Team coaching for top leadership teams: Working with power and end responsibility

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What is different when consulting to teams that represent power and ownership in an organisation? What guidance can we offer the team coaches, coaching psychologists and consultants working with such teams? It is well known that top teams invite high expectations and strong projections from members of the organisation and equally from outside stakeholders. Top teams often feel swayed by circumstance and the need to respond to a very full agenda whilst struggling with limited and biased insight into what truly goes on at all organisational levels, and similarly struggling with setting an agenda that is meaningful for the many interested parties around the team. As a result of such expectations and projections, it can become quite difficult for top teams to think calmly and then act coherently and meaningfully. Longer term, there are mutually strengthening processes between pathology and (top) leadership. These processes are highly idiosyncratic as the precise nature of the patterns vary by organisation, industry, and even individual leadership-team-member personality. This article highlights the importance of team coaching for top teams. It focuses on the role of the 'boardroom team coach' and how to work with the impact and trappings of power. It argues that a well-honed relational and reflective presence can help to address, review, and mitigate the influence of power, politics, distortions, and conflict in top teams.

***Keywords**: team coaching, coaching psychology, top leadership, leadership teams, senior executives.*

1. Introduction and definitions: what is different about top teams?

IT CAN FEEL very different to coach top teams, even though these teams share many characteristics with other types of teams. They are usually more focused on making decisions for other people and for wider systems. Whilst the approach to consulting and what the team dynamics evoke within us may often be similar, it is still worth looking at coaching for top teams separately. Top teams embody 'leadership' for a wider organisation. They have decision-making power with end responsibility for all or most of the decisions taken. In this article I will look at some characteristics of top teams which trace the pressures they experience and influence how they operate. I will explore the difficulties they have to overcome in their functioning, before suggesting how team coaches can respond to these and be of help.

Here is a common definition of top teams or senior leadership teams: they are a relatively small group of most influential executives with overall responsibility for the organisation (Mintzberg, 1979; Flood et al., 2000). This executive team or board around the leader of the company (CEO, MD, Vice-Chancellor, Permanent Secretary) have been put in place to help the leader run the organisation day-to-day and share responsibility for all key decisions and strategy formulation. It has been argued that this group is a natural solution to the conflicting pressures on unitary leadership and a complexity of responsibilities that has origins in biology (Wageman et al., 2008), which would explain why other solutions such as co-leadership, triumvirates or self-managed leadership are often unstable and quickly disappear over time. This group of executives or senior managers meet on a regular basis to strategize essential day-to-day business oper-

ations, lead core initiatives, and establish organisation-wide policies and procedures. According to Berman (2019), members of these teams bring a particularly confident style, strategic way of thinking, influencing ability, and sense of authority and power that present unique challenges for coaching psychologists. In this regard, it can be helpful to make the distinction between extra-dependent and intra-dependent teams (Kesby, 2018; Wageman et al., 2008). Top teams are intra-dependent teams: they bring different qualities and expertise together and repeatedly need to forge a common action or decision out of a disparate range of perspectives and knowledge. Unlike extra-dependent teams, which mostly consist of managers who have essentially the same role, such as non-executive director (in a separate supervisory board), divisional director, or country manager, intra-dependent teams are and need to be in a permanent state of – hopefully creative – *conflict* between opposing views. We can find intra-dependent teams at every level of an organisation but more commonly near the top. Top leadership teams need to make use of the free flow of knowledge, reflections, and deliberations of every member and need to come to a unified approach to all key tasks and decisions. This is not straightforward and often requires help, from specialised staff members like company secretaries, and frequently also from external consultants and coaching psychologists.

There are several characteristics of top teams which influence the way we can coach them.

Firstly, the main job of top teams is to make decisions for the whole of the organisation, not so much to think (or strategize) about those decisions nor to implement them, but really to *make* them. The team regularly needs to formulate and argue a way forward, and then to formally adopt an unequivocal decision. Top teams will often describe themselves as 'decision-making machines'. This gives top teams enormous local power as the ultimate decision-makers for the wider organisation, rendering them somewhat vulner-

able to criticism, particularly given the fact that (through modern technology) access and transparency have increased exponentially in the last few decades. Another source of vulnerability comes from the awareness that good decision-making is dependent on both subject-matter experts and deep experience of the organisation itself. To pursue this core task of decision-making, the top team needs to be well-informed, not only about the context, general markets, and stakeholders around the organisation, but also about the internal capabilities of the organisation and the state of relevant operations and functional specialisms. Key to the functioning of a top team, therefore, is the flow of information into the decision-making arena. This information includes 'upwards feedback': information about how the top team is experienced, which will be expressed by safe disclosure, motivation levels, and degrees of 'alignment' between the rest of the organisation and the top. There is good evidence to indicate that involving others, whether by empowerment or upwards feedback, is a key determinant of the effectiveness of a top team (Burke et al., 2006; De Haan & Kasozi, 2014, Chapter 11). After all, decisions only get implemented and modified through an ongoing feedback loop with other organisational layers.

