HOW ACTION LEARNING CAN BE USED IN TEAM COACHING
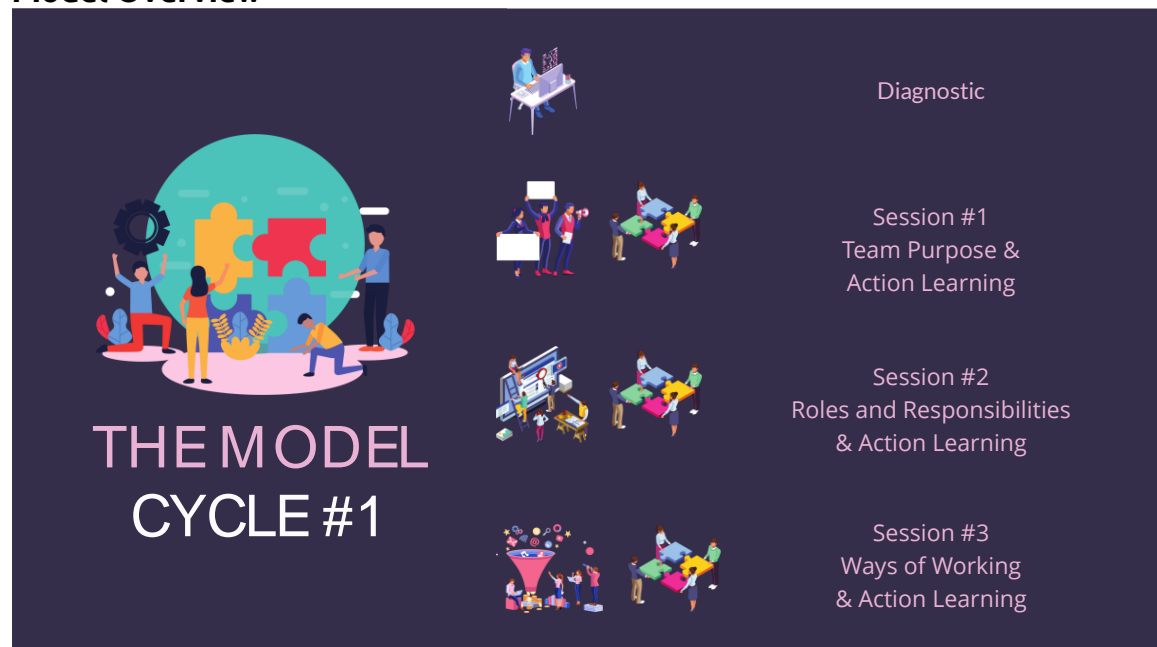
For the last 2 years I've been studying for my Masters in Coaching and Mentoring with Oxford Brookes, which I completed and successful passed in September 2021. My research looked at the use of Action Learning within Team Coaching. I wanted to share with you some of the findings from my research. In this article I share with you what a team coaching model using action learning could look like.
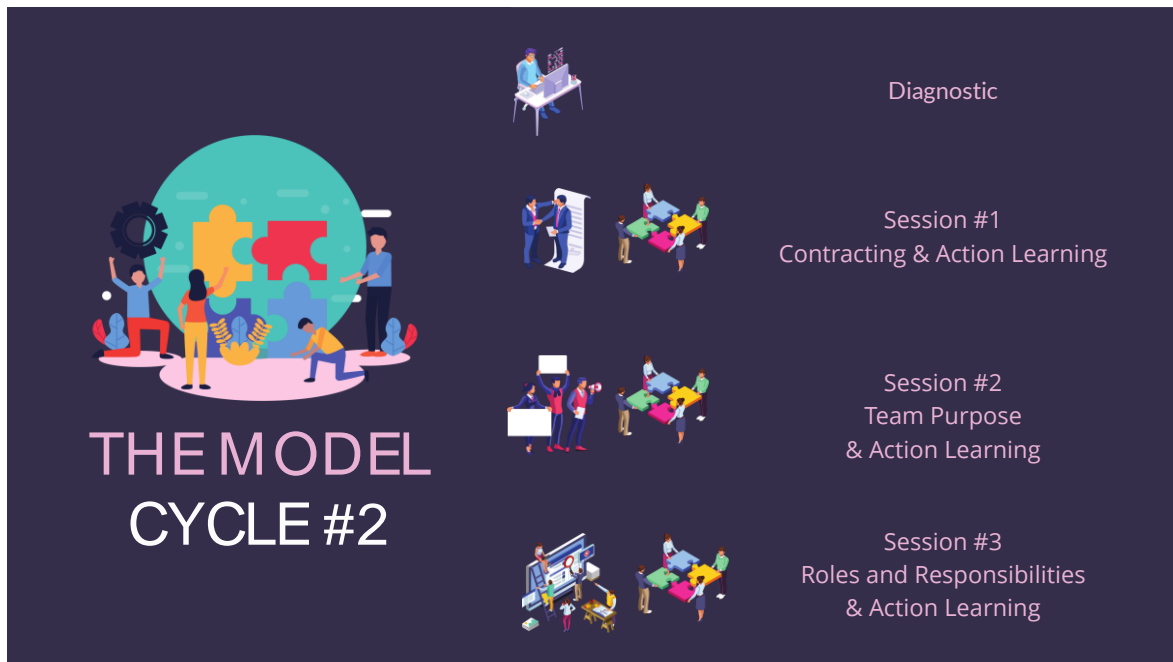
Methodology

In my research I was seeking to build a model using team coaching and Action Learning. I wanted to 'test theory in the real world' (Herr and Anderson, 2015), understanding its impact and developing knowledge for coaching practice. As such my research used an Action Research Methodology, which was Qualitative with a Pragmatist ontological approach and epistemology. This method enabled me to be a research-practitioner which enabled me to be the coach in the sessions and also the researcher.

