PEER-GROUP COACHING

Virtual and Face-to-Face

A GUIDE FOR BUSINESS LEADERS

COMPACT VERSION

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You downloaded the COMPACT VERSION and reduced version of the original book PEER-GROUP COACHING which can be found on Amazon. This compact version is sufficient to set-up peer-groups for coaching in your organisation. If you are a leader and you are part of a peer-group for coaching, this compact version will be sufficient to guide you well. The full and complete book adds more detail on this unique coaching technique and discusses additionally:

- Defining PGC from other forms of coaching
- Defining PGC from Action Learning and Experiential Learning
- History of PGC
- PGC in Leadership Development
- Matching: who works best together?
- Evaluating PGCs
- Implementation for practice
- Learning in PGC

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The virus changed the business landscape. COVID-19 changed the way we communicate from face-to-face to virtual. While this statement is not entirely true, we can observe that virtual communication technology is getting more advanced and easier to use and we can see that many meetings that have required a physical presence are being held in the virtual space. Next to the advance in technology, it is globalisation that drives this trend. Colleagues or peers are dispersed all over the world. Virtual communication is the only logical way to stay sufficiently connected. And not surprisingly, virtual solutions offer advantages that can be used in business' favour. In times of crisis and beyond it is no wonder that human connection becomes vital for psychological health and business performance. Peer-Group Coaching offers a way to connect peers and others on a deep, trustful and emotional level. The Harvard Business Review study "Roaring Out of Recession" revealed that after the Great Recession, 9% of organisations thrived, 74% survived, and 17% died. What did the companies that thrived do differently? They didn't sit tight and wait for the good old times to reappear, instead they adopted an entrepreneurial mindset and used the crisis to spark innovation. Peer-Group Coaching is the key to building an entrepreneurial culture in the midst of need. It creates the necessary psychological safety and gives the necessary space for problem solving and opportunity creation.

Peer-Group Coaching is a form of reciprocal coaching, where 3 to 6 group members coach each other on business and personal issues without the support of an expert, external facilitator or coach.

Some years ago, as partial fulfilment of the requirements of the award of Doctor of Coaching and Mentoring, I chose to research the topic of Peer-Group Coaching (PGC) to ultimately understand how business leaders learn in peer-group coaching. Since then, my company Change, Leadership & Partners. Ltd., our trainers and educators set up countless face-to-face and virtual Peer-Group Coachings. Many of these PGCs worked well and helped leaders to learn and to develop. Some of these PGCs failed and participants did not make good use of this unique format. This book sheds light on PGC; how to set-up groups, how to run groups for coaching and how participants can learn best in this unique environment.

My interest in conducting this study and writing this book grew from both my professional practice and my academic interest in leadership development approaches, particularly various forms of coaching employed to increase the performance of business leaders. PGC presented itself as a cost-effective method to provide the benefits of coaching without the need to match coaches with leaders or schedule coaching appointments.

Usually, a group of three to six leaders is first trained in how to apply the PGC method and, following this, meets periodically in PGC sessions. In these sessions, participants discuss and work on pressing issues and problems in an organised fashion using professional coaching tools. In PGC, one member takes the role of the coachee while the remaining group members take the coach role. By applying a coaching skillset, participants help each other to find solutions and learn from experience.

This coaching method particularly intrigued me because I could see the advantage of teaching a group of executive leaders a certain skillset and processes, so that they could coach themselves, achieving individual benefits, without the need of further intervention from an external trainer or coach.

Coaching without the help of an external expert would be advantageous, as peers could come together for coaching without aligning their diaries with that of an expert. External coaches would not need to become familiar with an organisation's culture and peculiarities and PGC could be initiated quickly and whenever needed, and without the additional cost for external facilitation.

My company, Change, Leadership & Partners. (CLP), has been working with the leadership development 'peer group' method for years in combination with leadership development programmes. The intention in working with peer groups is to increase the interaction of (non-competing) leaders from different functions and divisions.

CLP sets up groups of peers and encourages them to interact with each other during and between corporate training modules. The stated goals are an increase in self-awareness, a higher ability for self-management and decision making and, first and foremost, a transfer of learning from seminars and coaching into behaviour change.

At CLP we constantly improve the PGC method. We have changed group size, processes and intentions. We run groups virtually or face-to-face, and sometimes both in one PGC process. Some groups focus more on problem solving, some on social interaction, while others 'coach' each other. We started to introduce coaching techniques while developing the peer group method and learned that non-judgemental peer groups that coached each other, using simple coaching techniques worked better than others. Most of the peer groups worked successfully together, some not. Most leaders reported collaboration among peers, friendship, increased learning and great value.

Practitioners increasingly employ PGC in business, but PGC is diversely understood and practiced. This might result in different uses of PGC and potentially undesirable outcomes. Ineffective use of PGC might waste organisational resources such as time and money, and might harm the coaching reputation. These differing PGC approaches and outcomes suggested that the quality of learning in peer-coaching groups can be improved.

With the purpose of improving the quality of learning in PGC in mind, I turned to research on the development of leaders and PGC. Most peer coaching literature concentrates on impact and effectiveness, particularly studying pairs, rather than groups coaching each other within the group.

For this study, I conducted focus groups and interviews in order to explore the processes of peer-group coaching and to investigate individual aspects of learning in peer-group coaching. My research established that through PGC, leaders learn through information sharing, various forms of self-reflection and emotional reactions. Peer matching, group-dynamics, and specific peer-group coaching processes are factors that shape learning through influencing the learning environment. Psychological factors, such as trust and respect among peers, openness, empathy, and motivation were also identified as inter-connected with the learning experience. The results of the learning from peer-group coaching were manifested in new behaviour in leaders' daily work.

The purpose of this book is to apply my research and practical insights to provide you with the tools and knowledge to implement peer-group coaching within your organization and among your leaders. I will describe

key findings from my research and pair it with real life examples and practical suggestions on how to make this work for your business.

Introduction

"Feedback? I spoke to my boss only twice last year!"

In my work as a business consultant and leadership trainer I converse regularly with business leaders and executives from different kinds of industries. The higher leaders are assigned in the organisational hierarchy, the less feedback they receive from direct reports and colleagues. This is a phenomenon consistent across industries.

Top leaders have very little opportunity to receive feedback that could potentially contribute to their personal development. Feedback can be integral to the development of new behaviours and leadership skills. Feedback also plays an important role in improving performance by motivating individuals and leading them to correct their performance strategies.

One approach to overcoming the lack of feedback for leadership development is 'peer-group coaching' (PGC), which brings together leaders, here called peers, who do not usually work together but share similar professional and leadership challenges. PGC allows leaders to receive feedback, facilitate reflection and gives the opportunity to interact with each other on different business as well as personal issues in a secure and confidential learning environment.

