

» **Kim Turnbull James**
Professor of Executive Learning

» Coaching below the Surface

Managing a team of elite Olympic athletes is not an easy task and neither is managing a team of top business people. Winning a gold medal at the Olympics is a feat worth celebrating. The journey to get to that point will have been long and hard. However, the celebrations should not just honour the winning athlete, it should also celebrate the team around them who shared their journey to winning a medal. Getting to that point will have involved the team working together successfully, which is normally a reflection of a good leader at the helm.

The leader, whether they head up an Olympic team or a business, has the unenviable task of bringing together very different people to work together to achieve the best performance. A good leader will realise that in order to get the very best from their team, they need to be in tune with their own personal needs to succeed in their role. An executive coach can provide vital support for even the most confident, highly skilled and experienced of managers.

Executive coaches work with managers to determine the outcomes they wish to achieve. They examine the underlying dynamics that drive organisational behaviour. They don't just coach an individual on communication skills and inner confidence or performance outcomes but will look at team dynamics and the effect that underlying emotions kept 'under the surface' by individuals including the manager have on the overall team performance.

Executive coaches will focus on what challenges the team face in working as a cohesive group. The most powerful levers in any organisation often operate below the surface and are driven by emotions - what is being said and more importantly what is not being talked about. Executive coaching allows the manager to understand what motivates their team and helps individuals within the team to acquire different perspectives and insights into their situation in order to keep performing at the highest levels. There will be times when a leader feels anxious, angry or helpless.

This may not be their own feelings but instead a reflection of how their team is feeling. Coaching empowers managers to become a 'thermometer' for the team temperature and to understand the emotional experiences of the team.

This is a complex task, because if you ask individuals how they are doing they usually tell the manager they are fine. However, by observing the actual behaviour of people, the 'group dynamics' become apparent. For example: rivalries and jockeying for position; anxieties about failure that are not just individual concerns but affect the whole team; displaced anger onto other team members when things are not going well; fantasies about new regimes working miracles and disappointment when they do not. Coaching helps individuals and teams to recognise how these underlying dynamics are constraining them in moving forward with a challenge or dealing with a threat.

The skill of observing what is going on in a team as a whole, and knowing that team issues will not be sorted by having a word with one problem person, if the underlying problem is with the team as a whole, is a leadership quality that will help managers maximise the real potential of their team.

A successful manager will learn how to get the whole team to feel safe enough to face up to discussing tricky group challenges. This is where executive coaching can help you to understand the 'group dynamics' and then work out how to tackle them constructively as a team.

The basis for this type of work is an understanding of system psychodynamics: when people get together to do a task (such as winning Olympic medals; moving into new markets; merging two companies, or improving customer relations), the way the group as a whole works can support or undermine the work. Of course individual team members do not consciously set out to undermine the task; indeed they may be totally dedicated to success. However, the emotions that are generated from doing the work together may be intense and not all happy ones. These are therefore often difficult to talk about. We don't normally chat at the water cooler about feeling envious of someone's position, shame about having made a mistake, guilt about taking a job someone else wanted, rivalry over a new opportunity coming up or anxiety about whether we will survive in our role.

These experiences are difficult to acknowledge and may drive group behaviour and actions 'underground' (unconscious) making them even more difficult to access. Without skilled attention they can be quite toxic and derail even the most ambitious and technically skilled team.

Coaching helps both teams and individual managers explore these in a safe way, without any scapegoating or blaming, so that they can be dealt with productively. The right executive coaching delivers a sophisticated approach for working with teams and individuals whose development needs are grounded in the way people come together in their work. **[ME]**

For further information please contact the author at k.james@cranfield.ac.uk

Cranfield in partnership with the Tavistock Consultancy Service offers a three module course, *Coaching Below the Surface*, for experienced coaches who want to enhance their skills and knowledge to effectively coach high performing teams and individuals. More details are available at www.som.cranfield.ac.uk