Secondly, top teams need to withstand particular pressures from within and outside the organisation, which may be explicit or implicit, and which in turn affect both conscious and unconscious decision-making. Such invitations to embody views of how the leaders should represent and lead the organisation can add to the internal pressures on the top team and constrain the team's ability to take high-quality decisions together. Petriglieri & Stein (2012) describe this aspect and show that leaders often have little choice but to identify with the strongest projections and expectations directed at them – a process technically known as 'projective identification'. To the degree this happens will the top team become less effective, eroded by a loss of autonomy and inde-

pendent reflection. Arguably, members of the top team should instead carefully assimilate the expectations and influences from all around them into their own priorities.

Thirdly, top teams are authority figures within the organisation. They are very much in view and a constant presence in the minds of not only the more senior individuals they work with directly but also those they may hardly know or even meet. Some of the work of top teams is therefore performative and representational, acting in a ceremonial capacity on behalf of the organisation, both within and outside it. There are important questions about how much time top team members should devote to decision-making and how much time to represent and advocate on behalf of the top team and organisation as a whole. Some preliminary research shows that the representational elements can distract from doing the more primary decision-making job well; e.g. Bandiera et al., 2020.

> **Case example:** *The top team of a large ministry asked for two days of team coaching because, as they said, 'We do not know each other. We hardly talk with one another except about long documents that have options and decisions prepared. Recently, we had to decide about a very large expenditure over the next two decades into the country's infrastructure, which would impact several of our departments, and we could not move ahead. Everyone stuck to their pre-existing positions. There is no willingness to budge or give up any of our budgets. At the same time, the department that will have to grow to spend the new money is pressing for an urgent decision ever more strongly. We went back to the minister, we involved the Ministry of Finance, but all to no avail. It was to be our decision – and we just could not make it. At the current time our Permanent Secretary, the team lead, has given the rest of the team an ultimatum. If we do not take the decision within two weeks, she will do it all by herself. But we are not even sure if we will be able to work with that either.' During the work with the coach, they learned how 'avoidant' they had become of the big decisions. They found it easier to decide for others in their organisation, or on projects that were already defined by the government's manifesto commitments. Now that they really had to rise above just common interests of the team or specific interests within a department, they did not know where to start. They suddenly realized how lucky they had been that they never had to take any major decisions with such a massive cost to their own people and budgets. They also realized how they had perfected the art of 'not offending anyone', working around and accommodating many vested interests and 'no-go areas' from within the team. Such was no longer possible for this decision, and they were completely blocked, not just for a meeting; for months on end. The team coach helped the team to understand for the first time 'who' was on the team and how diverse personalities were interacting. After exchanging personal histories, values, habits and formative moments in their lives, the feel of the team changed considerably. They were speaking much more freely and started to negotiate more openly. Within a week they reached an outcome that only now they could see was the only obvious and logical one. They felt much more united as a team. They even managed to go back to the Ministry of Finance for more liquidity in the short term.*

Because of the characteristics mentioned, consulting to top leadership teams is different in that we can notice more pressures on decisions or a greater sense of urgency, and we may ourselves feel less powerful by comparison. Our own history and patterns involving authority will become part of our relationship with the top teams. As I will argue, these relational pressures call for a different style of coaching as compared to working with mid-level management teams. Coaches working at boardroom level learn to exude a calmness and firmness even though they feel viscerally implicated through their own personal relationship with leadership and authority figures (the image of the swan springs to mind; gracefully gliding across a lake whilst furiously paddling beneath the surface).

In the next sections, after a very short Methodology, I will first analyse the pressures on top teams in more depth, using what psychologists have found out about leadership under pressure, leadership personality, and the leadership shadow. Then I will interpret this analysis in terms of what this means if our aim is to further the effectiveness of the top team, i.e. what countermeasures seem to be needed and appropriate for helping the top leadership team deal with the pressures. Finally, I will turn our attention to the coach and what team coaches can do practically to help with those 'countermeasures' or 'effectiveness-enhancing interventions' in top teams.

2. Methodology: multi-case-study analysis

This article is based on my work with many top teams as an executive team coach; findings are based on my confidential case notes, which I have elaborated into (private) case dossiers. The core methodology is therefore retrospective, case-study based, and subjective with elements of multiple perspectives through working with other team coaches. Case study research, especially into own cases, has a long tradition in coaching psychology: De Haan (2019a) systematically reviews 26 independent publications based on case studies, of which seven are essentially a comparison of multiple cases such as this study. Through longitudinal case studies it appears to be possible to locate underlying factors that influence coaching effectiveness, such as trust (Alvey & Barclay, 2007), commitment to the coaching contract (Audet & Couteret, 2012), and the emergence of shared reflection in team coaching (Styhre, 2008). I have heavily disguised and occasionally amalgamated the teams in the examples for this article.

3. Pressures on top teams: the intimate relationship between leadership and derailment

As I will show, the obvious pressures on top leadership teams can have a deleterious effect on decision-making in those teams, causing this process to be considerably less effective. They also affect the work of consultants and team coaches for the team.

