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# Bringing Critical Reflexivity into Team Coaching: A Proposed Framework

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## Abstract

This article calls for more critical reflexivity in team coach development and practice. In doing so, it suggests going beyond the dominant focus on horizontal development to an approach which integrates vertical development, fostering deeper self-awareness and new ways of thinking. Without critical reflexivity, team coaches may fail to challenge their own assumptions and limitations of their models, hindering their ability to meet clients' needs effectively. To address this, the article proposes a framework to help team coaches enhance their critical reflexivity, enabling them to reframe existing knowledge, expand their capacity and develop new, more effective approaches to their practice.

*Keywords: leadership-as-practice, leaders-who-coach, process ontology, managerial coaching*

## Introduction

My intention in writing this paper is to call on team coaches, team coach educators and the professional bodies to be more considered about how and when they apply critical reflexivity in their practice and teaching. Coach development is currently achieved largely through improving skills and knowledge, a situation driven by most of the professional coaching bodies charting the path to mastery through incremental increases in competencies (Crosse, 2024). This is known as "horizontal development" (Cook-Greuter, 2004) and, whilst it addresses coaches' know-how and expertise, it fails to take into account the many different ways coaches can develop (Burt et al., 2024). A focus on horizontal development only can have implications for team coaches and, particularly, can give rise to inconsistencies between their philosophical assumptions and practice.

Many team coaching courses and training programmes involve some form of reflection. However, few go beyond this to encourage team coaches in a much deeper examination of the critical assumptions in their coaching practice and enabling them to transform their ability to think, a process known as "vertical development" (Cook-Greuter, 2004). This involves critical reflexivity, that is, examining the assumptions underlying our philosophy and how they impact our practice as coaches (Cunliffe, 2016). Mastery in team coaching requires both horizontal and vertical development (Woudstra, 2021). To address the potential impact in more detail for team coaches of focusing only on horizontal development, I will develop the argument that, firstly, much of the existing coach training focuses on developing skills and competencies and does not teach or help coaches to understand or practise critical reflexivity. The situation is made more difficult for team coaches because the discipline lacks the depth of practitioner and academic literature available in dyadic coaching. Secondly, I will examine how a lack of critical reflexivity

can have an adverse impact on team coaches' practice. Finally, I will offer a new framework and suggestions for team coaches to adopt in their reflexive practice.

## Education in executive and team coaching

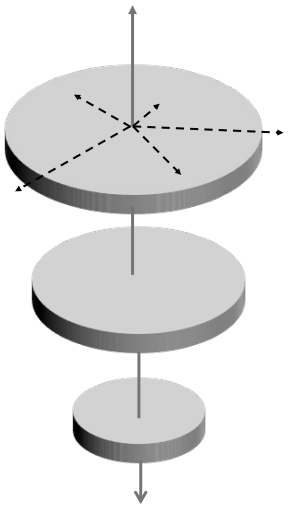
This section discusses the wider context of coach development, both dyadic and team, before turning to team coaching specifically. It will explain in more detail the differences between horizontal and vertical development.

### *Coach development is mostly horizontal*

Much has been written about coach development even though there is a lack of understanding of how "coach development" is construed (Garvey, 2011). The predominant narrative in practitioner literature is to equate coaches' continuous professional development (CPD) with "emphasising acquiring knowledge, skills, and coaching competencies" (Crosse, 2024 p. 99). There is nonetheless, Crosse (2024) notes, a shift amongst the main coaching accreditation bodies to focusing on increasing coaches' self-awareness and self-understanding. Despite this, the sequential stages of coach development leading to Master Practitioner remains the prevalent means of demonstrating coach maturity, an approach which contrasts with the one adopted by scholars focusing more on enhancing personal capacity (Crosse, 2024). The strong link between training programmes and competency-based accreditation, moreover, leads to overly simplistic understanding of coaches and how they are educated (Bachkirova et al., 2017). A different approach to coach maturity, proposed by Clutterbuck & Megginson (2011), set out four stages of development from "Control" through "Contain" and "Facilitate" to "Enable." They postulated that less mature coaches need a degree of control in their coaching through using or adapting a model. In contrast, mature coaches question whether they even need to apply any process or technique and, if so, how the client context and situation informs the selection from the wide choices available to them.

