a learning universe where the participants are free to use the learning generated through the coaching – in order to provide the best possible conditions for knowledge sharing.
3. **Appreciation.** Working from an appreciative perspective means that the reflecting team must validate and appreciate the statements of others – whether the team members agree with them or not (Hornstrup & Loeher-Petersen 2001). In practice this requires the team members to avoid criticising, disagreeing, etc. Team members can express new ideas or alternative points-of-view by latching on to what was said: "That sounds interesting ..." or: "This makes me think ..." before offering their own contribution. The purpose of this is to create an unprejudiced space where everyone can be heard. Appreciation also requires the reflecting team to express appreciative (and challenging) questions and hypotheses in

³ This interpretation of confidentiality is more constructive than the traditional definition as it encourages the participants to use the resulting knowledge and ideas. The more traditional interpretation of confidentiality – that nothing can be disclosed from the coaching – risks locking up the resulting insights.

relation to what is said.

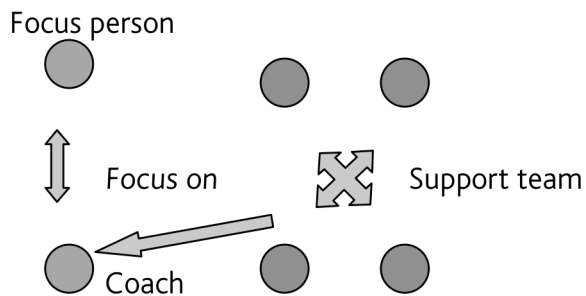
4. **Commitment.** Here, commitment refers to an obligation to engage actively in the task and in helping others.
5. **A time to speak and a time to listen.** One important element in working with reflecting teams is to establish restrictions concerning speaking time and listening time. In our experience, it is easier for the reflecting team to maintain focus if it is clearly defined when the team is supposed to take the floor. In order to listen and concentrate on what is being said – and continue to focus on the dialogue – the team should know when it is appropriate to share its reflections.
6. **A well-defined task.** The more accurate the task description, the easier it is for the team to make a constructive contribution to the process. Typically, the focus person (the person who receives coaching) is the one who defines the task of the reflecting team – possibly in cooperation with the coach. But the team may also function as an observer for the coach, which may be particularly helpful in training situations.
7. **Reflections are offers!** It is important to emphasise that the reflecting team is always an option for help. Whatever questions, ideas or hypotheses the reflecting team brings forward, it is up to the focus person, possibly in cooperation with the coach, to determine which elements seem most fruitful to the pursue.

As already mentioned, reflecting teams can be used in a variety of ways. Here we describe a range of focus areas for the reflecting team. In any case it is crucial to make the context of the team's work very clear. The reflecting team may help increase the quality and the efficiency of a coaching process – if it is given a constructive and accurately defined role. If not, the team may become an 'awkward' disturbing factor, hampering the dialogue between the coach/supervisor and the focus person.

One way of giving the team a clearer sense of its task is to label the team as accurately as possible. We often find the term 'reflecting team' to be too broad or vague. Therefore we have chosen to give each of the described applications a separate, distinct name. We encourage systemically inspired practitioners to expand and develop the concept and the approach in their

own organisations. Below, we present a number of basic forms, and in closing we describe some of the possible combinations that the approach also allows for.

Varieties of reflecting teams



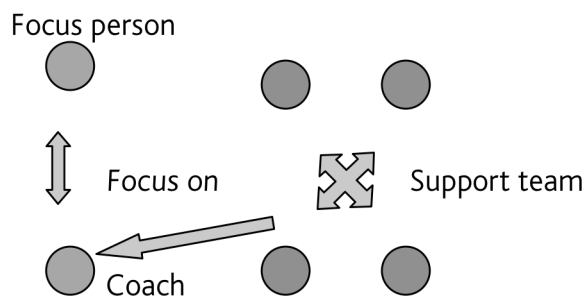
Support team for the coach

One may choose to use the team as support for the coach. In this capacity, the team focuses on the actions and behaviour of the coach – the questions asked as well as new questions. It is important that the team focuses on the questions that help the focus person reflect and reach new insights. In addition to keeping the key areas of the coaching in focus, this also provides appreciation for the coach. Appreciation/support from the team gives the coach a more stable platform to work from – which in turn is conducive to a good and constructive dialogue.

