FEAR
FACTOR

Team coaching is "not for the faint-hearted", says **Declan Woods** in the first of this three-part **Team Coaching Special Report**. Anxiety stifles effectiveness and can start in the team itself or even the team's coach. *Part 1: How do we turn an anxious moment into a positive performance?*

Most of us spend significant amounts of time at work in teams. It is received wisdom that teams should function effectively. Often, however, they do not. A key reason is the presence of unbridled anxiety. Teams are increasingly calling on coaches to help them become more effective. But what if the team coach is having an anxious moment?

What is anxiety?

Anxiety is our response to an actual or perceived danger. When faced with the reality of having to present to a large audience, for example, most of us would be anxious. The 'threat' is external (to us) and tangible. This is object anxiety. Neurotic anxiety, though, is internal – within our psyche – and, although out of sight, the physiological effect on us can be the same as in object anxiety.

Anxiety might start with one person in a team (or with the team coach) and can easily spread to others through, what Hirschorn (*1990*) calls an "anxiety chain".

In this way, anxiety can become pervasive, which can prohibit a team from achieving its aim or tasks.

So far, anxiety has been presented in a far from fetching light. While it can lead to serious, stress-related health consequences if unchecked, the energy of early anxiety can also be channelled to good effect. It is also an invaluable data point. Looking for cues and signals of its presence can generate valuable insights for a team. So, anxiety can be very useful.

Although I used the word "anxiety", of the coaches we interviewed* all bar one replaced it with the word "fear", suggesting a more extreme form of anxiety was being experienced by the team coaches. So what caused this among highly experienced coaches?
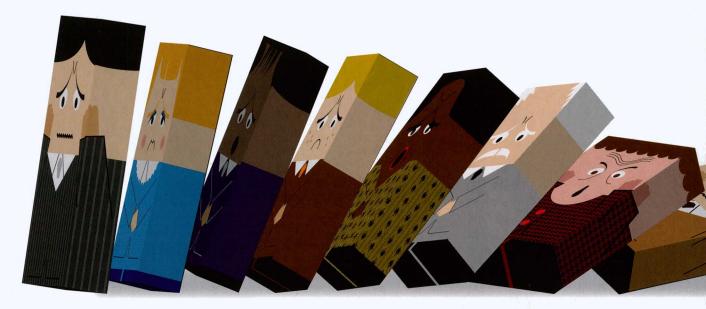
Why team coaches?

While the coaches were typically unclear about the precise source or trigger for their fear, most associated it with performance anxiety. Common phrases were: "…Will I deliver or won't I deliver what I set out to do?" or "Can I cope with this or am I out of my depth?"

The findings suggest performance anxiety manifests itself either through internal doubts or in external concerns around value delivered for the team. The more the team coach is paid, the greater the degree of this form of anxiety!

Some coaches reported content anxiety, ie, whether they had a grasp of the material in the team's work, but this was offset by active preparation. Most participating coaches were very experienced and did not report 'intervention' anxiety, ie, concerns over which tool, model or technique to use. By contrast, the one comparatively inexperienced coach named interventions as their chief source of anxiety. This concurs with related work by De Haan (*2008*).

Most coach participants found their anxiety greatest in the lead up to, or start of, a coaching engagement with a team. This is significant because it is the time

when a team itself is likely to be the most anxious, particularly if newly formed. There is also the danger that a coach's anxiety can spread to the team (or vice versa) and make matters worse. This puts a premium on a coach's ability to recognise their own anxiety, be able to discern what is causing it, and either self-manage it to prevent it spreading to the team or use it productively for the service of the team.

Another important finding was that even highly trained and experienced coaches became anxious when coaching teams, in a way that they don't while coaching individuals.

When probed about the nature of this anxiety, several commented about "...being on display or show". One participant said, "I never get anxious when one-to-one coaching. With a team, you are up there on your own, being judged and feeling that you have to give them something...".

Bion's work may offer some explanation for this. He described people's fear of being shamed, exposed and ridiculed in a group when joining a group or team setting, referring to this as the "politics of relatedness" (1961).

Kets de Vries reinforces this view, discussing the potentially negative consequences that can occur within a team or group as a "fear of self-exposure... and paranoid reactions" (2012).