It is apparent that students and academics spend much time in learning about the models, theories or techniques which enable an individual to become more effective and efficient, rather than thinking about who to be in relationship with others (Cunliffe, 2016). This has parallels with the work of Cook-Greuter (2004) who differentiated between horizontal and vertical development. The former is concerned with widening and deepening a person's way of making meaning through teaching new behaviours, skills or knowledge. In contrast, the latter is concerned with helping people transform the way they make sense to enable them to have broader perspectives.

Figure 1 (below) represents the difference between the two:



Horizontal = expansion at same stage (developing new skills, adding information and knowledge)

Up = transformation, vertical development, new more integrated perspective

Down = temporary or permanent regression due to life circumstances, environment, stress and illness

**Figure 1: Lateral or horizontal growth and vertical transformation (Cook-Greuter, 2004, p. 277)**

An example of horizontal development would be the path to Master Certified Coach with the International Coaching Federation (ICF). Coaches pass through three levels of credentialling, each based on their knowledge of competencies assessed through an exam and performance evaluation. Each level is sequential and builds specifically on the previous one through five steps: Education-Experience-Mentor coaching-Performance evaluation-Exam (International Coaching Federation, 2024). Similarly, in order to obtain the ICF's Advanced Certificate in Team Coaching, coaches need to demonstrate their knowledge and understanding of the team coaching competencies and pass an exam based on potential scenarios (International Coaching Federation, 2024). Many coaches thus focus on acquiring tools, models, techniques and knowledge, that is, horizontal development, driven by the professional bodies advocating a competency-based approach (Crosse, 2024).

## Education in team coaching is also mainly horizontal

Within this context of coach development in general being largely horizontal, team coaching has an even less developed academic and practitioner base compared with dyadic coaching (Widdowson & Barbour, 2021). This has been manifested in, for example, the main coaching bodies – including the ICF, the Association for Coaching (AC) and the European Mentoring and Coaching Council (EMCC) – only publishing team coaching competencies after 2020. The Association for Professional Executive Coaching and Supervision (APECS) does, in contrast, explicitly focus on the individual's capacity and practice, rather than competencies (APECS, 2024). With the exception of APECS, these professional bodies largely continue to promote coach progression based on horizontal development. However, as Burt et al. (2024 pp. 80-81) note

> a narrow emphasis on competencies and linear approaches to learning fails to capture the complexity and variety of coaches' developmental paths and therefore limits our understanding of the phenomenon.

The situation is compounded because, in order for team coach educators to have their courses accredited by a professional body, it needs to demonstrate how it addresses the relevant competencies. From an academic perspective, there has long been recognition of different approaches to understand coaches' development. In particular, development of experiential learning through concrete experience forms the basis for reflection (Cox et al., 2014) which, in turn, becomes a critical enabler of a coach's self-awareness in training (Burt et al., 2024). However, experience on its own is insufficient for development; it needs to form part of reflexive practice (Kolb, 2015). Thus, critical reflexivity forms an essential part of vertical development. The essential point is that coach development programmes are most effective when they focus on not only on competencies or models, but also include reflexive practice.

Few academic studies in team coaching exist (Fox, 2024), and practice literature is mainly dominated by a small number of well-known authors, for example, Hawkins (2021), Clutterbuck (2019), Lencioni (2005) or Giffard and Moral (2022). Models from other authors such as Grieve & Miller (2024), Peters & Carr (2013), Stout-Rostron (2019), and Widdowson & Barbour (2021) focus on helping teams improve business performance but, as pointed out by Garvey (2011), much of the work underpinning high performance in business is developed from sports coaching which has limited applicability to the realities of the business world. Moreover, the models espoused by many team coach educators are largely predicated on the authors' own experiences and opinions (Hanley-Browne, 2021; Wotruba, 2016) and have largely arisen as marketing vehicles to promote a particular approach (Bachkirova & Borrington, 2020b). The fact that many such models are not empirically researched or supported by specific evidence is not inherently problematic. Their continued widespread use and popularity suggests that they resonate with teams and coaches. What is concerning, however, is the potential for practitioners to follow a particular model without giving sufficient critical thought to the theoretical underpinnings and limitations of each one. It is suggested that practitioners should be taking "more care to recognize the lens of a particular author or practice they encounter and become more discerning about the possibilities and problems offered by each" Hurlow (2022 p. 134). Similarly, Gray, Garvey and Lane (2016) reinforce the need for coaching practitioners to be clear on their understanding of what theoretical stance underpins their work and be clear with clients as to their position in order to be confident their offering can meet the client's needs.