In addition to this, the support team should also suggest questions that might help the coach create a more in-depth exchange. To this end, the team should point to areas that warrant further elaboration, possibly including the actual phrasing of questions.

In this approach the team is free to reflect without being in direct dialogue with the coach, but in many cases it is useful to include the coach directly in the dialogue. That gives the coach the opportunity to use the team as an active helper for any questions or ideas that might arise along the way. This approach is very appropriate for training situations or for a coach who is inexperienced or insecure in his or her role.

Support team for the coach



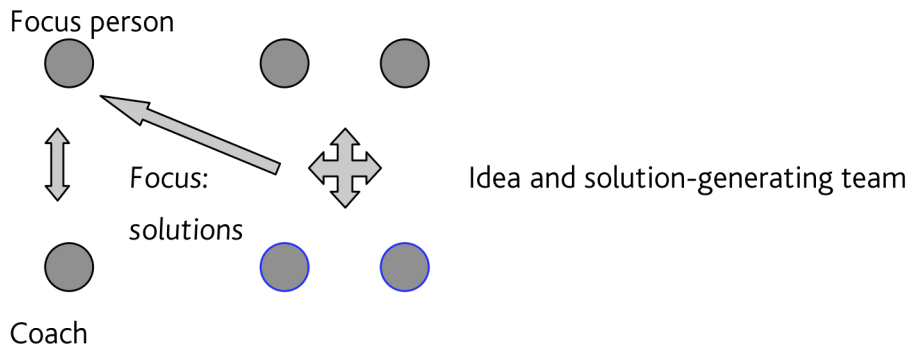
An issue that is often raised is whether the team should be allowed to advise the focus person directly. In some contexts (read: by some professional coaches) advice is discouraged, in others it is considered acceptable – if a clear context for advice is established (Schilling 1998). The context (the agreement) is crucial.

In an organisational context it will often be a bad idea **not** to use these suggestions – at least as part of the process. When a group of individuals observe a coaching session, they will often have a number of (qualified) ideas that the focus person might use. From the point-of-view of organisational knowledge sharing and efficiency, it would be inappropriate for the team not to pass these ideas on. It is, however, important that the solution-generating team presents ideas and proposed solutions as **ideas** and **open** hypotheses, where various possibilities and solution models are tried out and tested verbally: "*Might it be worthwhile to ...?*" or "*What might happen if she were to ...?*" If the team members instead were to present their proposals in the form of advice – "*I think you ought to ...*" or "*If I were in your place, I would ...*" – this might cause the focus person to block the suggestions out.

One variation of the solution-generating team is **the concluding team**. Here, the team assumes a meta-position (evaluating or clarifying actions in relation to the question types) and seeks to draw conclusions from what appear to be the most salient points in the dialogue. Such a team might also draw conclusions based on a particular perspective – or various perspectives relating to subgroups/individuals within the team such as the customers/users, for example. The task for this type of team might be defined as follows: "*Your task is to listen to and capture the main points of*

the dialogue seen from (e.g.) a users' perspective – imagine that you are the users ... What might they conclude on the basis of this coaching?"

Idea-generating team



Creative team

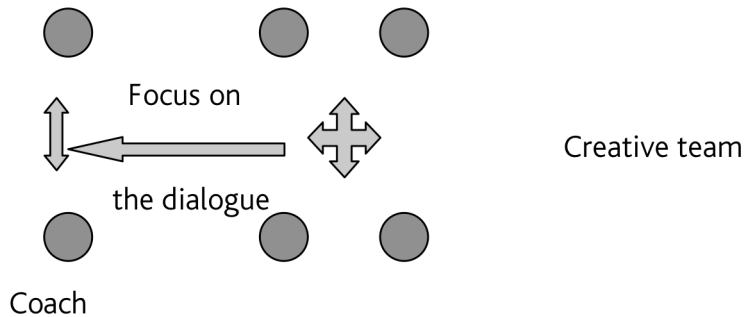
A creative team is particularly appropriate for addressing new tasks or generating new thoughts, ideas and options in relation to existing tasks.