Not surprising, as the focus on supporting leader development and quality leadership has increased in recent years, so too has the interest in PGC.

In this light PGC could be seen as one of the few coaching methods for leadership development that aims to achieve trustful and long-lasting connections among a diverse group of members for professional as well as personal development. Further, this coaching method transfers the responsibility for learning to the learner, in pursuit of developing better learners and transformational leaders.

One distinct feature of PGC is its ability to enable such potentially close and long-lasting relationships in a private business environment. Leaders explained proudly on many occasions, for example, that their peer-group

for coaching still existed one year after finishing their leadership development programme, where leaders coached each other with the help of PGC.

Who is this book for?

Peer-group coaching research for business leader development is limited, as mentioned above, so there is very little to no information on how to apply PGC to business leaders. This can result in the incorrect use of peer-group coaching and a disappointing coaching experience for its members. This is the very reason why I created this book – to provide you with the information, knowledge and tools to implement PGC within your organisation and among your business leaders.

This book can be used by HR and leadership development professionals, as well as external coaches, to enhance leaders' personal and business growth.

I am curious about what you will gain from this free book so your feedback and comments are highly appreciated. Please write to gottschalk@clp.world.

Introduction to Peer-Group Coaching

"Executive coaching is one of the fastest growing executive development processes in adult learning. According to the International Coach Federation IBISWorld estimates:

"The business coaching industry revenue increased to $15 billion in 2019 at an annualized rate of 5.6%. In 2015, the estimated global revenue from coaching was $2.356 billion."

Coaching is a technique to help executives adapt to change more efficiently and effectively. It provides leaders with practical development, aligning the outcomes with the strategic objectives of an organisation. At this point it is necessary to distinguish PGC from other types of coaching to

avoid confusion. I will intentionally omit "coaching" or executive coaching, where a qualified professional, the coach, works with an individual (usually an executive) to help them gain self-awareness, clarify goals, achieve their development objective, etc. Instead, I will discuss the differences of the more unfamiliar forms of coaching and learning in pairs or groups: peer-group coaching, peer coaching, group coaching, team coaching and action-learning.

Defining PGC from other forms of coaching

Peer-group coaching is distinct from other coaching models, including peer coaching, because a group of peers coach each other reciprocally. Coaches are not external experts, but inexperienced coaches and peers.

Peer-group coaching is a form of reciprocal coaching, where 3 to 6 group members coach each other on business and personal issues without the support of an expert, external facilitator or coach.

Peers switch between the role of the coach and coachee so that a participant is always - at least once - the coachee and the coach. The duration of the coaching can vary, depending on the group's needs. Groups can meet for PGC on a regular basis, face-to-face or virtually via telephone conference or web conferencing software.

Group dynamics in PGC is another unique differentiator from the usual dyadic coaching relationship, as they typically accelerate the transformation process of the participants.

PGC provides learners with the opportunity for human development, promoting desirable change for both the coachee and other stakeholders. Problems are not only addressed in PGC, but also cases, needs, feelings, solutions to a former problem or just thoughts about the patterns of issues.

In many forms of coaching, a facilitator or coach is responsible for the learning process and encourages the group to implement identified solutions. However, the intention of PGC is to support the coachee with the help of peers (coaches) to enable the coachee to find their own solution. Implementation of a possibly identified solution might be chosen by the

coachee, however it is not essential and it is left to the coachee to choose the course of action.

Impact, effectiveness and benefits

The UK Department of Education endorses the use of peer coaching, as does the US Department of Education, which has a long history of using peer support and coaching for teacher development.

Several PGC participants shared their benefits of the peer coaching experience:

- Received positive feedback
- Collected advice
- Improved practice
- Shared experience
- Developed self-confidence
- Less intimidation during the observation process

Peer-group coaching can also:

- Provide a supportive environment conducive to professional development
- Improve professionalism
- Contribute to the development of openness to accepting professional criticism
- Enable individuals to become more accountable and committed
- Develop listening skills
- Enable participants to appreciate the benefits of teamwork
- Provide protection from an increase in psychological distress during a stressful period
- Provide a positive impact on those who coach in addition to those who receive the coaching
- Provide reciprocal benefits to all parties taking part

Ultimately, PGC is effective in enhancing critical thinking and metacognition and can support the development of managerial competency. PGC is beneficial to both coachee and coach in a peer coaching

relationship and ultimately to the organisation employing such coaching methods.

How to start a Peer-Group Coaching session?

Take three, up to six leaders, lock them in a room and tell them to coach each other. Done. Well, not quite.

We can assume that in this scenario there might not be the required trust among the members to share sensitive topics. And, what is the process that is to follow? What skills are needed to have a successful PGC? What is conducive for learning and what is damaging to the session and particpant's relationships?

In my research, the peer groups for coaching were formed by participants in a leadership development programme with more than two training modules, where PGC sessions were practiced between modules. To distinguish PGC and to familiarise delegates with the approach, PGC was introduced in a six-step approach, which is shown below. This approach was designed on the basis of previously designed peer coaching 'frameworks' and shows how participants started their PGC process. It is important to note this initial approach, as it shows the participants' first exposure to PGC. All participants in the leadership development initiative were introduced to PGC in the same way. Participants experienced, for example, the same introduction to the coaching method, they were matched in the same way to form groups, and peers practiced the same coaching skills. Groups, however, changed their PGC processes later in the process according to their particular needs and experienced learning in PGC differently.

1. Introduction to Peer-Group Coaching
   PGC is defined and distinguished from other kinds of coaching. Participants know theoretically what PGC is.

2. Matching: who works best together?
   Peers are matched in groups. Peers assess each other for personal

compatibility, sustainability of partnership, and possible best diversity.

3. PGC processes and planning

PGC processes are defined and planned according to the group's needs. The peer group knows what to do.

4. Coaching skills

Coaching skills are introduced and practiced. Participants learn one coaching method (similar to GROW) and how to phrase coaching questions.

5. Psychological safety

Psychological safety is discussed and agreed on: how to build trust, openness, confidentiality, how to give non-judgmental and non-evaluative feedback, and how to conduct non-threatening discussions.

6. Contracting

Contracting the upcoming group support. Participants agree on how they want to work together.

PGC process and planning

Seven guidelines or principles that have been used to assist PGC and their outcomes are subsequently reviewed and discussed:

1. Peer coaching environment
2. Formal training
3. Formality of planning and contracting
4. Matching of peers and confidentiality agreement
5. Feedback
6. Reciprocity
7. Assessment

Coaching environment

The first principle of peer coaching is creating a coaching environment in which everyone can see themselves as one another's coach. Peer-group coaching is more effective as an on-going part of an overall culture rather than a one-time occurrence. This intangible coaching environment (coaching culture) might be one key element of the success of peer coaching. Peer coaching is built on confidentiality, honesty and trust, so as to achieve self-disclosure and the development of coach and coachee.