As argued in *The Leadership Shadow* (De Haan & Kasozi, 2014), all forms of leadership necessarily involve suppression – not only in trying to win over differing views or fight opposing proposals – but also suppression *inside the leaders*. Leaders have many different positions inside their conscious (and less conscious) minds, different positions that are vying for attention and influence. This is an ongoing, fertile state of keeping options open, uncertainty, doubt, noncommittal or even disinterest. When exercising leadership, this situation collapses into a single position. Over time, leaders are therefore bound to *suppress* many of their own viewpoints, positions, skills, and even talents, in order to contribute clearly and fully to their current leadership proposition. In top team meetings, countervailing ideas, perspectives, and bids for leadership usually get represented by different individuals in the team, who are encouraged to give free rein to their position. In the internal world of the top-team member, however, doubts and countervailing ideas usually fall victim to their coping mechanisms, as described above. The non-prioritised ideas, hunches, and doubts will go underground, dropping outside their conscious awareness, lessening interference with their leadership bids. This ubiquitous phenomenon of ongoing internal censorship and suppression to allow the exercise of unitary leadership over a sustained period of time, has been called the *leadership shadow* (De Haan, 2016). In the face of constant pressures and the need for the team to decide, leaders struggle to remain in touch with the suppressed part of their thinking. They naturally get consumed by the focus and decisiveness that is demanded of them by self and others.

Leadership therefore comes with suppression that may lead to pathology, in the sense that the mind becomes split, so that ambivalence and doubt is not processed or assimilated but locked away. It is well documented

that more senior leaders have larger distortions in their self-perception than junior leaders (Gentry et al., 2007). Moreover, we have good documentation and evidence that the influence and personal charisma that one obtains through power may very well corrupt one's judgement and behaviour over time (Robinson & Garrard, 2016), so that a top team becomes collectively more biased, risk-seeking, manipulative, or corrupted in their decision-making (Greer et al., 2017, for a systemic review). This derailing process in top teams may reflect fissures in terms of political alliances (inter-leader processes within the team or with regard to other teams) as well as intra-leader processes starting from suppression. A well-known mechanism of corruption is through *hubris* or overreach: the phenomenon that more senior and more tenured teams can influence decisions beyond their own narrowly defined area of responsibility. This can spread in leadership teams by amplification and mirroring, as recent large-scale malpractices such as in Wells Fargo (Tayan, 2019) and Toshiba (Caplan et al., 2019) may serve to demonstrate.

There seems to be a natural process in which a new leader or team initially experiences having relatively little control or influence. This team may also experience the greatest amount of doubt, ambivalence, and intimidation from other stakeholders. But slowly, over time, as though through some kind of osmosis (growing familiarity, skills, expertise, networks, etc.), power clings to a leadership team and grows ever greater. Another way of looking at the increasing leadership shadow is through the concept of managerial discretion (Wangrow et al., 2015). With the accumulation of power, the team's *managerial discretion* to choose their behaviour or force decisions, also increases. It is indeed through discretion that leaders can make a bigger difference in their organisation. However, discretion is both the currency with which leadership teams get things done *and* the bribe that will inevitably corrupt them. Kaiser and Hogan (2007)

argue that discretion not only increases with tenure and understanding of your own leadership role, but that it also increases with hierarchical level. Hambrick and Abrahamson (1995) have done an exploration of the amount of managerial discretion per industry to demonstrate the following:

- There are significant differences of levels of discretion between industries.
- The top teams with relatively high discretion can be found in the software, engineering, pharma, and entertainment industries.
- Four factors in those industries predict 49% of the variance in rankings of discretion: R&D intensity, advertising intensity, market growth and (inversely) capital intensity.

Inevitably, because of these cumulative discretion-enhancing processes, leadership will over time lead to pathology. And yet, as we will see, pathology also leads to leadership. In *The Mask of Sanity*, Cleckley (1941) was the first to describe the specific configuration of traits that capture the essence of the psychopathic personality. Psychopaths were described as superficially charming, self-centred, fearless, impulsive, articulate, callous, and guiltless. Out of this thinking, the triarchic model of psychopathy evolved (Patrick et al., 2009), where the most common psychopathic traits are clustered around boldness (e.g. grandiosity, interpersonal dominance), meanness (e.g. lack of empathy, callousness), and disinhibition (e.g. impulsivity, irresponsibility).

Although boldness may add to positive task performance and charismatic leadership, and disinhibition may add to positive adaptive leadership, an overall negative contribution of meanness and a partially negative contribution of disinhibition to *effective* leadership have been reported (Vergauwe et al., 2021). Vergauwe et al. (2021) asked subordinates to rate the effectiveness of their leaders (a well-considered measure for leadership effectiveness: honest rankings by direct reports have been shown to be

amongst the best measurement of leadership effectiveness; Hogan et al., 1994). Vergauwe et al.'s study provides rather convincing evidence that more serious pathology leads to a lower leadership performance.

The conclusion has to be that (statistically) leadership tenure enhances psychopathy which in turn decreases leadership effectiveness. Leadership appears to be an important example of 'successful psychopathy' (Dutton, 2012): firstly, it attracts individuals who are interested in power and self-promotion, and then, secondly, the pressures and projections on top leadership have a further pathology-enhancing effect, especially over time through the leadership shadow ('acquired hubris syndrome'; Owen, 2008). This means that either through self-selection or through experience on the job, such as the inescapable, strong projections onto leaders, the number of triarchic traits is expected to be greater than in the general population (Patrick et al., 2009).

The factors at play that have the worst impact on the leadership shadow and growing toxicity in top teams are the following: neuroticism (Furnham, 2016); highly personal derailment factors such as personality tendencies or disorders including narcissism, borderline and psychopathic tendencies (Torregiante, 2005); and projective identification (Petriglieri & Stein, 2012). These three can be viewed as moderators that worsen the effects of the leadership shadow. They need to be carefully managed by responsible leadership teams and organisations – with help of their coaches.