A creative team might be requested, for example, to be 'irreverent'. The team's task, then, is to turn the world – the basic assumptions and understandings of the focus person (and the coach) – upside down in order to generate new possibilities. Many of the difficulties that we encounter are related to deeply rooted thought and action patterns, as expressed in the familiar phrases: "Of course, one has to ...", "We always ..." or "Of course, one can't ...". The team's assignment here is to turn the situation around, to highlight and challenge "of course" and "one" by confronting them with new possible thoughts and actions.

In relation to question types, one might link the creative team with the reflecting and meta-reflecting questions that aim to open new opportunities and highlight things that the focus person/coach might be missing. Examples of questions that characterise the creative team: *"What would happen if the focus person were to give up the notion that X is right, and Z is wrong – what would happen if it were the other way around?"* or *"What is the worst that could happen if ...?"*

Creative team

Focus person



Metaphor-generating creative team

A variation on the creative team is the metaphor-generating team. Working as a coach/supervisor means working with language. Here, metaphors can be a valuable tool. The coach may generate and apply metaphors as part of the process, but this task may also be passed on to the team.

Metaphors can inspire new, alternative perspectives of an issue – the use of metaphors often has a liberating and vitalising effect, and it invites language games related to the linguistic universe of the metaphor. If the team is able to work with the metaphor it may foster new and fresh perspectives and stimulate the creativity of both the focus person and the coach. The advantage of working within a metaphorical context is that it enhances the possibility of maintaining a meta-position.

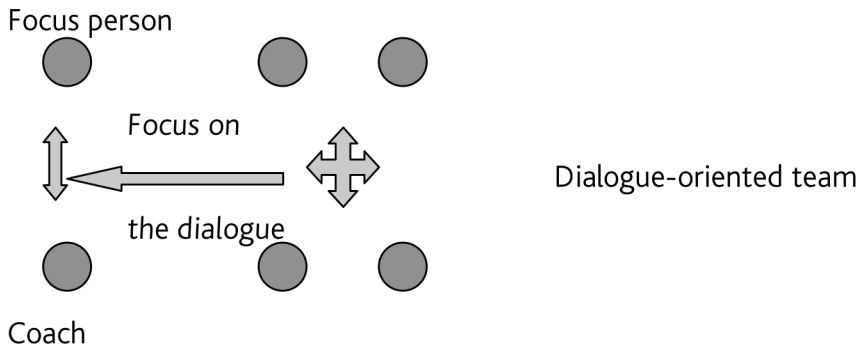
This approach can be used in a relatively directive form or more loosely. In the directive form, the team (individually, in pairs or as a group) is asked to generate metaphors, images, etc. that relate to what has come out during the coaching. Here, the coach may enter into direct dialogue with the team. In a looser approach, the team may function as a creative team, shaping and developing metaphors in an internal dialogue within the team. This process of free association is often very liberating for the team, the coach and the focus person, and the process often produces new and alternative ideas.

Dialogue-oriented team

As the name suggests, the dialogue-oriented team focuses on what happens in the dialogue between the coach and the focus person. Thus, the team aims to capture key points and peak

moments from the dialogue (appreciation) and state questions and hypotheses that may help move the dialogue along (promoting/creating appropriate disturbance).

Dialogue-oriented team



The primary task for this type of team is to appreciate what is being said – demonstrating the team's ability to relate to the dialogue. The team's secondary task is to look for areas where further questions might be indicated, or propose hypotheses concerning aspects that might not have been investigated sufficiently in the dialogue. Another aspect of the task may be to help create a more focused dialogue. Often, the dialogue brings up several issues, which may cause the dialogue to lose its focus.

Another way to describe this approach is to say that the team observes the dialogue from a distance focusing on topics or headlines – what topics/headlines have been dominant, less dominant or absent? Topics/headlines may include moods – the mood of the dialogue (joyful, reflective etc.), the relationship between mood and topics, etc. The team may also focus on the various language games/phrases. All in all, the dialogue-oriented team is asked to address the overall, general elements and their impact on the dialogue from a meta-perspective.