Individuals who are made to attend programmes tend to be ambivalent about the process at best, and frequently argumentative. The condition for peer-group coaching is that peers participate "whole-heartedly" in helping themselves and one another. Business leaders who are serious about building coaching programmes must provide the resources for extensive training and allow peer-group coaching participants to be trained in the use of the method.

Formal training

The second common factor in the success of peer-group coaching programmes is the provision of formal training for peer coaching participants. It is often difficult for participants to move from the evaluative mode to the coaching mode; participants need practice in providing non-evaluative, observation-based feedback. Untrained peer coaches tend to use evaluation, negative presuppositions, little paraphrasing and probing, and the use of closed-ended questions.

Reciprocity

There are two basic forms of peer coaching; coaching by experts and reciprocal coaching. The former is characterised by the premise that individuals who possess a certain level of expertise can provide assistance to others by coaching.

Reciprocal peer coaching on the other hand implies a reciprocal relationship: 'you coach me, I coach you'. The role of the coach is as a co-facilitator of the process, and the role of the coachee is to discuss their learning objectives. Once the learning focus changes towards the needs of the other party, roles are reversed.

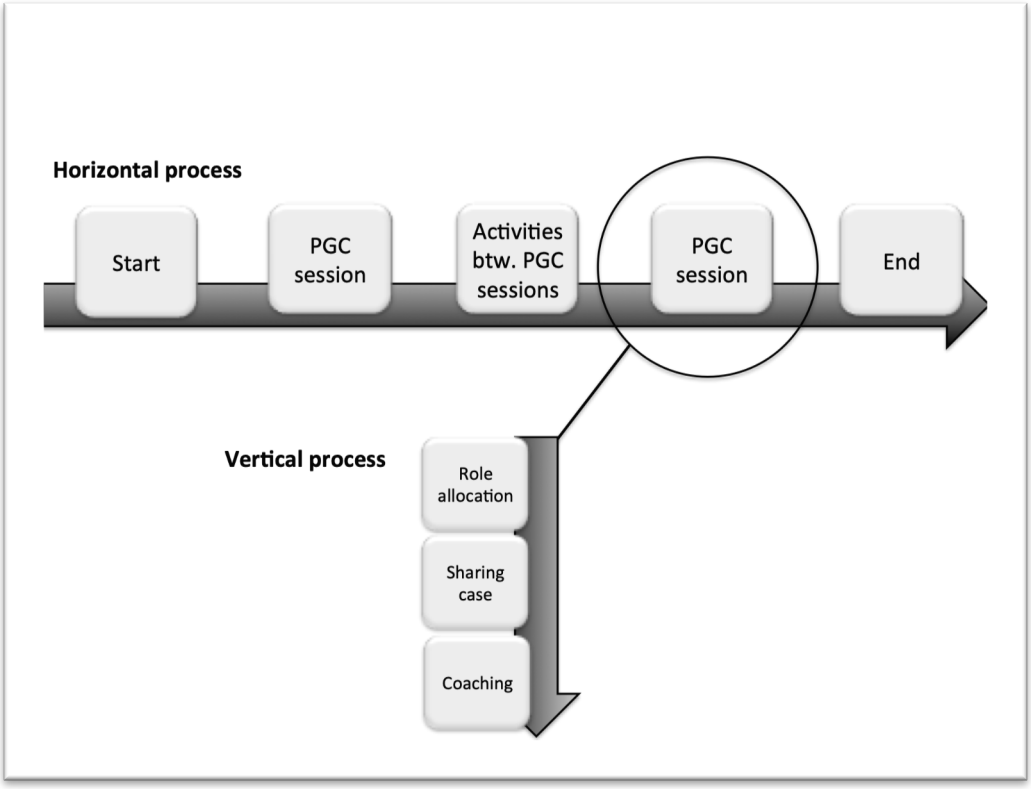
To prevent an imbalance from developing, all participants should over time have equivalent participation in both roles of coach and coachee. This maintains the level of perceived reciprocity and equality between the participants, thus maintaining the dynamic that enhances the prospects of on-going commitment and learning. Reciprocal peer coaching is consistently more effective than peer coaching by experts because reciprocal peer coaching is a win-win situation.

The processes within one PGC session

Two types of processes in PGC are identified in this study: 'vertical' and 'horizontal'. Vertical processes describe the development within one PGC session (role allocation and rotation, coaching, time to reflect, etc.),

while horizontal processes describe PGC from start to end (activities between meetings, frequency of meetings, duration of PGC).

The terms 'vertical' and 'horizontal' processes were coined while facing misunderstandings in focus groups when participants described different PGC processes using the generic term process. Vertical and horizontal processes affect the learning environment of PGC and hence individual learning.



Horizontal and vertical processes in PGC

Vertical processes

The so-called 'vertical processes' describe those processes within one PGC session. For example, during PGC, participants take on different roles. Participants contribute their own cases, which they would like to improve, in the role of the coachee. While one participant takes on the role of the coachee, the other members will be in the role of the coach.

The roles of the coachee and coach tend to be experienced differently. For most participants the role as coachee is easier to take on and is perceived as more comfortable:

"Taking on the role of coachee felt easy to me. It was really easy to open up and I have lots of examples and I can bring plenty of topics into the coaching process, so I feel comfortable being in the coachee role." -PGC participant

The coach role, in comparison, can be more challenging, as it requires dealing with a problem or situation brought into the session by the respective coachee:

"Well, the coach role causes me more insecurity than the coachee role. In the coachee role, I know or believe that I am the expert, and can confidently describe my problem. With the coach role, I first have to understand the coachee´s issue; so, it is a more difficult role for me." -PGC Participant

The role of coach demands, by definition, the use of coaching skills such as asking coaching questions or 'powerful questions'. 'Powerful questions', described later, are questions that respondents have found to be especially powerful or useful.

Reciprocity is known to be a process whereby an individual feels obligated to return an action, whether it was originally wanted or not. Taking the coach role stimulates interest in learning something new, allowing for self-reflection and the realisation of learning. But similarly, taking the coach role gives a feeling of contribution, that is, one of giving back. Thus, role changes and learning facilitate a feeling of reciprocity and contribution while allowing participants to learn from another perspective and give back to the session.

Assigned Time for Reflection

Another common vertical process is having assigned time for reflection in PGC sessions. During the coaching sessions participants find assigned time to contemplate and to reflect. Having assigned time helps participants to think about their actions and selves. Assigned time describes a point in time, such as a fixed date in participant schedules, where presence for PGC is 'mandatory' and other work-related duties are not the focus.