### *The need for vertical development*

Current practices appear to be heavily influenced by a positivist philosophy, resulting in approaches that are linear, competency-driven, goal-oriented, predominantly teacher-led and mostly ineffective (Burt et al., 2024). Moving away from these approaches requires vertical development which occurs through an "inside out…process that is based on reflection, raising awareness and generating insight. It requires a deeper self-examination" (Woudstra, 2021 p. 254). Vertical development is both exploratory and transformative and unfolds as individuals expand their capacity to interpret challenges and opportunities, alongside increasing the complexity with which they understand themselves, fostering a transformation in their thinking (Avolio & Drummey, 2023). It also requires "on going integration of your practice into who you are as a team coach" (Woudstra, 2021 p. 254). Moreover, as Burt et al. (2024) have pointed out, experience on its own is insufficient to develop coaches; reflexive practice is also required.

In summary, the result of the professional bodies' focus on competencies to deliver team coach mastery has been to lead to the dominance of horizontal over vertical development, and according to Burt et al. (2024) accreditation based on competency frameworks. Further, team coach educators who focus on horizontal rather than vertical learning risk over-emphasising the former over the latter. Focusing on horizontal development without the necessary vertical development means that team coaches may remain unaware of their underlying philosophy, the implications of that for their practice, and the limitations of any models of approach they use.

## The rationale for more critical reflexivity in team coaching

A lack of critical appraisal amongst team coaches could cause concern for several reasons. Firstly, as dyadic coaching is contextual and situational (Bozer & Delegach, 2019; Erdös et al., 2021; Kotte, 2022; Pandolfi, 2020) so the same is true of team coaching (Fox, 2024) where there are multiple individuals interacting and affecting the context. Thus, approaching a team coaching intervention with a "one size fits all" model or process to be used in every situation seems inappropriate and, potentially, unethical. Secondly, insufficient reflexivity around whether and how a particular model's theoretical foundations sit with the coach's own philosophical assumptions can lead to inconsistency in practice and mismatches between the organisation's expectations about what can be achieved and the coach's expectations about what can be delivered. This has particular consequences when using quantitative measures of, for example, Return on Investment (ROI) for the coaching, and diagnostics to determine whether the coaching programme has been "successful" or not. Lastly, a high proportion of existing team coaching models imply a level of linear cause and effect between the steps or elements of the model and predictable coaching outcomes, for example, Clutterbuck (2019); Grieve & Miller (2024); Hawkins (2021); Peters & Carr (2013); Widdowson & Barbour (2021). Whilst some of these authors assert the non-linear, recursive nature of their model, this is not necessarily obvious in their application; that is, a coach might feel the steps are there to be followed in a certain order, or all the steps are to be followed, irrespective of the presenting situation.

The remainder of this paper will consider each of these potential issues and address how greater reflexivity by team coaches is essential if they are to be aware of the potential opportunities or pitfalls of their preferred approach. It will adapt an existing reflexive framework for qualitative researchers to suggest different lenses through which team coaches can consider their own reflexive practices. Only with a greater understanding of their own preferred lens through which meaning is made and how that affects their choice of model and how they use it, can coaches best serve the interests of their client.

### *All team coaching is situational and contextual*

It is evident from studies including Erdös, de Haan and Heusinkveld (2021) that each coaching intervention is affected by its context and situation. Similarly, Bozer & Delegach (2019), Kotte (2022) and Pandolfi (2020) have identified how the wider organisational context may impact coaching, though team-based studies of context are lacking. Nonetheless, recent research by Fox (2024) points to the highly individualistic nature of team coaching sessions. Each team and organisation is unique and, even within the same team, the context and situation will change from session to session. Bachkirova & Jackson (2024) have noted that when leaders are learning at their place of work, the leaders' characteristics and the wider system's influences

are interwoven. The dynamic nature of that interconnectivity make it impossible to predict how the learning will be experienced and how it is affected. With multiple personalities interconnected in different ways with the wider system, I suggest similar unpredictability exists in teams when they are learning.