Learning points

- Anxiety is an everyday phrase yet it is little understood in team coaches
- Teams at work often do not function effectively because of the presence of anxiety
- Anxiety can start within a coach or a team – and spread
- Anxiety can provide useful energy and a source of data about the state of a team
- Even highly trained and experienced coaches become anxious when coaching a team
- Anxiety in both the coach and team is greatest before, and at the start of, a team engagement
- Creating a safe space through contracting and internal self/state-management are vital ways of working with anxiety

This arguably stresses the usefulness of working alongside another experienced coach, which Kets de Vries (2012) calls "shadow" coaching, and coaching supervision – cited by a third of the coaches as an invaluable aid.

Coaching competencies and, sometimes, coach training, refer to a coach maintaining 'presence' with a client – the ability to remain fully present and engaged.

The research found that when a coach was anxious, their attention was focused inwardly and less on the team, which, not surprisingly, limited their presence.

In turn, this jeopardised the team reaching successful coaching outcomes. Given this, it is critical for a coach to be aware of their anxiety, lack of presence and how to self-manage this effectively.

Self-management
Coaches reported engaging in mindfulness and cognitive

activities to become calm (internally) and present (externally) with a team, eg: "I've done a lot of work on mindfulness and presence, on inner strength and resources and how I work"; "I ensure I sit down and am grounded, clear, have let go of what is going on out there [outside of the team coaching session] to become present and grounded. My biggest focus is to get [myself] in the space, as I do my best work 'in the moment' and need to be present."

Having a positive self-image may also form part of a coach's self-management and, given the potential for anxiety from the outset, seems an important attribute for the team coach to possess or acquire. Some team coaches made positive self-talk an explicit part of their self-management, eg, one coach said: " 'I'm okay, you're okay' is a mantra I use a lot."

There were huge variations in how coaches managed themselves and their anxiety. Preparation helped some: "I manage anxiety in a team by stepping up the preparation and planning. I become meticulous in my preparation.... I become detailed and focused – it gives me a sense of confidence that things are covered."

In addition, the other strongest and most quoted way coaches manage their anxiety is through contracting – a negotiation with the client about how they will work together. Contracting here focused on the outcomes to be achieved through the team coaching as well as agreeing ways of working with the team.

In most cases, the coaches mentioned creating a safe environment explicitly as part of client contracting: "My golden rule is to have a contract and create a safe space"; and "I contract with a team especially to establish a safe space – this frees me up. I co-create [this space] with the team: What does the team need and what do I need [from them]? What can they count on me to do?"

If a clear contract cannot be agreed, then the contracting process provides both parties with the option to walk away from coaching early on. Some coaches exercised this option. One explained: "I don't do stuff I'm not good at. I know what I'm good at and play to my strengths."

He described this as: "... hugely liberating and gets rid of my anxiety".

While coaches were clear about how they managed their own anxiety, they were more divided about how they worked with anxiety in a team. Part of the

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challenge is in correctly identifying anxiety in the first place. Some coaches looked for behavioural clues and accepted these as signs of team anxiety, while others refused, saying: "I do not interpret anxiety per se. That is my judgment. I feed back my observations."

Some coaches made use of metaphor (eg, "It feels like walking through treacle") and invited the team to interpret its meaning for them.

For teams to perform, this sometimes necessitates taking risks and trying new behaviours. The same could be said of team coaches. Both parties need to feel safe. Creating this environment is the team coach's responsibility.

As one of the team coaches who participated in this study says: "The client [team] must feel safe. They must trust the coach and believe they will be held. The coach provides a safe container to work through issues. Challenge brings them face to face with their own vulnerability, guilt, shame, inferiority and embarrassment. If the coach feels anxious, the team will not feel safe and it will not do its work."

Team coaching is a growth business (*Ridler, 2013*), but if you want to capitalise on this and coach teams with impact, you need to develop robust strategies for dealing with anxiety – both yours and the team's. ∎

* This article is based on empirical research carried out at INSEAD, which observed a number of existing leadership teams in different sectors and countries in their day-to-day work. Coaches that described themselves as working with teams in a coaching capacity were also interviewed and the findings combined.

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