Since PGC is considered as part of the job, members can participate in PGC without feeling guilty about not doing something work related. Some participants may find it helpful to have allocated time for reflection on personal or business issues specifically without being driven by the aim of solving a task or being under pressure to achieve an objective:

"It is helpful that we have this organised frame, because you are forced to familiarise with it and you have to take time to reflect. "-PGC Participant

"I think what is helpful about it is not avoiding the madness, but just taking time for it. For these topics. Working with topics and having appointments on a regular basis was very helpful." -PGC Participant

Development of Skills

The third concept, the use and constant development of coaching skills during PGC, is a necessary condition for being an effective coach. Participants can practice using and applying the skills learned in formal training, as well as the use of powerful questions during each session:

"I feel successful and see my learning develop with the help of these questions. These techniques really forced me to come to the point. This made me learn how to use very analytical questioning to gain a new perspective." -PGC Participant

Horizontal processes

Horizontal flow or processes in PGC are the processes that occur in each group from the point of setting up PGC until its closing, including the steps in between coaching sessions. These can include activities between PGCs, confidentiality, trust, and frequency and modus of the PGC sessions.

Social Activities

Participants find social activities as useful unintended consequences of PGC. Participants that end up planning and experiencing social activities, such as having lunch or dinner together, visiting each other's site and work place, or planning evening activities beyond the PGC schedule, find these events extremely important.

These events build familiarity and increased trust among members. Subsequently, this familiarity and trust help to obtain and maintain a feeling of comfort during PGC. This comfort that develops among peer group members is based on the feeling that members have the possibility of discussing their issues in confidence with like-minded peers.

Confidentiality

Confidentiality is essential to all PGC relationships. In order to support a trusting relationship and for optimum performance and maintenance during the relationship, confidentiality is needed. A lack of confidentiality and trust can lead to reluctance to open up or can lead to missed opportunities. The content of the peer coaching relationship must remain confidential in order to achieve an honest and trustful learning relationship. Even in instances where such confidentiality was only suggested, not mandated by the trainer, all groups and members unanimously adopted the principle of keeping PGC content confidential:

"Everybody was open, there were no secret topics - it was our space and we knew it was confidential. So, it was really a free space where you can say exactly what you think." -PGC Participant

Trust

Confidentiality is an important facilitator for trust; trust not only among participants, but towards the PGC method. Participants tend to share sensitive, personal and business information with each other that requires a high level of trust. This trust level is typically reached due to the nature of the group formation in an environment that assures each participant that others can be trusted.

Meeting and Session Frequency

Another factor influencing the learning environment is the frequency of peer group coaching sessions. There is no outline or instructions about how often groups should meet, but frequent meetings tend to build more trust and retain the rhythm in PGC from start to finish. Not only the frequency of meetings, but also how participants meet (face-to-face, via video conference, telephone conference), is very important:

"If we see each other twice a year, I think it is difficult because you need trust and feedback: What happened? What did you experience? What happened to you, how did it develop? This cannot be created in a half-year rhythm." -PGC Participant

Virtual and face-to-face PGC sessions

Most participants will attest that face-to-face meetings are more helpful than virtual ones. Traditional face-to-face meetings are more effective and tend to elicit feelings of empathy and of being emotionally close to the interactional partner. Face-to-face meetings might be more honest, as we are benefitting from subtle cues, such as facial expressions and tone of voice. Although, praising the physical presence of coaching participants, virtual peer-group coachings tend to work well when done with a smaller number of participants.

There are several obvious benefits to virtual meetings, such as:

- time and cost effectiveness,
- just-in-time conversations,
- participation from anywhere in the world, and
- sharing of a variety of information in real time with all participants

One other difference between face-to-face and virtual relationships is the hypothesis that self-disclosure tends to occur much faster. Reasons for this might be the anonymity associated with online relationships and the reduction of so called gates or barrieres such as appearance, mannerisms and factors such as age and ethnicity.

The 'hyperpersonal model' of virtual relationships suggests that, as self-disclosure in online relationships happens earlier than in face-to-face ones, relationships quickly become more intense and feel more intimate and meaningful.

It is too early to select a clear winner of PGC effectiveness comparing face-to-face or virtual meetings. Our experience shows that virtual coaching sessions are working well with three participants, adequate technical equipment (microphone, speaker, camera), video conferencing software (like Zoom) and the following of the PGC process.

Customised Suggestions

Participants of PGC typically customise their PGC processes to accommodate their particular business situation and preferences. Some suggestions for consideration include: group size, social meetings, PGC diary, and task cohesion.

Group Size

It is important to not overload peer groups with too many members. PGC should be set up with a maximum of six members and a minimum of three members, with an optimal group size of around four members in face-to-face settings, due to issues of accessibility and dynamics in the peer groups, and three to four in virtual settings.

Social Meetings

Groups should be encouraged to additionally meet outside PGC. Social engagements, such as dinners, lunches or organised activities are important and even crucial for building trust in the group. In practice, PGC participants are likely to benefit if trainers or coaches introduce these gatherings as part of the PGC meetings. Adding to the documented advantages of reciprocity in PGC, the responsibility of organising social activities could be rotated among peer group members. Although social activities are not exactly part of the PGC method, they should be added as a positive benefit whenever possible. While we are more likely to think of social meetings as physical meeting of people, virtual social meetings and activities also have benefits. A simple call to 'check-in' or a virtual conference without an agenda with the aim to 'just' chat, was recommended and seen as helpful.

PGC Diary

PGC is best initiated and finalised with the help of experts to set the appropriate actions so that leaders can learn effectively. After the initiation of PGC, peers work independently without the help of an external expert. A PGC diary that is designed by participants, including fixed and agreed PGC sessions over the course of months, as well as fixed and agreed social

activities, such as lunches, dinners, virtual 'hangout' meetings and possible company visits, allow leaders to reflect and to learn in 'assigned time' for reflection.

PGC sessions should be regular to allow trust and increase openness, motivation, empathy and mutual respect. Participants should agree on PGC's reciprocal arrangement, making sure that role rotation is equal and frequent for coaching as well as for organising coaching sessions and social activities. PGC sessions should preferably be face-to-face. It is recommended that at least the first session is face-to-face to deepen trust and become comfortable with the coaching method with following sessions going virtual.

Task Cohesion

Group dynamics, such as task cohesion, facilitate group cohesiveness, and these positively influence learning in PGC. Task cohesion in the form of mutually agreed learning objectives should be part of the start of each PGC session. It is recommended that the focus be on two forms of tasks:

i) the organisational task in following the PGC process, and

ii) the individual task or objective that is given by the coachee at the beginning of each coaching session.

