



IT TAKES **TWO**

Is it possible to coach two people together to a better working relationship? Discovering there was no precedent for pairs coaching, **Dave Thornton** and **Val Sampson** developed their own model based on couple therapy

Further info

- See "How to coach two clients at a time", by Eyal Pavell, in *Coaching at Work*, vol 2, issue 5.
- Sampson and Thornton are planning a one-day workshop on pairs coaching this year. To find out more or to share your thoughts email: valsampson@tworiverscoaching.co.uk or dt@davethornton.org
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As coaches we all appreciate the importance of the one-to-one relationship with our clients. Which is why coaching two people at the same time might seem impossible – or at least a considerable challenge. However, it is possible to work effectively with two individuals to create a better working relationship – and improve their joint performance.

The idea for pairs coaching originated two years ago, halfway through a School of Coaching course. My colleague, Dave Thornton, who was working with the NHS, had been asked by the chair of an NHS Trust to include the chief executive in a joint coaching programme.

My background was in systemic couple therapy. I knew that working with two people on their relationship and mutual goals could produce dramatic, long-lasting, positive change.

Why couldn't self-awareness, a greater understanding of the other person and their values, plus the benefits of working towards shared goals, all be acquired through coaching too?

We began to research the idea – and drew a blank. Usually reliable web searches produced no relevant studies or articles. Even our highly experienced course trainers had virtually no knowledge of the process of coaching two individuals simultaneously.

Plenty had been written about working with teams and a fair

Case study: accelerating the relationship

Joyce Catterick, chair of the South West Yorkshire Partnership Foundation Trust, and chief executive, Steven Michael, turned to pairs coaching because they needed to build an effective working relationship as quickly as possible.

"Joyce became chair at a very critical time. We were applying for foundation trust status so both knew the relationship had to be accelerated," recalls Steven.

"We needed to develop a strong working relationship at speed," adds Joyce. "Having a skilled coach provided a shortcut. What would normally take months we had to do in weeks."

The pair had three two-hour coaching sessions over three months. They now have six-monthly "health check" sessions with their coach, Dave Thornton. "It gives us dedicated reflective time together, and the benefit of the sessions is cumulative," says Joyce. "You get to identify the drivers and values of the person you are working

with, and to better understand their decision-making processes."

"It is not a cosy chat," explains Steven. "It can be psychologically and emotionally challenging. The coaching pushes us, but it is also a safety net that allows us to say what we might otherwise hold back.

"The kind of relationship that might have taken 18 months to build took us less than half that time. It is certainly something I would recommend to other chairs and chief executives who respect each other already," he says.

Joyce agrees: "Coaching reinforced the collaboration between us and made the relationship work even better. I come out of every session feeling empowered."

amount was available on how to mediate between two individuals. But what we needed was information on how to coach two people at the same time towards a better working relationship.

We hoped to explore the art of transforming the relationship between two people working together so they were more self-aware, better communicators and more able to achieve their goals within their organisation.

We were daunted. Perhaps coaching two people together was such a bad idea that no one had considered it worth doing or writing about. But still, we were convinced the idea would work.

It is true that working with two people rather than one requires a specific skillset on the part of the coach – but it can be learned. After all, you are working with the relationship between the two.

We started to explore how it would be possible to transfer some

of the skills of working with a couple to coaching two people at work to create a better relationship and, most importantly, improved performance.

Lacking the precedent of a model, we created our own. Pairs coaching is cost-effective – half the price of coaching two individuals – and, arguably, more than twice as efficient. If a working relationship between two individuals, who might be at the top of their organisation, is dramatically improved, the advantages cascade down through the rest of the organisation.

The model for pairs coaching is by no means set in stone and we are also exploring the possibility of two coaches working with two clients in the same session. It's a doubly creative approach – and all the signs are that it allows a much deeper look at the working relationship. ■

What is pairs coaching?

Although coaching is already bursting with acronyms, we find it helpful to use PAIRS to remind us of the process and the model of working with two clients simultaneously. The approach described below can easily be attuned to the needs of the clients.

● P – preparation

Led by the coach and sets the context for the coaching. It might include questions like: "What do you know about the other person?"; "In what ways are you alike?"; "What are your differences?" This stage identifies the hot topics that affect both clients before identifying short and long-term coaching goals.

● A – acceptance

Also a belief in the benefits of the process. It includes acceptance of shared accountability for the challenges faced and a definition and acceptance of individual accountability in terms of achieving shared goals.

● I – involvement

What is the joint involvement with these goals? What is the best outcome for you both? What role does each client play? What will you both be doing differently from this point on?

● R – re-evaluation

The reflective/safety-check process. How realistic are the goals you have set together and what are the real-life applications?

● S – steps

A confirmation of actions and joint commitment to them before the session ends.