The model was developed from my literature review and I ran two cycles of the model with intact teams within two different organisations. I chose two different organisations to ensure impartiality in both cycles. Each team consisted of 5 people. The first team included the team leader, the second team did not. I conducted semi-structured interviews with participants at the end of the cycle. I also asked a reflective question after each session 'My experience of team coaching today was...'. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data. The model was iterated between cycle 1 and 2, based on the findings from the first cycle.

Model Overview

Diagnostic

Session #1
Team Purpose &
Action Learning

Session #2
Roles and Responsibilities
& Action Learning

Session #3
Ways of Working
& Action Learning

THE MODEL
CYCLE #1

THE MODEL CYCLE #2

- Diagnostic
- Session #1 — Contracting & Action Learning
- Session #2 — Team Purpose & Action Learning
- Session #3 — Roles and Responsibilities & Action Learning

FINAL MODEL

- Session #1 — Contracting & Action Learning
- Session #2 — Team Purpose & Action Learning
- Session #3 — Roles and Responsibilities & Action Learning
- Session #4 — Debrief & Ways of Working
- Session #5 — 1-1 Coaching Debrief

Team Coaching

There is a lack of specificity in the literature on what team coaching is. Team Coaching is a relatively new phenomena compared with 1-1 coaching. No single definition exists and there is a plethora of approaches in the literature. From reviewing the literature, I summarised team coaching into three core elements (conditions, content, coach):

1. **Conditions** – creating a safe space, its more than a one off event and diagnostics are typically used to determine the rationale for the approach
2. **Content** – Team Purpose, Roles and Responsibilities, Relationships and Ways of Working

3. **Coach**– can be an internal or external coach, the coach tends to use an eclectic mix of coaching approaches (i.e. goal orientated, Gestalt etc…)

Team Coaching and Action Learning

There is a scarcity of literature on the integration of these two approaches. They are both coaching approaches with a team of people that concentrate on learning and building relationships. Combining team coaching's focus on shared goals and purpose of the team with the experiential nature of Action Learning (working together on a real, urgent and complex problem) there seemed to be a potential to deliver the benefits of both especially action learning's learning transfer and team coaching's performance improvement.

Findings

Set up of the model

"It felt like a demo of a video game"

The sessions were held weekly which worked well for participants in both cycles. This cadence was felt sufficient to provide time for reflection and keeping information fresh in the mind between sessions. Each session was two hours in duration, with the first hour team coaching and the second hour action learning, which was not long enough. Three hours was felt to be a more beneficial duration of time together. In addition, three sessions were not enough for people to consolidate and embed the learning, five sessions was found to be the ideal number of sessions.

Virtual

"It would have been weird before the pandemic… it's second nature now"

Delivering the model via zoom virtually didn't negatively impact the model, which was revealed to be due to the change in ways of working from the pandemic. One participant explained there were benefits to be being in your own space when having the sessions – confidentiality, comfort and safety. As the coach conducting sessions, I found virtual sessions came with challenges, namely lacking the feeling of the energy/vibes of the team. It was difficult to 'read the room' and I needed to do more verbal check-in's to expressly find out what was being experienced.

1-1 Time

At the end of each cycle, I completed semi-structured interviews with each participant. A surprising finding was participants valued the 1-1 time reflecting on the experience on an individual basis. It was found this provided time to clear thoughts and debrief. Whilst this wasn't part of my model at first (it was the data gathering element), I concluded this 1-1 time was key to be included within a model going forward.

Content and Structure

In the first cycle I pre-planned the sessions and the activities within the team coaching part of the session, based on the four content areas discovered in the literature. However, I felt I was applying the model to the team. It felt very directive. I was doing the work for the team, rather than letting them do the work. Therefore, for the second cycle I included a contracting session where the team worked to identify the issues within the team and the outcomes they wanted to achieve. However, participants found covering the four areas very beneficial.

"Action learning can hit you like a ton of bricks… you ease in with the team coaching session before the action learning"

The quote above really struck me as to why team coaching and action learning can be a potent combination. Having a team coaching session before going into action learning seemed to really focus and bring the team together, setting the scene on broader matters such as team purpose, roles and responsibilities and ways of working. Then action learning, with its very experiential learning experience for the teams, brought to light in practice how the team work together.

Roles within the model

Coach

"Without the coach, the whole thing would not work"

Within the literature on Action Learning, Revans does not advocate for a coach to be in action learning sessions. There are also conflicting opinions within team coaching literature on whether the coach should be a team leader or an external person. In both cycles the teams felt they benefited by having an external, independent coach in running the sessions.

Team Leader

A controversy within the literature is the use of power dynamics within team coaching and Action Learning sessions. There are different arguments for and against team leaders being within sessions with their teams. It was clear that having the power differential was beneficial within Action Learning as it helped to have the different viewpoint within the problem-solving process. However, there was also caution around how open team members were when discussing issues within the team with the team leader present.

Implications for Practice

Action Learning coaches would benefit from combining team coaching with Action Learning, as it brings the benefits of both approaches, which is a potent combination. The virtual delivery of such coaching is now viewed as the 'new normal' and coaches delivering virtual models need to rely less on picking up the invisible cues from the team and conduct more 'check ins' to get an accurate read of the virtual room. When setting up the cadence of any model, consider the number of

sessions to ensure time for consolidation of learning and including 1-1 sessions to aid debriefing and concluding of the model. Include team leaders within the team sessions and use the combination of the sessions to build safety for honest conversations – another finding which I'll share in the next WIAL newsletter!

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