This brings into question how a "one size fits" all approach to working with teams can be the best approach in every situation. It raises concerns if claims are made that a particular approach will achieve a certain aim such as "high performance" or removing a team's dysfunctions in every instance. Whilst it is acknowledged that a specific model or approach will be appropriate in certain circumstances, it does not follow that it will be useful in all. As such, team coach practitioners need to be aware of the limitations and pitfalls of their preferred approach. Practitioners need to be clear in articulating these potential issues with clients and critically assessing whether the proposed approach is the best in that particular situation (Gray et al., 2016).

***Issues with inconsistent assumptions***

Inconsistencies in a coach's philosophical assumptions and stance, and the models used or practices followed can be problematic. Nelson et al. (2016 p. 2) urged practitioners and coach educators to recognise that theory and practice are "inextricably intertwined." They go on to emphasise that practitioners' assumptions the two can be separated are inherently erroneous because a theory forms a framework for understanding all practice. Moreover, theory is important in assisting coaches with the necessary foundations to grow their capacity for critical engagement with their development (Nelson et al., 2016). Nonetheless, even when practitioners do engage, they might have a "superficial" understanding of those theories and there is a need for coaches to engage more rigorously with the learning theories which are the underlying frameworks for coaching practice (Hurlow, 2022). In the context of team coaching, with its larger body of practitioner literature and under-developed academic literature, practitioners may find it more difficult to find and engage with relevant theories. A lack of understanding of the theoretical framework for their practice might inadvertently lead team coaches to make claims or assertions that cannot be warranted. For example, claiming that a specific model will invariably create "high performance" could overlook the myriad reasons why achieving high performance is not possible or practical for a particular team.

A further area for concern is in the use of team diagnostics. Hurlow (2022) makes the point that "behaviourism", with its positivist background, is often the basis for diagnostic tools in coaching because it is believed that only overt behaviour can be observed and measured. Similarly, Organization and Management Studies often adopt an objectivist view, treating the social world as an independent reality that can be studied to produce accurate, testable, and predictive knowledge (Cunliffe, 2016). This knowledge is applied through rational, neutral models to improve organizational efficiency and effectiveness. By contrast, holding a subjectivist ontology and an intersubjective perspective means organizations are seen as communities of people rather than objective structures or systems (Cunliffe, 2016). In coaching, focusing on behavioural change as an objective and systematic process to address performance issues can appear seductively reassuring to purchasers of coaching services (Hurlow, 2022). However, a potential inconsistency between using a positivist-orientated diagnostic and a social constructive belief underpinning practice can lead to inappropriate conclusions about what is

being measured or compared, and claims of causality which may not be substantiated. It could also lead to focusing on the pre-determined metrics contained in the survey at the expense of overlooking something more important to team members, particularly if something new emerges during coaching which falls outside the original assessment. Further, research by Ladmanová et al. (2022) showed that the timing of when the data is captured can have an important effect on how it is reported and what has been achieved. Similarly, research has indicated that the timing of when data is captured – during the session, after the intervention or some time after it has finished – affects the answers given (Fox, 2024).

### *The problem with adopting a linear team coaching model*

A particular feature of the more recent team coaching literature is the increasing use of the word "systemic" by practitioners (Lawrence, 2019). However, this popularisation of the term leads to "a risk that the descriptor 'systemic coach' becomes little more than a marketing term, used in an attempt to create the impression that the coach is advanced in their thinking and practice" (Lawrence, 2019a p. 2). Moreover, the word "systemic" can have different meanings: it can refer to the wider organisation and ecosystem in which the team sits (Hawkins, 2021); a series of nested systems (Hawkins, 2021; Woudstra, 2021); and "That which acknowledges, illuminates and releases the system dynamics so each element can function with ease" (Lawrence, 2021b p. 63). I would argue that notwithstanding these various meanings, all team coaching is systemic if only because a team itself can be considered a "system" (Guzzo & Dickson, 2024).

The potential challenges of being unclear about the meaning of "systemic" can be illustrated through the 5 levels of systems proposed by Lawrence (2021a; 2021b). Lawrence (2021a; 2021b) described these levels as ranging from first order linear where the system is understood to be "real" and acting in a predictable way, to meta-systemic which understands a system as being purely a social construct. Other authors such as Cavanagh (2016) take a "complex adaptive systems" approach to coaching, emphasizing that systems are inherently unpredictable which can produce unexpected outcomes when working with teams. The challenge for practitioners lies in any disconnect between their understanding of teams and organizations as complex adaptive systems or meta-systems, and their approach to working with teams, particularly if they consistently rely on a linear, cause-and-effect model. In other words, insufficient reflexivity in this area might create assumptions that following specific steps leads to pre-determined goals. Lawrence (2021b) concludes that even comparing a team with any kind of system can be problematic, because it leads the coach to attribute simplistic rules to team members' behaviour. People do not, however, behave in a simplistic way.