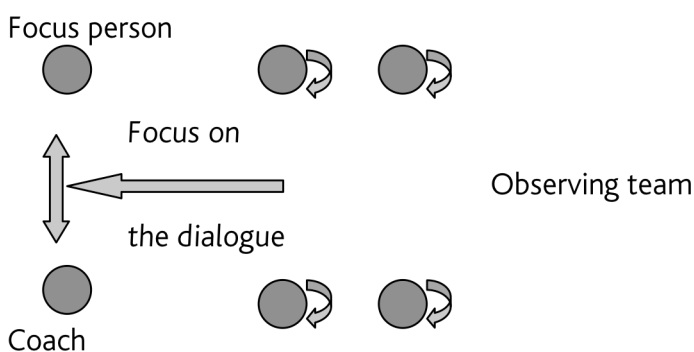
In this approach, the reflecting team will typically display an open exchange about the dialogue, without addressing the focus person or the coach directly. The focus person and the coach assume a reflective listening position, which allows them to relate to and apply the reflections that they find most useful.

This approach may be particularly useful for dealing with comprehensive and vague topics; it is also very useful for developing the application of reflecting teams.

The (silently) observing team

In some cases, it may be useful to have the team act as silent observers throughout the coaching or part of the time. This may be the case, for example, when the coaching deals with topics that are 'sensitive' to the focus person or concern internal opposition or conflicts within a staff group. Here, the team's primary task is to observe and reflect quietly – listening and attempting to see matters from the other side (the focus person's perspective).

Observing team



If the observers themselves are actively involved in the matter at hand, it may be useful to have brief dialogues between the coach and the individual members of the observing team. This variation may help add some dynamics to an otherwise difficult talk, as it makes it possible for all the 'voices' to be heard in turn.

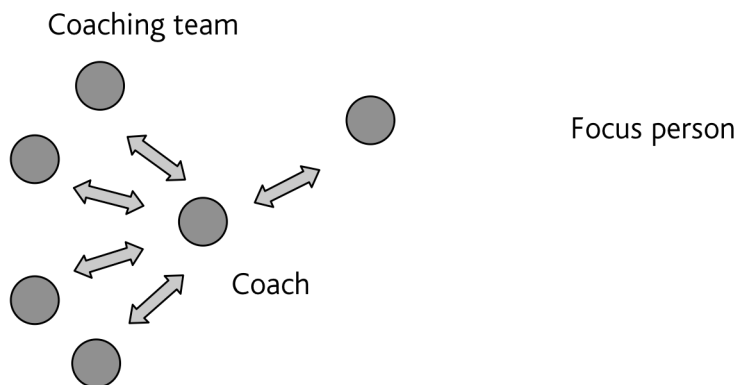
If a leader wishes to work with this type of opposition or conflict resolution, it may be useful to include a reflecting supporter/observer in the coaching. An observer who enjoys the trust of all parties involved may often provide valuable support for the coach in an otherwise difficult situation.

This approach may also be useful as a first step in working with reflecting teams – an exercise in acting as a reflecting and appreciative observer. Here, the coach will first complete the coaching with the focus person and then have a dialogue with the observing team.

The team being coached

Another variation is to have the coach working with the reflecting team instead of the focus person. The first step in this coaching is a five-minute time-period for the focus person to present his or her 'case' to the team and the coach. During this part of the coaching session, the role of the coach is to ask all the necessary factual questions.

The coaching team



For the remainder of the coaching session, the roles are switched around. The coach interviews the reflecting team – as a group or one by one – interspersed with short breaks where the coach and the focus person discuss what the focus person thinks of the coaching: Is it on the right track, is there additional information that needs to be included, or does the focus person wish to adjust or change the team's focus?

This approach leaves the focus person free to assume an active listening position and relate to the thoughts and ideas of the reflecting team. Often, the focus person finds this process to be particularly rewarding precisely because he or she has a free position in the dialogue, which often sparks new ideas that spring from, but are not always directly related to, what the reflecting team is discussing.