The first task could be agreed upon in the form of a contract or agreement that is consented to by the PGC group members at the end of the PGC-introduction with the help of the expert. It should contain procedural, psychological, and process agreements.

Requirements of PGC

Peer coaching programmes demand (a) emotional support, are based on (b) communication, dialogue and reflection, require a (c) climate of trust, honesty and authenticity, and (d) equality among group members.

Emotional support

Emotional support is difficult to find in business leaders who are ranked highly in the organisational hierarchy, where it is difficult to get

feedback, and 'charismatic leadership' and performance is linked closely to effective feedback. Peer coaching involves moving beyond superficial networking towards becoming 'critical friends'; peer coaching provides a unique peer learning opportunity that creates emotional support which is fundamental for leaders' learning because of the related interplay of learning and emotions.

Communication, dialogue and reflection

Peer coaching produces a learning space which becomes a neutral territory. This space is for reflection, discussions, dialogue and feedback and it develops awareness of personal behaviour and uncovers underlying needs, mental models, and belief structures that affect performance. Peer coaching offers an ideal structure for reflection. Exploring possibilities and alternatives, and discovering new insights helps to boost the coachee's self-confidence and self-efficacy.

Climate of trust, honesty and authenticity

Trust, which grows over time between peers, is a psychological condition for peer coaching. Trust indicates a shift towards a high risk, low blame culture that is an empowering factor in peer learning:

"By building a professional rapport and getting to know each other at a deeper level, it broke down any barriers to open and honest communication and feedback." -PGC Participant

Peer coaching relationships should attempt to adopt a stance of unconditional acceptance that enables vulnerability and curiosity in order to be successful. Trust requires all partners to be honest and open with each other and with themselves, so as to raise delicate issues.

Equality among group members

Perhaps one of the most influential peer coaching conditions is the lack of status differential in the peer relationship that supports more self-disclosure and discussions of learning initiatives and challenges. Since peers are at equal level, it is more likely that leaders will open up and discuss delicate issues rather than, for example, disclose sensitive topics about their direct reports or boss. Maintaining equality in status is central

to the success of peer coaching. Peer coaching communication is non-evaluative and that possible feedback is non-threatening so as to build necessary trust between coach and coachee. The development of trust has been made possible partially through the establishment of certain agreements at the beginning. These agreements, such as confidentiality of meeting content, allowed the initial development of trust among members.

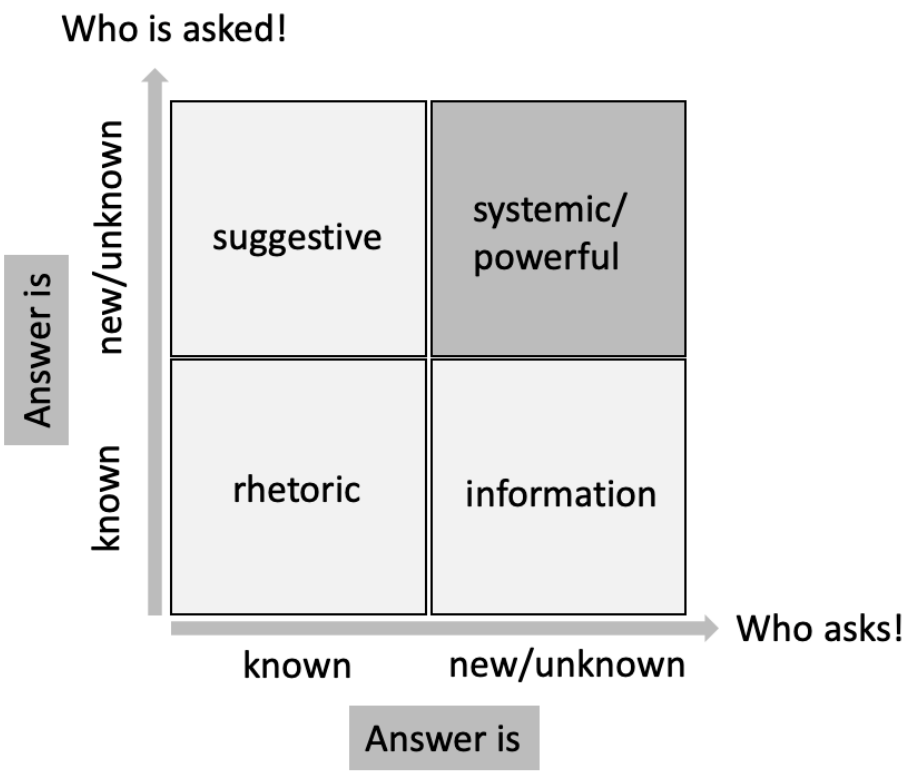
Coaching in a group

Group dynamics in PGC can be seen as a unique differentiator from the usual dyadic coaching relationship (one coach and one coachee), as they are claimed to accelerate the transformation process of the participants. Researcher Kets de Vries explains in one of his articles why working in groups for coaching can be extremely effective:

"Group experiences [in group coaching]…are journeys of self-discovery. If done in a safe environment, telling stories about significant events and situations...(it) helps an individual work through internal conflicts and crises and arrive at meaningful, personal life integration. The acceptance and support given by other members of the group help instil a sense of hope and change for the future. Listening…to others' stories of their dysfunctional patterns helps participants recognize their own. This…paves the way for cognitive and emotional restructuring."

The most powerful tool to master in coaching is to ask the right question!

There are numerous coaching processes and tools on the market. Processes such as GROW, COACH, RAAGAA, etc. are helpful in guiding the coach from start to finish. Many tools are helpful that focus on values, goals, biases, risk, opportunities, communication, etc. Though nothing beats asking the right question at the right time. Many participants in PGC experienced tools and processes as distracting and unhelpful. Their concentration was with the coachee and in the moment and tools often distracted more than helped. In my work with leaders in PGC I have found that asking the right questions was the most important skill to possess. At CLP we use a simple matrix to explain how to ask questions and when to use them:



Kind of questions in coaching

Rhetorical question:

A rhetorical question is a figure of speech and in my experience is best for opening a conversation, making small talk or setting the mood.

I personally love the English for their skill in asking rhetorical questions about the weather: Isn't it a lovely day?

Or coming home with bags of shopping to have my wife ask me: "Honey, have you been shopping?", knowing exactly that I am just back from the supermarket.

In coaching and PGC rhetorical questions are of no use.

Informative questions:

This is the type of question mostly asked by leaders and one that many associate with coaching questions, however, I could not disagree more. Informative questions ask about a past situation to gain information about what has happened. This might be helpful in order to find out what the coachee has done, said, how they responded and reacted in a certain situation. Here some examples:

- "What has happened?"
- "What did you say?"
- "What was suggested, said, done, etc.?"