From the research as quoted in this section we can safely conclude that leaders who are members of top teams have higher risk factors in terms of possible hubristic overreach and other leadership derailment factors. We just do not know if this is mainly because of a process of 'self-selection' in stepping up to higher levels of leadership, or whether the bias towards hubris and derailment is entirely due to pressures and expectations on leaders within the high-powered roles themselves. Most probably it is both.

What we do know is that there is a higher risk in these teams, and that therefore the mitigating influence of coaching on personality derailment (as demonstrated in the following outcome studies in coaching: Allan et al., 2018, Zanchetta et al., 2020, and De Haan et al., 2019) may be important at these senior levels.

Once the patterns are sufficiently noticeable to play a role in the dynamic of a team it is impossible to determine conclusively whether they have individual and biographic origins, whether they are related to the primary process and history of the organisation, or whether they are the product of the intense projections and expectations onto the top of the organisation. Freud's idea of 'overdetermination' (Freud, 1900) applies in these cases: there are more causes than one, and every single cause is sufficient for attribution of the psychological (team) phenomenon. Thanks to this multicausality we can be confident as team coaches that we can sense derailment patterns early on as they arise within us: we will often feel implicated or guilty ourselves as we experience the presence of something hubristic, disturbed, or excessive. Here is one recent example.

> ***Case Example***: *When a leadership team is suffering from 'shadow patterns' or 'derailers' then this is often quite clear to a team coach at the very beginning of working with the team, or even much earlier. I was recently asked by a former client to help the Board of a large transportation company through offering team coaching for just the first day of their twice-yearly three-day retreat. I was invited to meet the CEO in person, in preparation for this event. I arrived after a considerable journey to discover that my meeting was to be one hour in the CEO's diary. I was then given a cup of coffee. After some twenty minutes I asked again at Reception and was asked to wait but I sensed the discomfort of the receptionist. I was aware of manifold thoughts and emotions, sitting there with my second coffee. Because I am at work, I tend to not pick up any magazine nor consult my mobile*

phone, but just pay attention to my felt sense, emotions and thoughts. Just to be kept there waiting for the meeting triggered quite strong emotions as I felt essentially kept a prisoner (a familiar feeling, one which many CEOs fail to recognise or remember as they keep their waiting lounges populated). I was thinking to myself, perhaps something important had happened on the day, which was distracting the CEO a great deal. When I was finally welcomed in, a full fifty minutes had elapsed, and it was made clear to me that we would have just the ten minutes remaining for our meeting. One of the first comments or rhetorical questions from the CEO was, 'why would you and I be working together anyway?', which was followed soon by a comment on the HR Director who had advised about this meeting: 'I don't trust her, but I can make good use of her; she is very useful'. After I inquired why the HR director might want to arrange this meeting and us to collaborate, I was left none the wiser. The only thing I could inject in the remaining two minutes was 'I can sense what the problem is, just from my experience here with you'. This comment did lead to a moment of reflection for the CEO, after which the next visitor was ushered in. Later I understood that in fact the idea of team coaching had not

come from the two people I had now spoken with, but from a new member of the team who was rather perplexed by the toxic behaviours she had encountered in only a few first weeks at work. I later heard this person was seriously considering leaving within two months of having arrived.

In Figure 1, I have highlighted what we know about the impact of the leadership shadow on top leadership teams. It shows that as power grows within the team (either residing with individuals or with the team as a whole; Greer et al., 2017), the impact and leverage of the team *increase*, whilst the effectiveness or the leadership outcome of the team may eventually *decrease* through suppression of information, influence and emotions, causing less decisions to be made, or lesser-quality decisions. With increasing power, tenure, and/or discretion, the impact and the output of the team start to take a different turn, with impact still increasing and output/effectiveness beginning to decrease. The gap between impact and outcome opens up a 'coaching zone' where coaches can help create a bridge between impact and quality of impact by countering suppression and stimulating reflection. Impact and outcome

Figure 1: A depiction of the effect of power, tenure, or discretion of a leadership team on the likely leverage and effectiveness of the team. The continuous curve depicts the expected effectiveness of the team (correlating with quality and quantity of decisions). The dashed curve shows the expected impact of the team within the organisation, which is expected to rise with power.
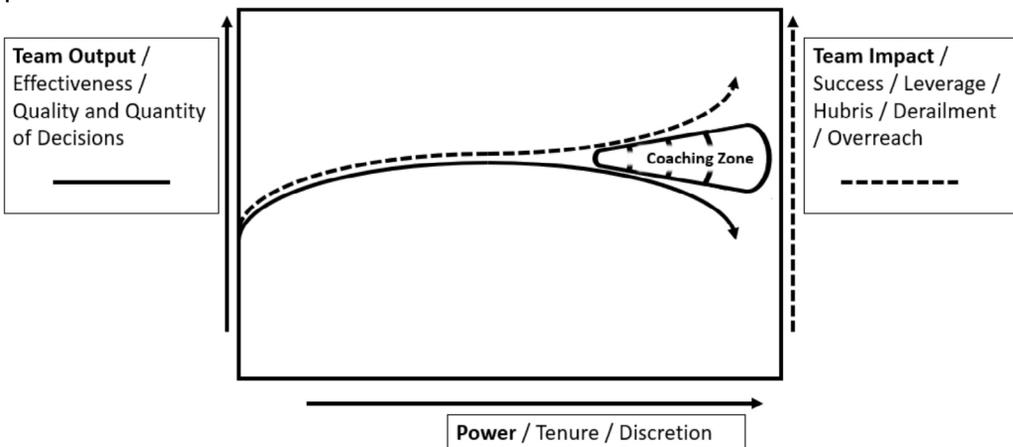
can then become more aligned again but only if power differentials around the team decrease through equalising tendencies such as upwards feedback and listening, higher quality reflection within the team, and identity- and trust-building (through, e.g. strengthening a common vision). Similar curvilinear relationships as in Figure 1, between different dark-side personality traits and overall leadership effectiveness or performance, have been found in several independent studies (for overviews: Hogan et al., 2021; Wille et al., 2023)

