



# Making Good Teams Great By Using A Team Development Coach (With Apologies To American Baseball)

**White Paper**  
*by Lorin Walker, PhD*

## WHY HAVE A TEAM DEVELOPMENT COACH?

*"Don't look back; something might be gaining on you"—Satchel Paige, baseball pitcher*

The greatest athletes know the value of having a great coach. Even Tiger Woods has a coach; a hacker will read a golf magazine or two and hope for the best—Tiger will obtain the best instruction possible to perfect his game.

Creating a great team follows the same principle—it seldom happens by chance—even with the best players, the best support and resources, and a realistic objective, teams more often than not fall short of their full potential. To bring out the team's full potential, a coach does a number of things. A coach can be a mentor, an instructor, a drill sergeant, a mother confessor, a taskmaster, a parent-figure, a nurse-maid, an inspiration, a gadfly (general pain-in-the-neck when necessary). . . . . In the words of one famous coach, "the coach's value is in getting people to do things they wouldn't otherwise do on their own".

Coaches are both outsiders and insiders. They are outside the team, not a permanent team member, and they are also inside the team, privy to the team's life and values, able to connect outside wisdom with inside action. Being outside the team, they can assess objectively, with fresh eyes. Being inside the team, they are committed to the team's success, and recognize its challenges and constraints. They are able to speak to the team's organization and leadership. Coaches address the two biggest swing factors in team success identified by CII research: how well the team is organized on the front end and how much time the team invests in team building activities.

In our experience, a team development coach has five distinct and complementary roles:

1. Diagnostician
2. Closure catalyst
3. Team skills trainer
4. Team process observer and giver of feedback
5. One-on-one coach

## DIAGNOSTICIAN

*"It ain't braggin' if it's true"—Dizzy Dean, baseball pitcher*

The effective coach has a myriad of measurement tools or "revealing" exercises to uncover the truth about team functioning, to discover root causes and to measure trends over time. Given this information, she is able to raise a red flag to keep things from going off track, or to pinpoint the best next step in the development of the team. The coach makes the unconscious, the invisible data, both conscious and visible, so that it can be dealt with.

## CLOSURE CATALYST

*"When you come to a fork in the road, take it!"—Yogi Berra, baseball player*

In this role, the coach calls for decisions at the proper time. He records and follows up on decisions, keeps action minutes, and makes sure decisions get implemented. He or she may convene the team or a subteam to assess progress. He encourages players to make conscious choices about whether to pursue a course, modify it or abandon it. The coach helps teams know when they have "come to a fork in the road", so they can choose and move on.

## TEAM SKILLS TRAINER

*"Gettin' the players, that's the easy part. Gettin' 'em to play together, that's the hard part."—Casey Stengel, former Manager, New York Yankees—winner of 5 straight world championships*

Skills for working effectively in teams, which are not normally taught as part of formal schooling, include decision making, agenda setting, resolving conflict, goal setting, influencing without authority, meeting management and so forth. The coach is able to see which of these skills would greatly help the team accomplish its mission. He is able to prescribe skill acquisition to help teams move ahead. He is a skillful model and an effective teacher, and brings the skills training in the proper degree, at the proper time.

## TEAM PROCESS OBSERVER AND GIVER OF FEEDBACK

*"You can observe a lot by watching"—Yogi Berra*

Looking in from the outside and noticing how the team energy is flowing, the coach is able to point out communication logjams, where someone may be withholding information, bullying the group, coming unprepared for the meeting, or ignoring the needs and contributions of other team members.

The coach is able to observe and point out when the team may be over-processing a topic, lumbering toward "analysis paralysis". She is able to point out strengths and weaknesses in the team process and suggest action if needed. The role can be not unlike the designated role, in medieval times, of the king's court jester, whose job it was to say to the king, with impunity, what everyone else was thinking but afraid to say.

## ONE-ON-ONE COACH

*"Son, we'd like to keep you around this season, but we're going to try and win a pennant"—Casey Stengel*

Finally, the team development coach can give just-in-time coaching, mentoring and advice to individual team members. Given the advantage of being knowledgeable of team actions and needs, yet in an impermanent outside role, the coach can be on target in pointing out areas of improvement. He is also in a prime position to notice and praise improvements in leadership or effective team-oriented behaviors as the team produces high quality outputs.

## WHAT NEXT?

*"The future ain't what it used to be" —Yogi Berra*

Fulfilling these five roles make the team development coach a valuable player in today's fast paced, exacting, team-oriented business climate. Organizations who seek to have great teams will go to the effort to look for great coaches.

Coaches should be chosen on the basis of three factors:

- **Competence:** does the coach understand the business of the team as well as demonstrating ability to improve team communication, process and results?
- **Chemistry:** how well does this coach's personality and style fit with the team? Is he or she able to maintain rapport while still working through thorny issues?
- **Commitment:** is the coach as committed to the team's success as the team is (or maybe more)?

Teams just starting up will find that working with a coach will greatly accelerate their path to high performance, helping them to produce the deliverables in the team's area of responsibility. Teams that are already in the "thick of it" will likewise benefit from the focus and productivity enhancement that a good team development coach encourages.

