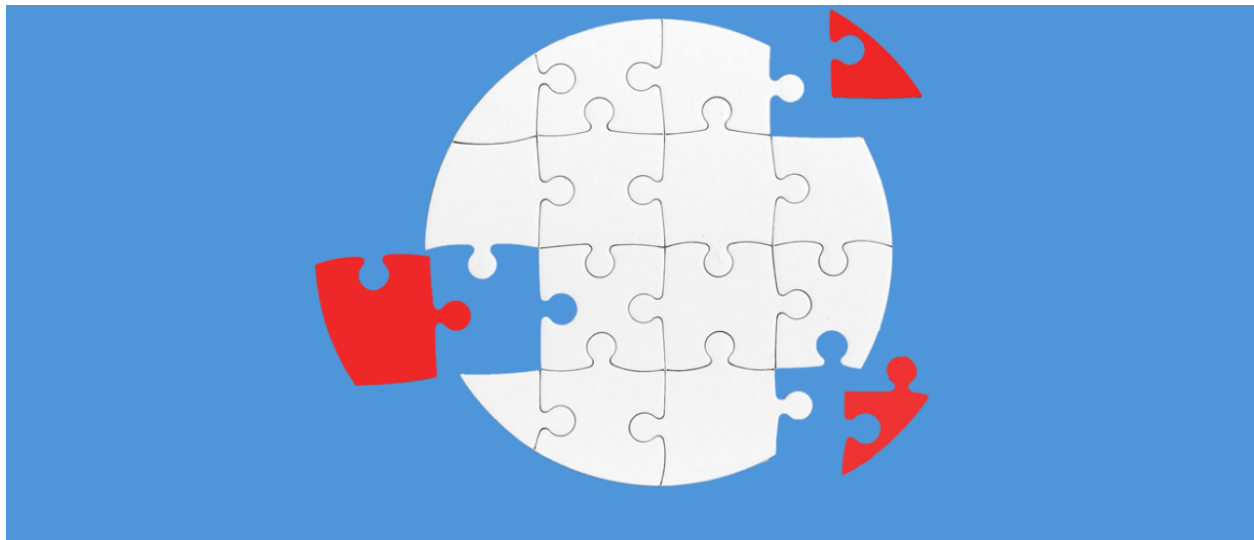


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# Understanding The Whole Picture



By Derek Deasy and Enoch Li , INSEAD

## **The benefits of group coaching for organisational change and impact.**

Leadership happens in groups, as does most work. Without followers, who and what are we leading? As such, leaders must understand what groups need if they want to maximise performance. While most leaders should be familiar with the idea of executive coaching on an individual basis, they may know less about the benefits of group coaching.

Much of individual performance is influenced by the context, and so efforts to improve performance must factor in the team culture if they want to effect sustainable cultural change. When organisations seek out group coaching, they send a message that teamwork and interpersonal dynamics really matter and that leaders understand that effective leadership is about the relational space between leaders and followers. Groups need structure and containment if leaders want the team and the people within it to function effectively.

## **Structure and containment**

Structure is the visible, obvious and explicit expression of leadership. This can be manifested in the strategic direction, vision, implementation and articulation of the shared purpose – in other words what the group does together. Most leaders talk about leading using words that relate to structure, but structure is ineffective without containment.

Containment is implicit and less obvious. It refers to sensemaking and boundary management – or how the group operates together. **Containment is a psychological concept** developed by British psychoanalyst, Donald Winnicott. He proposed that there is a need for predictable boundaries so that children have the space to fall down but can learn from the experience. Containment gives structure through the boundaries of time, task and territory, without stifling innovation, flexibility and initiative.

Leaders need to prioritise containment for their team. They need to give them room to explore, make mistakes, develop and relate to each other through sometimes difficult emotional experiences to achieve intended outcomes – and learn from those experiences. This is a key skill for leaders, but one which very few understand as a necessary, and even vital leadership function.

### **More to the problem than meets the eye**

Group coaching is particularly effective when there is a misalignment between structure and containment within a team. It exposes leaders to different interpretations of the same situation, presenting an opportunity to engage with a diversity of ideas.

Imagine this scenario: Jo consistently shows up late to team meetings and does not deliver tasks within the pre-agreed timeframe. Everyone else on the team is frustrated. Jo is disappointed in themselves. When the team cannot produce the required output as part of a broader process, Jo gets referred to as “the bottleneck”. Members of the team start to joke that “It’s at Jo’s desk” whenever there is a delay, even if the delay is not Jo’s fault.

Jo has been working on improving. The company is supportive of Jo attending training courses on time management and working with an executive coach to facilitate behavioural change.