4. Radical ways to think about decision-making in top teams

Given that there are so many ways the decision-making process or general effectiveness can be distorted by the pressures of working in top teams, it is of vital importance to understand how we can keep those top teams as healthy and balanced as possible, so that they can continue to make the best decisions for the whole organisation, even when they are under considerable pressure. Hogan & Warenfeltz (2003) argue that top teams must grow self-awareness and obtain regular feedback on how they are making decisions including a critical appreciation of their response patterns and coping mechanisms under pressure. Similarly, they argue that healthy top teams organise a form of 'upwards feedback' so that they take on board as much information as possible from the next levels in the organisation, from subject-matter experts but also from line managers who will eventually implement new decisions. In my view, such middle managers are also important experts: experts on the organisational context in which decisions are being made, with a deep knowledge about what goes on at their level and how people are feeling. It is well known that having more experts (i.e. a range of differing autonomous and informed viewpoints) participate in a decision produces qualitatively better decisions (Surowiecki, 2005). Top leadership teams can facilitate high-quality upwards communication including reflection on

patterns within their organisation, by setting up quality assurance, feedback, and protective systems for their staff. E.g. whistleblowing can help to receive vital upwards feedback information. However, it is important then that whistle-blowers are protected, and that triangulation (Dunn, 2006) is avoided in dealing with the feedback.

I think it is possible and necessary to go further than just balancing team dynamics through e.g. team coaching, multisource feedback, and upwards communication. I believe that with the growth of our large organisations and the increasing crises on our planet (many of which are arguably caused by leadership failures – De Haan, 2022), we need to radically democratize leadership in organisations (Semler, 2001). In our modern, fast-changing, and pressurised world-in-crisis, we need to bring more relevant viewpoints to the table, we need to get better and faster at problem solving, and we need higher levels of commitment once a decision is made, but most of all we need a healthier morale and higher levels of honesty and integrity. All of these can be delivered by a working democracy especially near the top levels of an organisation. Democracy will make top leaders more dependent on the people who receive their leadership, by participatory, voting, and influencing mechanisms, and that will create better decisions, commitment, transparency, and morale.

Here is a current example that may teach us something about the power of democratic mechanisms in the exercise of leadership.

> **_Case Example_**: *I have been very taken by the leadership patterns around the Russo-Ukrainian war and have started to volunteer as a supervisor of Ukrainian coaches/ therapists. One prominent feature of this war which currently is just about contained to Ukraine is the degree to which it appears to be a conflict between 'good' and 'evil', especially on the leadership level. On the one side we see an isolated leader with totalitarian control of his country, not allowing any dissent or*

even truthful information about the war or leadership bids at the top to percolate through to the masses in 'his' country – a leader who seems to be riddled with fear, needing total control, and lacking a positive vision of the future. On the other side we see a leader who appears open and direct, personable, fiercely democratic, and setting an example for many in his own country and around the world with his decisiveness, openness to dialogue, and selfless compassion for the afflicted. Part of this split into 'good' and 'evil' is to do with the partisan projections that leaders naturally attract, but even if we take those into account, I believe the differences in the implementation of leadership are stark in this conflict.

Rather than looking at differences between 'good' and 'bad' leadership, I have learned that it makes more sense to look at the differences between 'good' and 'successful' leadership (the same contrast as in Figure 1 between 'outcome' and 'impact', between the straight and dotted lines). Both these country leaders are obviously successful, but their impact and style could not be different, and the amount of 'goodness' that they bring is often contrasted. We see the same differences playing out in today's large organisations. There are many successful leaders who lead empires with up to a million employees, but the amount of 'goodness' that they bring is rightly debated. We know from reliable estimates that less than 50% of leaders and leadership teams would get the predicate 'good enough' from within their own team, provided free polls are taken which is not straightforward (Chénard-Poirier et al., 2022, and Hogan et al., 2021).

Most of the larger institutions in today's world are essentially non-democratic, as leaders are not elected. I think this is partly what is causing some of the unpopularity of our organisations' leaders. So, before becoming distracted by circular debates about good versus evil, let us ask ourselves about good leadership and successful leadership instead, and how they are different?

