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Individual coaching for leadership development has slowly but surely made its way into many organisations around the world, with professional coaches helping executives assess their leadership challenges, change their behaviours and become more authentic leaders.

More recently, small group coaching has emerged as a credible alternative to address similar challenges and a number of business schools and companies are now systematically offering small group coaching to their executives either within the company itself or as part of development programmes.

Rather than being merely a cheaper, diluted alternative, we suggest that small group coaching has unique advantages and is actually an accelerator of leadership development at the individual, team and organisational levels, which allows over time the creation of an overall “coaching culture” in the host organisation while offering a more cost-effective way of addressing major leadership challenges.

Under the leadership of Professor Manfred Kets de Vries, the INSEAD Global Leadership Center (IGLC) has since 2003 pioneered and successfully developed a psychodynamic group coaching process for leadership development.

Today, the Center carries out over 100 group coaching interventions per year across INSEAD’s campuses, supports a global network of 100 executive coaches and works with over 4,000 executives every year.

There is an enduring demand, with a 20% yearly growth in group coaching, mostly as a smaller portion of a broader development programme, either via open enrolment programmes or as part of a customised development partnership with a corporate client.

What is group coaching and what are the key ingredients?

One-on-one leadership coaching is often defined as a co-creation process between the coach and the coachee, whereby the coach helps the client arrive at a mutually determined goal based on greater self-awareness and focused on actionable results.

What leadership coaching in small groups brings in addition is a true accelerator of the insights and learning process of the coachee and the group as a whole. How does this happen?

The three major elements of a successful group coaching intervention, as practised at IGLC are the psychodynamic approach as the driver of the process, the group, which functions as the context, and finally the coaching methodology as the method to achieve change.

The psychodynamic approach gives the participant the ability to understand and reflect on deeper aspects of themselves.

In today’s fast-paced digital age, this self-reflection is at least a pause, a small hiatus in the executive’s life: at best it is pure catharsis. Through the act of talking about a personal history, of recapitulating one’s dreams and hopes, and ultimately seeing oneself in a broader context, the executives will often undergo a process of restructuring their story and thereby create greater meaning.

The group context is a defining factor in all of this. The group listens, reflects back, questions, supports and challenges the participant. The emotional engagement around the table is high, sometimes fevered. It is no surprise to us, as practitioners, that many of these groups stay intact as self-supporting networks way beyond the end of their programme.

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What does the typical group coaching “leadership journey” look like?

A proprietary global 360-degree feedback report combined with qualitative feedback from one’s personal environment and a brief biography constitute the key “multi-source feedback elements” of each executive before his or her arrival on campus.

Once on campus, the “group-coaching day” constitutes the major element where groups of four or five executives work together in a fully safe and confidential “space” on their leadership challenges, facilitated by the professional coach.

The day has a specific structure with the participants drawing a “self-portrait” around key dimensions, which constitutes the basis for a presentation in the group of their life story, and an open sharing of their 360-feedback results within the group in a context of respectful challenge and genuine support.

The outcome of the day is a detailed leadership action plan for each executive, which they then share with a “peer” from the group as well as other group members and the coach.

A virtual follow-up call with one’s peer a month after the programme and a group call with the coach one to two months after the programme supports the process of actionable change.

More elaborate versions of this typical group leadership journey often spread the leadership segment over two modules of the programme with one full coaching day in each module. This is complemented with individual one-on-one coaching on campus and occasionally also with outdoor experiential learning exercises before the group coaching and/or with specific action learning on strategic company projects.

Other group coaching interventions address top teams in companies with specific IGLC 360 Leadership Archetype Questionnaires. Still other interventions specifically assess and discuss the organisational culture of companies and use the IGLC’s OCA (Organisational Culture Audit) questionnaire in group coaching settings.

What are the key underlying reasons for the positive impact of the group coaching process?

The group process as described above brings together a complex set of sub-processes such as validation of every coachee’s personal experience, a sharing of life narratives and 360° feedback results. The creation and holding of a sense of community and support and a problem-solving approach lead towards an action plan supported by follow-up with a peer, the group and the executive coach.

Below are some quotes from executives after group coaching and we link them to key elements of the group coaching process:

- “This day really allowed me to think, to tackle some deeper challenges I am facing”: This echoes the notion of transitional space, a place “neither here nor there” where people can experiment with a different sense of self.
- “I felt really connected, there was a flow”: An example of the profound sense of meaning and connection people can experience through the process.
- “The value was more from talking together than having comments on our 360 graphs, which are self-explanatory”: Here we see the value of having a courageous conversation, of exploring personal and professional themes in this safe transitional environment.
- “Drawing on experiences from other group members particularly in areas of commonality brought out the feeling ‘I am not alone’ in this journey”: An example of how such a group experience, as in group therapy, can alleviate the suspicion or worry of a personal deficit.
- “Experienced and professional coach asking the right questions and creating a safe space with a constructive team”: Confidentiality and safety are two of the key ingredients for making the process work. Setting up the process properly is directly correlated with a positive outcome.

4.4/5

Our evaluations show the group coaching intervention is systematically highly rated with an average of 4.4/5





How do we measure the impact of group coaching?

As in all coaching interventions the ROI (return on investment) of coaching is a challenging subject. Qualitative data suggests progress. Quantitative data at the individual, group or systemic level, is harder to put a figure on.

Our evaluations show the group coaching intervention is systematically highly rated with an average of 4.4/5. Though as we well know such “happy sheets” are merely a short-term indication.

Second, the presence and active participation during the virtual follow-up call is also an indicator of progress and we estimate that roughly 90% of all coachees who followed a group coaching leadership journey dutifully and systematically checked in for the virtual follow-up call, where progress on their action plan is discussed. Without the threat or promise of follow-up, we suspect the impact would be greatly lessened.

One thing we note from our research on an open enrolment programme over time is that not only do participants have a high success rate of delivering on their action plan over a three-month period but they also have a desire to work on further actions with the support of the group.

The true changes with an executive we often observe as a result of his or her leadership journey often happen at two levels: a first level where the executive will work on a very specific behaviour immediately after re-entry, for example “better listening”. He or she will then start to experiment with a new leadership style, which on a second level and over time will bring him or her to a deeper level of change affecting his or her leadership identity – such as impacting the image they would like to project themselves as a leader, for example by becoming less heroic and more empowering.

An additional important possibility is to aggregate and summarise anonymously the key themes that come out of the group coaching sessions. This can be helpful in guiding organisations to work on aspects of their culture, for example articulating a clearer strategic vision or enhancing interdependency between business units.

Conclusion

In summary, through small group coaching over many years we have seen deep individual reflection coupled with the development of long-term relationships, where executives find true and constant peers to help them navigate the inevitable choppy waters of corporate and personal life.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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