All these questions are helpful to increase the understanding of a situation; though they might shed little light on a possible solution. Also they will not help for reflection or any other development.

Suggestive questions:

Suggestive questions are mean! Wikipedia writes: "A suggestive question is one that implies that a certain answer should be given in response, or falsely presents a presupposition in the question as accepted fact. Such a question distorts the memory thereby tricking the person into answering in a specific way that might or might not be true or consistent with their actual feelings, and can be deliberate or unintentional."

Here some examples:

- ‘‘Don't you think this was wrong?“
- ‘‘Wouldn‘t it be better to do it this way?“
- ‘‘Isn’t idea 1 better than idea 2?“

There are various types of suggestive questions. Though in a nutshell, they are manipulative and propose a direction, thought or idea rather than elicit it. Suggestive questions have no place in a coaching session and, they have no place in leadership whatsoever!

Powerful or systemic questions

Powerful questions are unique. Here, we are asking questions that require good thought as the coach nor the coachee knows the answer. This type of questions often trigger something new. Something to think about, to reflect. Participants usually dont find it easy to ask systemic questions but report out that using powerful questions was the most helpful to any PGC.

Please find below a small list of powerful questions:

Resource oriented questions

Treat problems as challenges to be dealt with, not in a superficial way but rather from the perspective that the person involved in the challenge (coachee) is the key to solving it. This person may already have the solution but not be aware of it. With resource-oriented questions, the coach can support that person in discovering his/her personal strengths and abilities to deal with their challenge.

- What shall remain as it is?
- What would you like to maintain?
- What is the positive side of the problem? Or: What would be different after the problem has been solved?
- What effects would that difference have?
- How did you cope with the current situation until now?
- How did you deal with the problem? What was helpful? What was not? How did you manage to keep the problem as it is without getting worse? Who supported you in coping with the problem and who will in the future?

- How did others manage to keep the problem as it is without getting worse?
- Who else could be helpful? How?

Exception questions

Exception questions are especially helpful to open the door to possible solutions by highlighting the difference between the challenge existing and disappearing. They can be future-oriented about a life without the challenge, or backwards-oriented looking at how the coachee has dealt with or tried to solve the situation in the past.

- When do you not have the problem?
- What is the difference compared to situations in which you have the problem?
- What has to happen in order to increase the frequency of the exceptions?
- Who except for yourself could contribute to keeping the frequency of the problem lower?
- Assuming the exceptions would be more frequent, what would you perceive differently?
- What have you done in order to solve the problem? What helped at least to some extent?
- How did you treat comparable problems in the past?
- What have you learned from previous experience that could be helpful in this situation?

Circular questions

These questions focus on changing perspectives and require the other person to answer questions from the perspective of other people involved/impacted by the challenge. Use these questions to get the person to put themselves into the position or thought processes of others (e.g. the coach asks the coachee what a third person would say or think). What the coachee says may not necessarily be what that third person really thinks or says but it can open up further areas to be discussed between coach and coachee.

- If your colleague attended this interview, how would they describe the problem?
- How would other centrally affected people give account of the chain of events?
- What is this person likely to say?
  You have known each other for a long time. Guess.
- What would your main competitor advise you to do?
- What effects would it have on your colleagues if you and XY decided to change? Assuming the team would decide to change? How would the superior Y perceive this change? What would their reaction be?
  What would the effects be on Z?

Hypothetical questions

These questions focus mainly on the future and allow coachees to open up new angles or solutions in their mind. It's less about concretely solving a problem and more about evaluating possible ways to act differently with regard to it. In describing possible scenarios, the coachee visualises how their challenge could be dealt with and so start to think about possible solutions. These types of questions encourage the coachee's own creativity and initiative. They are also useful to quickly evaluate the potential success of possible approaches, as well as its future consequences on others.

- Let us assume you would react differently (e.g. calm and considerate) next time. What effects would that have?
- What would have to happen in order to convince XY to react differently?
  Who would first notice the change?
  What would they do/say/think?

Scaling questions

These questions are used to understand things that are difficult or impossible to measure objectively. They consciously focus on the subjective perspective of the coachee (their satisfaction, motivation, awareness, impression, feeling, etc.). Normally, the scale is from "0" (weak) to "10" (strong). When answering, the coachee does not have to explain what "5" exactly means. Instead, the coach can focus on why only a "5" was given and what it would take to increase it to, for example, a "7". These questions

are useful to start a conversation about a topic or to recognise progress on it.

- To what extent do your objectives match the objectives of your colleagues/boss/team?
- What is the probability between 0% and 100% for reaching your desired objective?
- Assuming I can control time, what do you reckon the situation will be like in (five, twenty) year(s) from now? What would a good situation look like?
- What do you think is most realistic? Do you think so or is that your wish?

Paradoxical questions

These are the opposite of hypothetical questions but with the same purpose. Coaches consciously use these questions to exaggerate the challenge of the coachee in order to generate new ideas and solutions. Depending on the situation, it is useful to tell the coachee that you're about to ask them a question that sounds paradoxical, to avoid irritation and keep them focused on the topic. They can be used to consciously re-live certain situations for a prescribed time (e.g. "spend the next 10 minutes complaining about X") for example to clear the air or show up own innate reactions, as this can be useful to break behavioural patterns.

- Assuming you want to deliberately worsen the situation (you obviously do not want to), what would you have to do? What would you need to think of?
- How could you sabotage the project completely? How could you bring it to its knees?
- Who could "support" you to keep the status quo? Whose company would be most "helpful"?

Miracle questions

Miracle questions are also a type of hypothetical question but they are especially useful when the coachee views the challenge as unsolvable. The focus is on allowing the coachee to imagine what the best possible situation could be and, from that perspective, to work on their resources to make it happen.

- Imagine a miracle happened tonight and the problem would be gone tomorrow. Describe the things that would change.
- Are there already times/moments, when this applies? What exactly is different?
- What would you (or others) have to do to increase the frequency of such situations?
- If we only pretend the miracle happened – can you name one or two things you would do differently in that new situation?

Psychological Safety

Psychological factors emerge on an individual level but influence the whole learning process and play a crucial role in enabling PGC. Psychological factors affect participant behaviour and contribute to the inception of a positive learning environment. Although these factors are described below discretely, they are inherently inter-connected. The most common psychological factors that emerge during PGC are: trust, openness, motivation, empathy and respect.