Successful leadership is easiest to define

and recognise. It is the influence or rank / position that a leader or team has achieved. The higher the position the more leadership they can exert. Leaders in larger institutions generally become more successful as they can convince the layer above them to take them on, i.e., to promote or elect them for a vacancy. The president of Russia is a straightforward example of this kind of success, as he essentially owes his position to one man and one man only: Boris Yeltsin, who promoted him and then made him into the 'succession plan' for his own job. In a democratic country or organisation, one must convince a great many more people to obtain similar success.

Good leadership can be defined by contributions to the process of making an organisation more effective, more competitive, more sustainable, or more strategic (Campbell, 1956). Good leaders help others to become more effective within a team or organisation.

Just as we instinctively know who has higher morals in the Ukrainian war, and we can back up this intuition by arguments and facts, so we also know how to recognise good leadership in organisations. As argued in this article, good leadership teams are able to facilitate a dynamic ebb and flow of such information, feedback and feelings of motivation and purpose. They welcome diverse views including dissident and critical voices, which they summarise into a broadly shared sense of direction, which in turn helps to give meaning and purpose to the work of the team. We can see this process work in all implementations of leadership, including even during wars and stressful transitions.

To summarise the learning from this case, I believe the science of work and organisations still has a lot to learn from free democracies. We can see that the global political world is shaping up increasingly as a rivalry between free democracies and controlling autocracies. Yet what is less reflected upon is that we see the same conflict very much playing out in the leadership of large organisations. Effective teams manage to take the

'dressing room' with them and they are aware of a multiplicity of views. Authoritarian teams can afford not to do that, but only to the detriment of their team and its decisions.

Here are a few of my more specific learnings from the horrendous ordeal we see playing out in Ukraine:

1. As top-team coaches we need to have some awareness of how the exercise of central power can be implemented in society, and we should actively support democratic leaders and democratic processes within organisations. It was Pericles who already realised the fragility of a democracy and spoke about it in his famous funeral speech to the war victims. Tolstoy was recently quoted by Alexei Navalny, the Russian freedom fighter: 'War is a product of despotism. Those who want to fight war must only fight despotism' (Tolstoy's diary entry on 4 June 1904).

2. We should be in support of fixed terms for leaders, and not just in political appointments. Fixed working terms of four to five years in the role are very healthy at board level, and it is indeed something we are increasingly seeing across the world, at least in the public sector. However, the implementation is often less rigorous than would be desirable, so that relatively authoritarian leaders can all too easily extend their 'formal' terms.

3. We should actively help senior teams to contain their authoritarian traits, such as narcissism, acquired hubris syndrome and other derailment factors, by regularly collecting feedback about their reputation in the workplace and by actively challenging them when reflecting on their plans and the risks of their leadership offers.

4. When dealing with relatively authoritarian leadership teams, sometimes called 'petty tyrants' (because they have only limited control of their citizens as compared with real tyrants), it is impor-

tant to encourage free expression and multilateral pressures, to form coalitions and maintain a sense of personal purpose, as it does take a huge, costly and risky effort to refresh and emancipate such leadership.

5. More generally, we should nurture and listen to opposing views by (a) encouraging debate about key (strategic) decisions, (b) strengthening the practice of 'listening up' (Reitz & Higgins, 2019), and (c) nurturing whistle-blowers (Miceli & Near, 2002). Whistle-blowers should have the right of anonymity together with identity and job protection. If organisations implement the policies which can already be found in national guidelines, they raise the chances that whistle-blowing stays internal, does not escalate outwards from the organisation into the public domain, and demonstrably reduces financial and reputational damage.

5. Implications for team coaches in working with top teams

Team coaching for top leadership teams can be quite an exposing ordeal, especially in periods of change and renewal, or when vital decisions need to be taken. To help team coaches remain reflective and helpful in these circumstances, I would recommend the following:

1. Actively resist pressure: stay calm, mindful and relational. It is important to keep training your awareness for co-created emotions and to keep wondering what the particular tension, fear, doubt or pressure that you experience might be about: what can it tell us about the current challenges for the team? Coaching psychologists hone their ability to be focused on their self-awareness whilst also focusing on the team and interacting during sessions (Heller, 2013).

2. Maintain an open, curious, and spontaneous response. Amid top-team pressures spontaneity may feel rather courageous and anxiety-provoking. Nevertheless,

plain speaking offers not only a rich outsider's perspective on what is going on in the team currently, it also models a form of speaking up that would benefit the team and the organisation more widely. A willingness to speak the (subjective) truth with honesty, integrity and empathy is vital for processing the leadership shadows (Berman, 2019). In team coaching we sense the emotions and suppressed experiences that are being felt in the organisation (through what is technically called 'parallel process' – Searles, 1955), so if it feels difficult to be spontaneous then that is meaningful in itself, e.g. a helpful comment can be 'it seems difficult here to speak up'.

3. Focus on enhancing (fresh) reflections in the team. It is important to remain balanced between feeling the pressures and observing them, something I have described as maintaining 'fleeting moments' of noticing (De Haan, 2019b). If it does not feel entirely manageable or safe for a single coach it is often a lot better to go seconded, so that you can keep the leadership shadows within the team in ongoing observation.

4. Focus on the data and the phenomenal: decisions need to be based on sound data (which include feelings!), reading the room, and reading the experts (i.e. both subjective here-and-now data and objective longer-term data), so where you can help as a team coach is in collecting and highlighting data-driven, upwards-feedback-driven decisions.

