

Groups That Thrive

Essential ingredients for success

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Increasingly, more coaches are adding group coaching to their mix. The benefits for coaches, clients and organizations abound (refer to sidebar). This article explores key ingredients for coaches to consider before, during and after a group coaching program, to maximize success for all involved.

Before the Program

Even before you get on the phone or into a room with a group, there are a number of key areas to consider:

Look at your numbers and design. For a program to be considered group coaching for the purposes of credentialing, the ICF has set a cap at a group size of 15. Group coaching is an intimate conversation space, focused on goal setting, awareness building and accountability. In group coaching, the principle of ‘less is more’ is critical. As a group coach we want to create robust opportunities for conversation amongst the group members. Group coaching is not training, where the facilitator is the expert and the goal is to equip group members with new KSAs (Knowledge, Skills and Abilities). Group coaching is grounded in coaching principles, with the group coach playing the role of coach – supporting the members to deepen their awareness and take action on issues important in their work or life.

Set your focus. What is going to be the focus of your program? A majority of clients prefer to have a set of themes or topics around which the coaching is to occur. This helps the group to identify commonalities. Themes can provide an anchor point for conversations, and will also support you in your marketing and implementation.

Consider learning styles. Within any group context you

will likely have a mix of visual, auditory and kinesthetic learners. Consider how you can meet the needs of these different styles through handouts/visual anchor points, body centered coaching, journaling and other hands-on exercises.

Conduct pre-program 1-1s. Wherever feasible, prior to the start of my group coaching sessions I like to speak with each participant to find out what their priorities are, what their agendas are and what has brought them to the program. It is also a good way to cover off any logistical issues and discuss expectations. Group coaching is still a

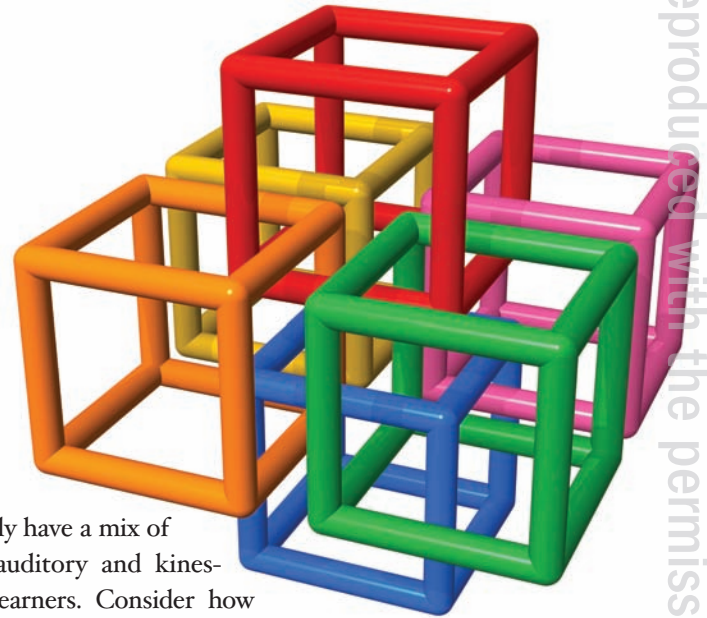
“Group coaching is an intimate conversation space, focused on goal setting, awareness building and accountability.”

mystery to many clients and the differences between a content-heavy workshop and the focus of group coaching’s reflection and action may not be well understood.

If you are working with a corporate group, where meeting one-on-one may not always be possible, a questionnaire or web-based survey will support you in honing in to what’s really important before the program starts. Another benefit of these pre-program 1-1s is to get a sense of any difficult issues that may emerge. Consider these pre-program 1-1s as part of the design of your coaching alliance.

During the Program

Set the tone. Spend time in session 1 strategically giving



Benefits of Group Coaching (Britton, 2010)

CLIENT

- Collective wisdom
- Multiple perspectives
- Less didactic (back and forth questioning)
- May have more chance to reflect
- Less 'on the spot'
- Enables people to connect across geographic and industry boundaries

COACH

- Leverages time and resources
- Economies of scale
- Effects change
- Harnesses the collective wisdom of groups
- Scalability

ORGANIZATION

- Time
- Money
- Scalability
- Effecting change more readily
- Cross functional fertilization
- Culture change
- Enhanced retention of learning

the group an opportunity to get to know each other as well as developing ground rules or ways of working. Confidentiality plays a critical role in the group coaching context.

Leave lots of time for the group to connect. One of the key benefits clients mention about group coaching is the opportunity for them to connect not only with the coach but also with each other. Never underestimate the power of peer learning and sharing.

Leverage your core coaching competencies. Group coaching is an extension of coaching, and fuses together important principles from the realm of group dynamics and adult learning. How are you using your core coaching competencies, such as:

- Curiosity
- Asking Powerful Questions
- Listening
- Being unattached to the outcome
- Holding your clients' agendas (plural in this case)
- Supporting clients to deepen their awareness, set goals and take action
- Creating Accountability

Notice and work through the group dynamics that are occurring. Bruce Tuckman's model of Forming,

Storming, Norming, Performing (and later Adjourning) can provide coaches with valuable information about the support needs of a group at different stages.

For example, conflict that emerges in a second or third session may be a function of the group figuring out its different roles, and can actually signal healthy development of the group.

Engage your audience every five to seven minutes. The latest research in virtual facilitation points to the importance of engaging your audience every five minutes (Huggett, 2010). Whether it is asking a question to the group, having people reflect on a question in a journal, or beginning a conversation, changing your pace is critical in keeping your group members engaged throughout a program.

Remember that the impact of coaching really happens in between the sessions. Robust assignments using Inquiry, Challenges and Requests can support group clients to integrate their learning and insights into their life and work. Given the diverse nature of groups, recognize that a "one size fits all"

assignment may not be the best approach. Where possible, have group members self-identify, or tweak their own inquiry, challenge or request. Assignments between calls are even more important in the virtual/phone-based domain.

After the Program

Follow up with the group and check in on accountabilities, both collectively and individually. Keeping in touch can be also a great marketing approach, and can point to the need and interest for follow-up programs.

Obtain feedback from the group in the medium and long term as to what impact the program really had for them. What are the benefits of the program? What were the results? What changes need to be made?

Keeping these ideas in mind before, during and after a program can greatly boost the impact and satisfaction of the group coaching process for coaches and clients alike.

References:

- Britton, Jennifer. *Effective Group Coaching*. John Wiley and Sons, 2010.
- Huggett, Cindy. *Virtual Facilitation Basics*. ASTD Press, 2010.