



Team Coaching on Sailing Yachts – A Transformative Experience

by Mario Gonzalez Forrellad (Germany)

Getting a client team to sail a yacht is one of the most powerful tools for team coaching. It can be powerfully integrated with a classical team coaching process, as an outdoor workshop aimed to accelerate the development of the team in terms of cohesion, alignment and performance.

A set of brilliant individuals are often not performing as expected in a team setting: they all can be top performers individually, but together in a team, the team is not a high performing one. The first thing to consider is whether the individuals forming part of a team are indeed a team, or rather a group.

A team can be lacking a clearly stated common goal and an agreed set of rules to operate. Furthermore, some of the five dysfunctions of the Lencioni's team model can be present: absence of trust, fear of conflict, lack of commitment, avoidance of accountability, and inattention to results.

In a classical team coaching process, the intervention includes an initial assessment of the team, and then the coach accompanies the team in some of their regular meetings for a period of time. The coach observes the team from outside, and can see things that the team is not able to perceive from within, and mirror on what he sees. The team coach focuses on the interactions within the team members, rather than on the members themselves: the team is as an entity in itself, and the interactions, rather than the individuals, shape the team. This classical team

coaching approach is in its own already very powerful. The extra session on-board a sailing yacht accelerates and amplifies dramatically all the beneficial effects of team coaching, because when managing a sailing yacht, the team must operate as a functional team, otherwise the boat is not sailing properly, providing immediate feedback to the team.

In the outdoor session, the team is put in charge of the sailing yacht, facing a set of sailing situations to solve, and the coach facilitates the analysis and parallelism with situations faced as the team they are in their professional lives.

The session on-board can be included ideally in the middle of a team coaching process, so after some initial team coaching sessions, comes the session on-board, and then, the coaching process continues with the regular team coaching sessions.

There are two ways to approach teams, the mechanistic approach (classic approach), where it is assumed that the members shape the team; and the systemic approach (modern approach), where it is considered that the interactions (not the members) shape the team. The systemic



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approach to team coaching is based on two principles: a team is a set of persons that have agreed on how to agree when they disagree (so, there are established rules for decision making); and that the structure of the system is the network of its conversations (so, as mentioned above, the interactions, and not the members, shape the team).

Furthermore, the team has two pillars: the goals of the team and the rules of the team. The goals of the team are the performance indicators; the performance of the team will be measured against those goals (for instance, yearly sales budget). The rules of the team are the commitment indicators; as much as the team is honouring its rules (for instance, “We make ourselves predictable”), as much they are committed to the achievement of the goals.

And, a functioning team will overcome the five Lencioni’s dysfunctions mentioned above by: building trust, mastering conflict, achieving commitment, embracing accountability and focusing on results.

All these aspects of the team (goal setting, rules of the team, interactions among team members, and dysfunctions of the team) can be observed in a very much amplified way when the team is put in charge of the yacht. The interactions among the team, that are essential in order to properly manoeuvre a sailing boat, become completely evident: the boat performance is reflecting the team performance.

In the setting of handling a sailing yacht, the team dynamics are very much amplified. The unknown and demanding setting works as a magnifying glass, where the team interactions become very much evident. This allows the team to be very aware of how the team works, and to work on the spot on the aspects the team requires.

The urgency in the communication, along with the immediate actions to be set and coordinated in order to, for instance, tack the boat (change course), and the immediate feedback that the boat itself provides (the boat ‘demands’ an effective team in order to sail properly), amplifies very much the working mode of the team: on board things are the same than in the office, but far more urgent, much faster and completely self-evident.

This amplification is a great tool both for the coach and for the team: the team becomes immediately aware of which aspects of its interactions to work on, and the new agreed upon working modes can be tested and adjusted in the next manoeuvre, straightway. And the coach can go along with the team in analysing the just experienced situation and its parallelism in the corporate environment. Everything becomes immediate, continuous and very fast: the awareness about the challenges of the team, the definition of the rules to overcome that challenge, and the experimentation with the newly defined working modes.

The effect of this team session is that powerful because it is a stunning experience, it really puts the team outside its comfort zone, and in this demanding situation the really best of the team is called in, there is no place for procrastination and no place to hide. In this challenging environment, is where the untapped potential of the team arises in all its strength.



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The effects of the session are immediate; as it is essential for the team to work together in a functioning fashion from the first second, it demands top performance in teamwork, and there is a direct carry-over into the office, because the team skills needed are exactly the same on board and on land.



Another very important aspect of the team session on board is how lasting the effects are. The shared sense of accomplishment creates a very strong bond among the team members; it easily becomes a lifetime bond. A typical comment after this session is: "I've got to know more about my workmates in the last 4 hours, than in the last 15 years with them". The facts that it is part of a complete team coaching process contribute to make the effects and learnings lasting.

An example illustrating these aspects of amplification in the effects, acceleration of changes and permanence of the improvements: a passage organised for a manufacturer of jet engines. There were two departments willing to improve their cooperation, willing to operate as one only team.

The team members of both departments have been already within a coaching process, and in the middle of the process, the outdoor session on-board was included.

The targets of the team for the coaching process were to optimise the cooperation between departments, to improve the communication and synergy among them, and to develop a common plan of projects.

According to the team members, the turning point of the coaching process was, as a matter of fact, the coaching session on board. In that session the challenges of the team were clearly identified and new team rules were defined and

tested on the spot. The client team reported remarkable improvements in the information flow, in the self-awareness, in the team cohesion, and in the achievement of its corporate targets.

Apart from the direct feedback from the client, the progress was as well measured by assessing the team at the beginning and at the end of the process with a set of tests, and comparing the results. There were the tests of Lencioni (the five dysfunctions of the team), McClelland (motivational needs), Belbin (roles of the team), and Thomas-Kilmann (conflict modes). Comparing results of those tests at the beginning and after the coaching process, there were measured remarkable improvements in team functionality, in orientation to action, in affiliation, and in conflict resolution.

Considering all above mentioned, one can conclude that incorporating an outdoor session on a sailing yacht within a coaching process accelerates, strengthens and consolidates the effectiveness of the team coaching intervention.



ABOUT MARIO GONZÁLEZ FORRELLAD

Born in Barcelona, he is presently based in Germany. He speaks fluently five languages. He holds a master's degree in mechanical engineering, a master's in business administration (MBA), and a master degree in executive coaching. He is furthermore a yachting sailor.

During his international career, he managed consulting projects for industrial companies in twenty different countries, located in Europe, North America, South America, Middle East, South East Asia and Far East. Merging his sailing, coaching and management consulting backgrounds, he integrated executive coaching sessions on board of sailing yachts, achieving excellent results in the cohesion of the client teams.