I believe a 'fiercely democratic' stance would behove us as team coaches and coaching psychologists. It is important to keep in mind the less powerful employees that this team leads, and to remain aware of consequences for others in the organisation. This is not easy as we will suffer the stronger projections around the team and be swayed by our authority countertransference. We nevertheless should speak out for what we are observing and noticing, and thus overcome

power dynamics moment by moment. We should remind ourselves regularly that we are not inside the hierarchy and that we are independent. Finally, we need to keep looking into our own corruptibility as a team coach in the presence of power (Skinner, 2012).

It is important to create the right conditions for top-team coaching to work. It is helpful to have a formal contract in place, which specifies the confidentiality and independence of the team coach, the importance of challenge, and other basics such as coaching objectives. Team coaches often regret it later if they haven't spoken with the CEO or overall commissioner about the need to afford a team coach the space and freedom to become a trusted, critically involved, supportive outsider. In nearly every coaching relationship there is a moment when the whole team unites in attacking the team coach for having an independent view, and at that very moment it would be helpful to be able to say 'see, I told you this would happen', or 'at least you seem united now, for a change, in your unanimous critique of your powerless supportive outsider' – almost like a court jester.

Team coaches are in a small minority up against a big, powerful team, so they should try to find a deep confidence that the top team needs them as a critically involved, supportive outsider. As I have argued above, top teams cannot function very well without outside observations and challenge (including upwards feedback from within the organisation). It would be best if a multitude of relevant views on the bigger challenges in the organisation would percolate upwards from other layers in the organisation. However, in reality (in most large organisations) such views are often in short supply. Modern organisations are not (yet) democracies, they are strictly speaking autocracies where ultimate power resides in a small number of autocratically selected individuals (according to an 'opting in' principle which means minorities are nearly always under-represented). This model usually gets

replicated in other layers of management as well: it is rare to see whole departments voting for important decisions or for the appointment of their next leader (although according to the evidence reviewed here that would be good practice: leading to better decisions). One can understand the form of governance in most organisations as a bounded autocracy: there are clear limits on the power of the rulers, who can only rule on organisation-related and therefore work-related issues and their instruments of power are also limited to non-violent, essentially persuasive ones. The harshest measure that they have in their toolkit is exclusion, depriving employees of their salaries, work role, privileges and/or contract with the organisation.

To come to the best decisions in autocracies – but also in democracies – it is crucial for information to flow to the top where the important decisions are being taken. Coaching psychologists can help both with the information flow upwards (e.g. by summarising the findings from interviews) and with the consideration of fresh information and minority perspectives. To contribute to this enriching of relevant information at the top it is vital in my view that we are frank and courageous, and that we do not ourselves become a filter or censor for potentially crucial information. In other words, it is important not to advise or advocate; better to just hold out the information *as* information, as something for the team to consider, to take on or integrate as leaders see fit. Promoting certain ideas over others has the same effect as filtering or censorship: it constrains rather than expands the potential for decision making at the top of the organisation.

As argued, team coaches for top teams need to be rather direct and challenging, as well as truly deep listeners and observers, without becoming advisors or co-leaders. Our work is entirely non-directive, e.g. raising a possible avoidance or elephant in the room, or pointing out potentially unhelpful dynamics. This is why

a combination with expert consulting is not generally so helpful. Similarly, certain relatively directive approaches to coaching, such as step methods (GROW, GROUP, CLEAR, etc.) or Solution-Focused Coaching, are less powerful at the board level, because they do not use much challenge or interpretation at all. On the other hand, approaches that encourage emergence of fresh thinking from within the team, such as relational, Gestalt, and person-centred approaches, or that support the formulation of hypotheses and new insight, such as systems psychodynamics and other systemic approaches, have much more to offer at the top. It is therefore important for us to quietly observe, listen compassionately, hold hypotheses, and to be able to interpret what is going on, as well as to let go of an interpretation in order to return to listening. We should be able to tolerate, to a degree, the anxieties in the team and our own pain of not knowing, whilst staying observant. Many authors have already remarked that coaching can be a very helpful, tailored intervention at top levels, particularly as it seems to be an effective approach for highly personal tensions and for leadership derailment (e.g. Nelson & Hogan, 2009; Warrenfeltz & Kellett, 2016; De Haan et al., 2019).

> **<u>Case Example</u>**: *Here is a recent case example of a university institute's leadership team where researchers are working on one of the global crises that are keeping our minds focused across the world. They asked me to offer a series of team coaching sessions to help the research leaders to overcome boundaries between an archipelago of autonomous research groupings. In these various teams, methodologies and scientific inspirations were different and they were in a sense in competition in trying to understand the current crisis. As a result of working in relative silos they were now not talking with one another much and blaming each other for lack of delivery or wasting the centralized funding of the institute. Before the team coaching, I asked for the opportunity to do interviews and to write a report*