## The meaning of being "critically reflexive" and implications for team coach practitioners

Reflexivity can be defined as "Questioning what we, and others, might be taking for granted - what is being said and not said - and examining the impact this has or might have" Cunliffe (2016 p. 741). She goes on to note that reflexivity consists of two dimensions: self-reflexivity which is about one's beliefs, our relationships and how we interact with others; whereas critical-reflexivity concerns practices, social structures and our knowledge base. Reflexivity consists of a psychological space that allows coaches to distance themselves from their day-to-day surroundings and enables them to reframe their activities and experiences

(Fatien et al., 2014). Being reflexive is more than simple reflection: it requires criticality and, importantly, experimentation or action are needed to create growth( Burt et al., 2024). A further distinction is between phenomenological reflexivity which comprises a retelling of events and somatic responses to help develop a sequence of experiences, and critical reflexivity which requires the coach to examine the underlying assumptions affecting our actions (Fatien et al., 2014). Moreover, being reflexive "describes the capacity of any system of signification to turn back upon itself, to make itself its own object by referring to itself: subject and object fuse" (Ruby and Myerhoff, 2016, p. 2). I suggest that this idea can equally be used to describe how reflexivity is central to team coaches, by making themselves the object of enquiry. In this form of reflexivity, the individual contests their own understanding of "knowledge" and "truth" and such critical reflexivity becomes the guide as they work with teams, in a similar way it guides researchers (Finlay, 2017). Central to the notion of reflexivity within research is the idea that the researcher and object being studied exist in mutual relationship with one another (Whitaker & Atkinson, 2020). Team coaches might be considered as the "object" being studied.

### *A framework for critical reflexive practice*

Finlay (2012) offers some alternative lenses for qualitative researchers to consider their reflexivity. She termed these: (1) strategic reflexivity through which the focus is on methodological/epistemological aspects; (2) contextual-discursive reflexivity which examines situational and sociocultural elements; (3) embodied reflexivity which encompasses the researcher's somatic experience and the gestural duet between interviewer and interviewee; (4) relational reflexivity which examines the intersubjective, interpersonal realm; and (5) ethical reflexivity which monitors processual aspects and power dynamics, enabling the possible ethical implications to be revealed. I am not suggesting team coaches will or should necessarily adopt the same rigour of reflexivity as may be required in qualitative academic research. However, while most courses incorporate reflective and self-reflexivity practice, there seems to be significant potential for programme-led critical reflexivity: an approach that does not leave individual team coaches solely to their own resources.

I believe some parallels can be drawn with Finlay's (2012) framework shown in Table 1 below insomuch as the coach is making themselves the object of critically reflexive inquiry. The questions provided may offer some guidance for team coaches in helping them become more critically reflexive and enabling them to foster their vertical development.

| **Finlay's (2012) categories** | **Suggested lens for team coaches' reflexivity** | **Some questions for team coaches to consider reflexively** |
|---|---|---|
| Strategic | What are the philosophical underpinnings of my beliefs and assumptions as a coach? | What are my beliefs around how meaning is constructed?<br>What are my beliefs around systems (linear/non-linear/complex adaptive/meta)?<br>What do I assume about cause and effect in coaching teams? |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | | How do my beliefs and assumptions affect the models I am drawn to and use? |
| Contextual-discursive | How do I make meaning of different contexts and situations? | What do I believe about the contextual and situational nature of teams?<br>What are the implications for the models I use?<br>How do I use diagnostics in different contexts and situations? |
| Embodied | What am I noticing about my somatic experiences when coaching and what meaning might they have for my practice? | What am I noticing somatically when team coaching?<br>How do my somatic experiences affect the way I coach? |
| Relational | How do I relate with myself and others, and what are the implications for my practice? | How deeply do I understand myself, my history and what triggers me?<br>What is my presence? |
| Ethical | What are the ethical implications of adhering to my models, tools and ways of working? | How do I explain to potential buyers and clients about the way I work with my preferred model?<br>How do I contract with clients about any limitations around cause-and-effect? |