1. Trust - as a base and all-influencing concept
2. Openness - as a catalyst for a positive atmosphere
3. Motivation - as an eagerness to attend sessions and to learn
4. Empathy - as a factor of inclusivity
5. Respect - as a psychological stance towards peers

Trust

Trust is a necessary foundation that enables cooperation between participants and enhances the learning process. Participants tend to 'open up' - and facilitated by the trust among the group – tend to take risks and begin discussing problems, issues or ideas that are often not shared with others. Thus, any trust-related barriers are lifted and 'psychological safety', a climate in which people are comfortable being (and expressing) themselves, evolves during the sessions.

Everyone opened up and presented their problems, nobody was hiding behind imaginary walls, everyone just said openly "Hey, I have a problem, I don't know how to proceed." And if you open yourself up at this point and you see that everyone also does so, then trust develops. -PGC Participant

Having formed a trustworthy relationship means that participants can also speak about sensitive issues, facilitating intimacy among the group members:

Yes, very confidential and intimate, where leaking would have had consequences. You have to rely on the fact that all things stay in the room or in the heads of the people participating and I experience it like that in practice. Extreme levels of trust. -PGC Participant

The development of trust is made possible partially through the establishment of certain rules at the beginning of the session, as mentioned in previous chapter. These rules, such as confidentiality of meeting content, allows for the initial development of trust among members:

At the very beginning of the group, it was clear that we had to define the rules and it was really respectful. -PGC Participant

Trust in groups tends to be initially paradoxically high in a business context. It has been theorized that trust is gradually built over time, and trust in PGC has been reported to grow over time; however, PGC members tend to trust each other almost immediately.

Initial trust forms in the following ways:

- Through an individual's disposition to trust
- Faith in humanity
- Institution-based trust
- Trusting beliefs
- Tendency to be willing to depend on others

Institution-based trust

Institution-based trust means that one believes impersonal structures support one's likelihood for success in a given situation. Institution-based trust at the beginning of a relationship may be high because of situation normality and structural assurance. Here, situational normality is the

understanding that a situation is non-threatening, whereas structural assurance is the belief that success is likely because contextual conditions such as contracts and regulations are in place.

Although the PGC situation is at first unfamiliar, PGC members can assume that the situation is normal and non-threatening through a shared organisational membership and structural assurance in the form of the PGC method.

Participants of PGC argue that the trust that develops ultimately allows participants to be open about their cases and decisions. Trust is merely a feeling that can be manufactured in terms of a conscious decision to trust. Honesty or openness, for example, in contrast to trust, is not a feeling but a behaviour that one can choose, or not choose. Conversely, one cannot choose to love or trust.

Participants taking part in PGC make the decision to take part and share their cases with each other. This decision to trust others and report a case might already be a conscious decision for openness and thus trust is experienced. The trusting feeling might consequently be a normal effect of the PGC process, since PGC requires reporting as part of its design. It is possible that the behaviour of being open and showing vulnerability inherent in the PGC design and then also showing respect to other peer-group members might in fact be behavioural triggers for the feelings of trust, motivation and empathy.

Openness

Trust is associated with another concept, that of openness:

Of course peer coaching is a matter of mutual trust, you have to be open. But openness is a result of trust. -PGC Participant

The presence of both trust and openness contributes to the development of each other. As such, they are interrelated. In this regard, the established rules, which aide in facilitating and increasing the already high levels of trust, also aide the development of openness. Once openness is reached, trust is always present as the basis on which openness can emerge and affect participant mind-sets.

A trustworthy relationship between members was therefore carried by the positive atmosphere, which emerged through this interaction of trust and openness.

Trust in mutual relation to openness and other psychological factors leads to a positive learning environment where participants abandon mental barriers. Once trust is established, the learning journey can be powerful. Some participants even describe the atmosphere as "fun" and something to really look forward to. This positive atmosphere subsequently has an effect on participants' motivation to return and work with PGC:

I have the feeling that we are all looking forward to those events. During our calls there's always a fun atmosphere. Even in difficult times we have each other and our sense of humour. -PGC Participant

PGC requires participants to share personal cases within a group of other professionals. Openness describes the willingness to openly share cases that might be embarrassing or uncomfortable and also be honest about one's opinion in such cases. Once participants begin to open up, there is a willingness to openly share experiences. This openness facilitates the exchange of ideas and experiences which is at the heart of the learning process and which is the original aim of PGC. Openness is not present immediately from the start, however. The willingness to open up to others develops gradually:

If I am taking the view of the person who has the problem, it feels very good to present the problem to someone and get it off your chest, that you have somebody you can talk to. -PGC Participant

Openness and the positive atmosphere during PGC tend to be different from daily work and participants tend to speak about the topics, which normally they would feel hesitant to share with their bosses or colleagues. Openness is the foundation for participants to feel comfortable in contributing and discussing different topics:

I think that when you have an open relationship between each other, in such case you always have a topic. -PGC Participant

Motivation

Considering such emphasis on trust and openness, it is fair to assume that without them a positive atmosphere is unlikely, and participants would not have the motivation to attend the sessions. Trust moderates the conversion of group member's motivation into group performance. Trust influences group performance indirectly by channelling the group's motivation and energy in order to achieve certain goals.

Participants take part in PGC with a motivation to exchange ideas and to learn. They come into the sessions with different concepts regarding what PGC is about and what their role will be. Participants are motivated to attend sessions because they are learning something new and feel positive about being in a place where they can openly share their problems and learn from others. Motivation and enthusiasm grow with the flow of the sessions and mutual recognition:

I was very surprised with how well it worked being in a group which I would not have consciously chosen on my own, but it worked very well. We have very different personalities and I am very enthusiastic and I think I get something additional to what I would have with the colleagues I speak to already. -PGC Participant

Motivation to learn is connected to other interrelated psychological factors such as trust and openness. These contribute to a pleasant coaching environment in which participants look forward to. This environment allows the sharing necessary for participants to contribute and come back with an intention to learn.

Participants are motivated to participate in PGC based on the coaching environment and the presence of positive associated psychological factors. Some goals participants bring to PGC tend to be diverse but mostly non-specific.

Some participants tend to be quite sceptical about PGC initially and are later surprised when they find that PGC had a positive effect. Gradually, participants learn about PGC and how the process can help them, which leads to their bringing more specific cases and goals they want to work on. Participants tend to set relevant goals with the resolution of their cases. Without a clear goal, people lack motivation in learning oriented activities.

High performance and learning goals can lead to a higher motivation and performance across many tasks to achieve performance goals, thus it is necessary for participants to understand the task they are aiming to complete. In PGC, participants are equipped with the PGC method in a seminar and learn how to use this method by applying what they had learned during the PGC session.