for the leadership team which was doing its best to keep a neutral stance presiding over the various competing factions. My interviews were emotional and sometimes dramatic, as I felt most of the research leads tried to win me over to their view of the world but also to a very dark estimation of some of the other groups. There were regular hints at unethical practice but despite probing I could not find any evidence of malpractice, except perhaps for some posturizing or claiming deeper insight than appeared to be warranted in purely scientific terms. It was straightforward for me to not blame any individuals in my report. In fact, my main hypothesis was that the primary process – research into a highly problematic issue – had spilled over into the dynamics of the group, as has been well documented in organisations that deal with anxiety, loss, or crisis (starting with Menzies Lyth, 1960). I interpreted some of the difficult experiences of the teams as possibly being the result of 'secondary' defences originated within the research organisation that had been built around the extremely difficult study material. I offered to go ahead with the team coaching where we could process some of this and create a better containment for the researchers. What was interesting about the top leadership was that they had the reputation of being rather 'hands off', that they gave the researchers a lot of freedom, and were often ill-prepared in meetings with them – something that I also felt when I had my meeting following the writing of the report. In that meeting my report was heavily criticised by the team leads and appeared to become the object of a new scientific debate where the team leaders could unify in their universal disparaging response. I decided to hold on to the report's interpretations as my subjective and preliminary views, offered a date and a frame for team coaching, without an agenda for that meeting. Then I arrived on time, waiting for what would emerge. To my delight the report and the overall leadership had faded and the negative experiences and rivalry between the teams gained centerground. Although no formal outcomes were achieved in that first session, everyone felt heard and

united in a new way – some reported they had not felt this close for several years. A very impactful session as everyone went beyond the toxic dynamics into a shared space where they shared the same humanity. They shared how hurt they had felt in some interactions, but also how warm and generous individuals had been at times. This proved to be a good basis for the next team coaching sessions and the beginning of a slow process 'back' from the fragmentation and crisis they had experienced before.

Effectiveness studies, although still very limited especially in team coaching, seem to back up the hunches about what might be an effective team-coaching approach for top teams. What little we have in team coaching shows that this might be particularly effective when reflection is hard to come by or under pressure, which is typically the case in top leadership teams. Buljac-Samardzic and Van Woerkom (2015) and Carson et al. (2007) showed that if levels of reflection and support (respectively) are low in teams then team coaching has a much higher impact towards the team's effectiveness. In individual coaching studies, randomised controlled trials have established the general effectiveness of a variety of approaches: problem-focused (GROW models: Spence & Grant, 2007; McGonagle et al., 2014; Singh et al., 2015; Fontes & Dello Russo, 2020; goal-setting model: Williams & Lowman, 2018), person-focused (relational coaching model: De Haan et al., 2020; process model: Williams & Lowman, 2018), and solution-focused (Green et al., 2006; Grant et al., 2009). In the only randomised controlled trial where two different coaching models were directly compared (Williams & Lowman, 2018), no difference was found. This does however not mean that it really does not matter at all which model or approach we adopt. There are now clear indications that certain models are better suited to certain questions. Hui et al. (2013) measured the differential impacts coming from two different coaching approaches: guidance coaching and facilitative coaching – which were then tested for a 'coached' similar task and a 'crossover' dissimilar task. For the coached task, participants who had received guidance

coaching performed better than those who had received facilitative coaching (p < 0.01). For the crossover task, participants who had received facilitative coaching performed better than those who had received guidance coaching (p < 0.05). Later, in a series of four publications, Hui was able to confirm these remarkable findings in a range of other contexts, such as coaching by managers. For more evidence in the individual-coaching research literature that different approaches have different consequences and therefore differentiated effects, we can look at Sue-Chan et al. (2012) and Jarzebowski et al. (2012) who show that 'prevention' (challenging, critical) coaching achieves better results with coachees who implicitly believe the theory that personal characteristics are stable, fixed and unchanging; 'promotion' (supportive, encouraging) coaching, on the other hand, works best with coachees with an implicit view of humanity in which personal qualities are changeable, malleable and incremental. Sun et al. (2013) also found that stronger coaching relationships are developed with more in-depth, 'transformational' coaching than with more directive coaching focused on 'skills' alone. By contrast, Williams and Lowman (2018) set up a randomised experiment to detect differences between two different coaching approaches – but as is often the case in the research literature, they found that both approaches were equally effective. However, they did not apply the different approaches to different questions, as the other cited studies did.

We can therefore argue on the basis of recent outcome research findings, that we should expect non-directive methodology to work better in circumstances where complex and novel solutions are needed, which is often the case for top leadership teams. However, currently this is still only a hypothesis that needs to be tested.

6. Future directions and concluding thoughts

Taking a step further back and surveying the coaching and leadership literature in general, we can see that our understanding about (team) coaching and leadership is rapidly growing and that researchers are, e.g. beginning to quantify factors in the effectiveness of coaching as well as leadership derailment. It will be very exciting if this early research can be followed by more and better research on the effectiveness of team coaching overall, and specifically, of team-coaching interventions as they relate to the effectiveness of leadership teams.

I hope I have been able to convey how crucial the role of a team coach or coaching psychologist can be for top leadership teams, and how exciting it can be to play this role and make a difference to major decisions in organisations through impacting the quality of reflection in top teams. The team coach is often the odd person out, who is outnumbered by the team. Team coaches attend to different aspects than the leaders around the room, and may well look somewhat out of their depth, bedraggled, or clumsy. However, as Shakespeare wrote, 'jesters do oft prove prophets,' and from the background or the shadows of the team's dynamics a team coach can make a profound difference to the sustainability and validity of decisions of top teams. The secret of the successful fool is that he is no fool at all. And a jester unemployed is nobody's fool. Just to quote a few well-known sayings that apply very well to top-leadership team coaches.

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