**Table 1: Suggested lenses for team coach reflexivity**

Greater reflexivity can benefit coaches by enabling them to develop new perspectives and break through their hitherto dominant ways of thinking, leading to greater flexibility in addressing new situations (Fatien et al., 2014). Importantly, reflexivity is also contextual (Parker et al., 2020) and, I suggest, the context and situation in which a coach's reflexivity is learned and applied forms an essential part of the process. This points to the importance early in team coaches' development of organisations' openness to fostering team coach's critical reflexivity and role modelling that reflexivity by critiquing their own models, processes, tools and techniques. Team coach educators and the professional bodies thus have a key role in demonstrating and encouraging team coaches' reflexive practice. As Charmaz, Thornberg and Keane (2018 p. 417) point out "A reflexive researcher actively adopts a theory of knowledge. A less reflexive researcher implicitly adopts a theory of knowledge." The same can be said of a team coach.

### *Critical reflexivity in team coaching practice*

By adopting the proposed framework in Table 1 and posing themselves these questions, team coaches can start introducing more vertical development into their practice, bringing to the surface some of their unspoken or implicit assumptions and the limitations of the models or approach used. For example, the questions will enable team coaches to start understanding whether they adopt a linear approach when they believe teams are complex adaptive systems,

and what this means. The questions could also allow team coaches to consider whether using a "one size fits all" is the most appropriate approach for their practice.

The difference between a horizontal (learning a new tool, skill or competency) and vertical approach (applying critical reflexivity to the learning) can be illustrated using the example of a team coach's learning about a new diagnostic they wish to use when working with teams. Table 2 below shows how their beliefs and assumptions might appear under each approach.

| | **Practice with horizontal development only** | **Practice with vertical and horizontal development** |
|---|---|---|
| Assumption underpinning the diagnostic | • The diagnostic proves causality is demonstrable between the team coaching and the impact on the variables measured | • A correlation between coaching input and impact may be demonstrable, but not causality |
| Application of the diagnostic in practice | • The team coach uses the same diagnostic tool with every team encountered<br>• Will coach to address the measured variables | • Understands the limitations of the diagnostic, when to use it and when another approach is indicated<br>• Will coach to help the team's emerging awareness of what is figural to them |
| How the diagnostic might be described to a client | • This diagnostic will demonstrate how much the team coaching has improved the metrics or variables measured<br>• Causality is attributable between the coaching and its impact<br>• The team coach makes claims accordingly about what the coaching can achieve | • The diagnostic may show how team members perceive the metrics or variables have changed over the course of the coaching<br>• The team coach understands that other variables outside the team and the coaching may have an important effect on the team but are not measurable or unknown<br>• Makes claims appropriate to what the diagnostic might illuminate, not what it proves, and contracts accordingly |

**Table 2: Example of the result of applying critical reflexivity to learning a new tool**

## Conclusion

My aim has been not to critique the authors, models and processes which have so far dominated the team coaching practice literature. Rather, it is a call to action for team coaching practitioners to undertake more vertical development through greater critical reflexivity and not rely overly on horizontal development. This is important with regard to the way they use models, particularly in respect of their congruence with the coach's own philosophical position and the

model's limitations. That is, to use them where it is indicated that they are the best approach in the moment in service of the team's needs, and not be wedded to them come what may. Coaches need to reflect on and reassess their personal coaching philosophy (Bachkirova & Borrington, 2020a). Gray, Garvey and Lane (2016 p. 33) assert that "Once a purpose is defined, it is possible to consider which perspectives can be used to inform the coaching and mentoring journey on which they are engaged." This requires team coaches to potentially be much more eclectic in their use of tools and models, and spend time being critically reflexive on how they go about team coaching and not simply being reflexive about themselves. Following the views of Gray, Garvey and Lane (2016) who question the way in which coaches are trained and developed, I believe the team coach education organisations need to take a more proactive stance on how they train team coaches around reflexivity, and explicitly talk about the need for critical reflexivity as a fundamental part of a coach's learning and development. Ideally, this would be through role modelling critical evaluation of their own models or techniques. It is too important for coaches to be left to be reflexive without guidance as to what that means and how they might go about it. Without such critical reflexivity, however, team coaches will remain unaware of whether the model, process or diagnostic tools they are using are serving the team's interests, or their own.

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