Motivation grows when participant proficiency and familiarity with the method also grow. Many participants who experience PGC formulate goals during PGC either through developing their case or through the coaching questions they are asked. Participant motivation for PGC is aided by the generation of goals during this process, as well as by the atmosphere of openness and trust and the potential to exchange relevant information with like-minded peers.

Empathy

Trust also helps participants to share uneasy experiences and leads to the development of empathy between a speaker and listeners and vice versa. When participants take the role of the coach, they develop a feeling of understanding while listening to other participants. They learn that there are similarities between their own and others' problems and develop mutual empathy for each other.

Empathy is an additional concept influencing the learning atmosphere. Empathy is related to the feeling that the participants are not alone, and that someone understands their situation while they also understood theirs. This empathy that develops for each other influences the group by giving participants a feeling of belonging to the group or social inclusion, thus favouring group cohesiveness:

It makes things more bearable, the problems, the challenges, when you see that you are not alone with your problems and challenges, that's a wonderful place to be in. PGC Participant

Empathy is also described when PGC participants realise they had already been in a similar situation as their counterparts. This feeling of

similarity causes empathy and a willingness to share one's own experiences:

There are suggestions or thought-provoking impulses about what you could do, or somebody says "I already had this once and I dealt with it this way".m-PGC Participant

Another form of empathy emerges when participants have already been in the coaching role and asked powerful questions. Being in the role of the coach, the participants use question techniques to help the coachee. They realise that the way they pose a question influences the emotional state of the coachee.

Emotions have to be taken into consideration when asking coaching questions during PGC. Questions asked should not only be based on logic or rationales, but sensitivity and an understanding of the emotional state of the other person. This realisation develops empathy in the coachee, but also as a form of self-development and realisation of their own predisposition to focus on more logical issues.

Empathy in PGC describes how participants develop a feeling of similarity and emotional consideration for each other. Through the exchange of similar situations, participants realise that other participants are experiencing similar issues and thus get a chance to relate to each other through their shared experiences and suggested solutions. Similarly, while taking the role of coach and relating to each other through similar situations, participants discover that for learning to happen, one has to bear in mind the emotions of those they communicate with. This concept of empathy resembles empathic and authentic listening.

Empathic listening describes a reproductive form of listening, aimed at understanding the other person's needs and suspending prejudice against the coach as helper. Authentic listening describes being completely in the present and confronting the prejudices of both coachees and coaches. This clearly describes how empathy among peer group members allows them to understand each other and learn through being exposed to each other's experience.

Respect

The development of empathy plays an important role in the mutual understanding of the participants in PGC. Empathy is linked to trust between members, as mentioned earlier, and empathy is also linked to respect among members. Respect allows the participants to develop sensitivity towards other participants. This allows them to relate to each other in a sensitive way, keeping the personality of other members in mind during their interaction.

Respect as a psychological factor describes the esteem and regard participants develop and keep for each other during PGC. Although PGC is guided by rules, such as preserving confidentiality, respecting these rules and also respecting the views of other participants is a necessary feature:

I think in PGC many things rely on mutual respect and one's willingness to listen. -PGC Participant

Respect can be found on many levels, but it is closely related to the development of empathy and trust. Empathy as a concept describes how participants learn to respect personal and emotional boundaries, and deliver, for example, coaching questions in a way that suited the situation and emotional reaction of the coachee. Respect and empathy are thus closely related. To show empathy, it is necessary to mutually respect the values, situations and emotional states of other participants.

Thus, openness and a positive atmosphere in PGC require respect between participants. It would be impossible to trust others and share ideas without respect for one another. This shows that although the psychological factors category contains concepts that can be described separately, they are in fact describing an interrelated and inseparable set of psychological factors that facilitates the learning experience.

In summary, the psychological factors of peer group coaching are necessary factors contributing to the learning process. Trust, open communication, participant motivation, empathy among group members, and mutual respect are catalysts for the learning process. These factors are not only in interaction and likely to be inseparable from each other but also influence the whole PGC process.

A note on matching and psychological factors

Psychological factors in PGC such as trust between one another and trust towards the coaching method, the openness of participants to sharing knowledge in the form of cases and issues, motivation to conduct PGCs, empathy to allow empathetic discussions and mutual respect, that scaffold all PGC activities are linked directly to learning in PGC. It is the expert's responsibility to match group members successfully and to make sure that both psychological factors and the belief in the PGC method are strongly experienced by the group.

Leadership development exercises can be employed before the start of PGC to give participants the chance to get to know each other and to increase trust. Professional coaches can provide PGC participants with tools to measure and to discuss psychological factors before each PGC session. Such tools could include the use of scales from low to high where participants anonymously evaluate the level of subjectively experienced trust, openness, etc. Additionally, the way to handle deviations from high scores should be considered and discussed with participants.

Contracting

Procedural agreements address behaviour during PGC, such as turning off mobile phones during coaching and informing members of any diary competing commitments.

Psychological agreements should address how to create the 'safe space' or psychological safety that is necessary for PGC to succeed. Psychological agreements should address maintaining confidentiality, building trust or how to handle disagreements.

Process agreements address timings, frequency of meetings etc. Each single PGC session should again begin with process and psychological agreements for the structure of each session and to determine whether psychological factors are still experienced as high or positive. The second goal is that each coachee starts their session by reporting on the topic or case they want to be coached in and also expresses an objective for the session.

Sample PGC contract

Procedural agreements

To be fully present during the peer group session – for example mobile phones are turned off.

To make the group aware of any competing diary commitments – for example a need to leave early or to 'dip out' to make a call; so that we can agree as a group how to manage this peer-group coaching.

We seek to work in the spirit of confidentiality: when talking about employees or colleagues you may choose to keep their identity anonymous.

It is possible that participants may wear different "hats" because of their "day jobs"– if at any point you become aware of a potential conflict of interest, please bring it up it so that we can decide as a group what best to do about it.

Our belief is that there are many different ways of handling coaching situations – each coach will be guided by their own experiences and value systems. Should you find that you take a different stance to another coach

we would ask you to approach the difference in the spirit of enquiry. We welcome differences of opinion when they are offered without judgement.

Psychological agreements

When working with peers, making comparisons is quite natural - we invite you to be curious about difference and to honour both your own and other's diversity.

Our intention is that the peer group session will provide a safe space to explore our varied experiences – our aim is to raise awareness of our choices rather than create a sense of what is "right vs wrong".

Trusting one another, openness, motivation to be present at peer-group coachings, showing respect, and keeping the content of each coaching session confidential are important factors for successful peer-group coaching – we will ask regularly if these psychological factors are in place and valued by each participant.

Process agreements

We agree to meet (also virtually) between today and ..... Please describe your peer-group coaching plan below (when do we meet, how do we meet, for how long do we meet, who is responsible for each meeting …)

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