While it looks like the company is supportive of development and generous with its resources, the underlying thinking is that if Jo’s performance

improves, then there will be no more “bottlenecks”. Implicitly, the interpretation is that the problem lies solely with Jo. This is actually scapegoating, where one person bears all the responsibility for the organisation or team’s shared challenges.

It’s not that Jo has no responsibility for the performance shortfall, but there may be other factors taking place at the team level. Perhaps the time boundaries are unclear, or Jo carries the performance anxiety of the whole team. Group coaching allows the whole team space for discussion around where the anxiety lies, with whom and for what reason.

Understanding that contextual factors may impact the individual’s performance can lead to a richer appreciation of which kinds of culture promote or inhibit performance. It also digs below the surface of what most would simply interpret as a behavioural issue with one individual.

### **Expanding perspectives**

For an organisation, group coaching is a statement that development is as important as performance, because group coaching is less about individual capabilities and more about the culture of relationships.

Often, we jump to conclusions about the source of the problem. This does not help since the diagnosis of a performance issue dictates the outcome of the intervention. Before making that decision, stop and ask the question “Is the problem only where we think it is?” Group coaching opens us up to possibilities and alternatives to the “fix the individual” perspective that many of us habitually hold.

The notion that individual behaviour is actually a message from a group can be challenging to accept but is an important factor to consider when diagnosing a performance issue. This is why the INSEAD MBA **Personal Leadership Development Programme (PLDP)** includes individual coaching, group coaching and intergroup coaching. Developed by INSEAD professors and leadership consultants the learning methodology is based on a **systems psychodynamic approach** – an understanding that the unconscious influences us more than we know and that groups have their needs.

### **How group coaching works**

Group coaching is a vital ingredient for experiential learning and typically involves participants taking part in **emotionally and mentally stimulating** (and sometimes physically challenging) activities together. It is not about team building; instead, participants are asked to experience the present moment because joining, forming and becoming a group is hard work. They need to discover how they experience themselves, how they are experienced by others, and how they might influence and be influenced by the group.

Coaches create containment for participants to experience each other beyond who they say (or think) they are on a surface level. Who we are evolves, which influences what we do and how we exercise leadership. The ability to keep up with our own versions of ourselves, is an insight into how we might diagnose problems differently and exercise leadership in different contexts.

This approach generates exponentially more data and observations to better explore the underlying group dynamics: how does the group make decisions, how does it form its culture and what unknowingly derails the group from its articulated goal. Maybe it is the stress or uncertainty of the whole group felt by one person, maybe it's the realisation that they are more different or related to others than they originally thought, or maybe it's just the joy of finding new ways to relate to each other.

Group coaching acts as the container for the group to learn about itself without overamplifying the individual's influence, allowing everyone to be implicated in the change and development. Seeing conversations from different angles allows leaders to consider different possibilities and solutions to a challenge. Ultimately it prevents them from reverting to the same dysfunctional team dynamics.

### **Working relationship**

Effective group coaching promotes the autonomy of the team to explore and embrace its own dynamics to improve its performance and development. An effective and impactful relationship between the coach, the team and the individuals is one of give and take. That means generating questions for each other, paying attention to the signs that participants pick up from each other in the group setting, and discussing what those patterns might mean to the group culture they are forming.

Leaders need to choose a competent group coach who can avoid getting drawn into excessive teaching or facilitating. Although counterintuitive, a coach doing less often provides more value to a team invested in developing their own capacity for containment. The implicit goal of group coaches is their own redundancy, because this means the team has matured.

### **Aim for the bigger picture**

For managers and leaders in organisations, it's vital to consider the full **choice of interventions** at your disposal. Consider what you are prioritising – and potentially overlooking.

Organisations typically ask managers to fix the problem of underperformance. However, if leaders are serious about holistic change, they need to prioritise development and learning for all their team members. They need to be prepared to feel a range of emotions, perhaps even embarrassment, in a group coaching setting. They need to realise they are often part of the problem, and they need to tolerate feelings of uncertainty as the team navigates the possibilities that they don't yet understand.

Individual coaching is only one piece of the puzzle, while group coaching gives a channel to reveal the broader picture. Leaders who work with groups at a systems psychodynamic level can bring richer insights and longer lasting shifts in habits.

Group coaching allows for more profound solutions that go beyond a quick, surface-level fix. What it takes is members who are motivated and secure enough to explore the root causes of the dynamics at play and are willing to own a part of the responsibility and emotional experience of working with each other.

### **Find article at**

<https://knowledge.insead.edu/leadership-organisations/understanding-whole-picture>

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