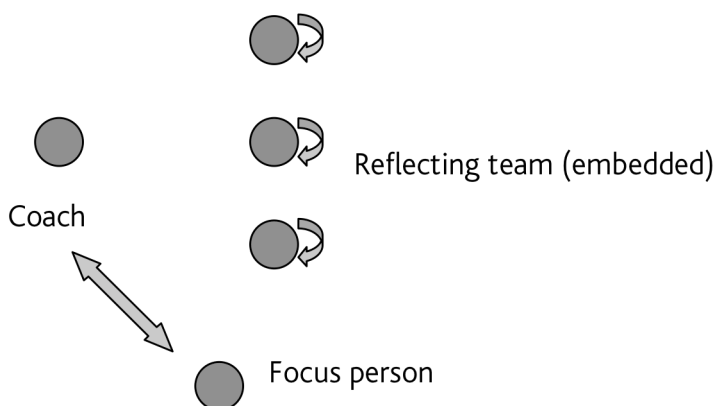
This approach is particularly useful in connection with 'open' processes that aim to generate new ideas or in cases where the team has thorough knowledge of the matter at hand.

Embedded reflecting team

In an embedded reflecting team everybody takes turns assuming reflecting observational positions and active roles, respectively. The coach talks with the individual members in turn while the others assume observational positions where their task is to reflect on what the others say and relate it to their own thoughts and ideas.

The advantage of this approach is that it allows everyone to be actively involved in the dialogue as well as to act as an observer. It has particular potential in relation to topics that are equally important to all the participants. Thus, it may be applied in a number of different settings, for example, in connection with agenda issues of a clarifying or ideational character, assessment/evaluation of projects or team development processes and many other contexts. Generally, it is a very powerful approach in situations where the principle of 'one person talking, while everybody else listens actively' is superior to a completely free dialogue.

Embedded reflecting team



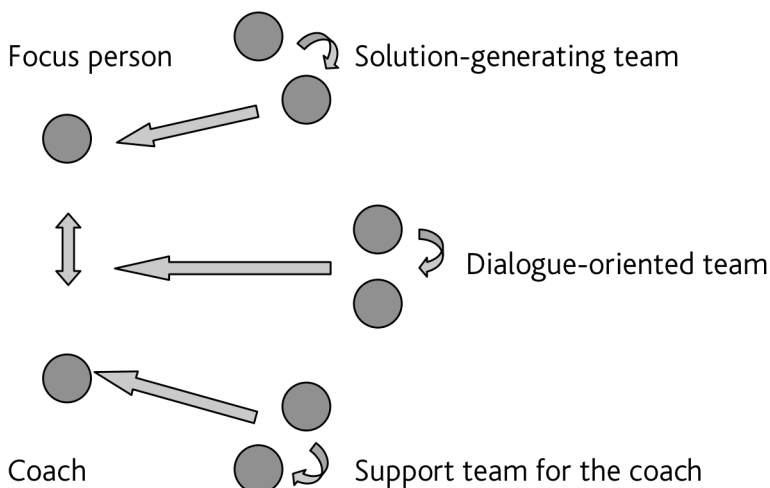
Multiple teams within the team

It is also possible to combine the different types of teams. This may be particularly appropriate if the team consists of six or more members. Splitting the team up into smaller teams, each with a particular assignment (position in relation to the dialogue), makes it possible to bring more than one position into play, which often has very positive effects. One way of bringing multiple positions into play may be to have different groups within the reflecting team speak from different positions – offering reflections from the points-of-view of different stakeholders. For example, one might invite the 'voices' of the users, customers, employer, staff in other departments, etc.

One may also choose to assign different positions to the various teams, cf. the section above. Thus, one team may provide support for the coach, another may focus on dialogue, and yet another may focus on solutions or act as a creative team – this is completely up to one's imagination and the number of participants.

A further advantage of this is that it keeps the individual team 'on its toes'. It may be hard for the individual members of a large team to maintain concentration for long periods of time. When large teams are split into smaller teams (two-three members) the individual members have more clearly defined tasks.

Multiple teams within the team



Summary

All in all, the purpose of this section is to offer inspiration for the ongoing process of developing the potential inherent in the different types of reflecting teams. The limits are set only by one's imagination – and the context!

A discussion of the different approaches should also include some general considerations about the time required to work with reflecting teams. When choosing to use additional resources (compared with, for example, individual coaching) one must seek to use the available time as efficiently as possible. A choice to use reflecting teams must be based on the assumption that this approach will provide superior solutions, increased knowledge sharing, etc.

Time consumption involved in using reflecting teams may vary (from half an hour to two hours). With an accurate description of its intended role and an active position in the coaching, the reflecting team may become a key instrument in the daily generation and exchange of knowledge.

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