This book offers a new perspective on the subconscious and non-verbal processes through which people learn and communicate with each other in groups. Describing these processes in the context of modern organizational life, it provides practical advice about how to do group and team coaching.

Introducing key concepts from psychology, group analysis and systems theory, Group and Team Coaching gives practical guidance on core areas of group coaching: team coaching, group supervision, action learning sets and other learning groups.

Casting new light on the ‘secret life’ of groups and teams, it discusses:

• the invisible processes of group dynamics
• pitfalls of group coaching and how to avoid them
• how to design coaching interventions
• common dilemmas
• ethics and supervision.

With many vignettes and case studies, Group and Team Coaching is essential reading for coaches who work with groups and teams.

Christine Thornton is a group analyst and coach who has consulted to individuals, teams and organizations for over twenty years. She holds an MSc in Psychology and is a Member of the Institute of Group Analysis and the British Association for Psychoanalytic and Psychodynamic Supervision.
The Essential Coaching Skills and Knowledge series provides an accessible and lively introduction to key areas in the developing field of coaching. Each title in the series is written by leading coaches with extensive experience and has a strong practical emphasis, including illustrative vignettes, summary boxes, exercises and activities. Assuming no prior knowledge, these books will appeal to professionals in business, management, human resources, psychology, counselling and psychotherapy, as well as students and tutors of coaching and coaching psychology.

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Group and Team Coaching: The Essential Guide
Christine Thornton
Dedication

For John, who makes everything possible.
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This book comes at a pivotal stage, as coaching emerges as a profession, rapidly becoming one of the most accepted ways to accelerate people and business performance. While coaching started off as an intervention to facilitate a manager’s or leader’s individual learning and development, it is now being used to drive organizational change and transformation.

At the heart of this change comes a greater understanding for coaches and those involved in driving the organization’s learning agenda to be open to new perspectives in getting maximum returns from both their current and future talent. We need to look beyond conventional coaching and learning methods (i.e. 1:1 development, ‘content-led’ training), and tap into the wisdom of groups. It seems we are only at the brink of what this can generate. This book contributes to that change at many levels.

The timing is right for *Group and Team Coaching: The Essential Guide*. It is the first book to cover this growing and important area of coaching to the depth that the author, Christine Thornton, shares with us. Her experience as a coach practitioner, as well as someone well educated in the areas of group analysis and systems theory, certainly shines through here. Throughout the pages, she strikes a nice balance between what informs group coaching – the bedrock, if you will – and practical, real-world examples from her twenty-five years’ experience in this field.

The coaching profession needs a book like this to appreciate where group and team coaching has evolved from
(like many forms of coaching, from many disciplines) and to put a ‘stake in the ground’ at this stage of our evolutionary growth. It offers ideas for others to learn from, to be inspired by, and apply in practice so this very important area of coaching will advance, thereby enabling coaches, groups and organizations to reap the wider benefits.

On a broader scale, group or team coaching, as a catalyst for drawing out co-learning and collective group wisdom, can, in Christine’s own words, ‘foster feelings of connection and common purpose’. She notes that ‘if people feel more connected to a larger, worthwhile undertaking, they work harder and stay longer because they feel good about themselves and their place in the company, and in the world’.

If we have more of that in the workplace, and in our lives, there is no doubt that this not only will produce new sources of energy for greater people and business performance, but can be the key for breaking down barriers that inhibit change. It can act as a new source for answers during challenging times, and generate new possibilities and direction – in turn, helping to transform organizations and, one can only hope, society.

Katherine Tulpa
CEO and Co-founder, Association for Coaching
I wrote this book out of a desire to share with other group and team coaches the group analytic insights into the ‘secret life of groups’ that have enriched my practice with teams and groups over the past twenty years.

These ideas are explored in depth in Chapters 2, 3 and 4, which are the ‘must-read’ section of the book. They demystify the elemental processes of group dynamics. The rest of the book applies these principles to the ‘how to’ of group coaching in everyday situations. Though the focus is on working with groups in organizational and business contexts, the ideas can be applied to all other kinds of coaching group.

To our knowledge, this is the first book about group coaching including teams. There are clearly many books about teams, but few are written from a coaching perspective, and none from a group coaching perspective. The book’s approach, like my own, is fundamentally pluralistic, deriving value from the ideas of different, even apparently contradictory, traditions.

The book’s core aim is itself paradoxical: to explain complex ideas about group dynamics in terms clear and simple enough to provide a tool of value to coaches and allied professionals. It:

• explores the question ‘what is group coaching?’
• explains the fundamentals of group dynamics and the interpersonal processes underpinning group coaching
• offers practical guidance about ‘how to do group coaching in organizations’.
Coaching professionals typically seek new insight in a book like this, information to illuminate practice, and practical guidance to be weighed against experience. Using the principles described in the book requires the coach to think rigorously about the purpose, context and membership of each group with whom s/he works; doing so enables us to craft, with each group, appropriate methodologies, depth, and frankness of engagement.

Business professionals might use the book a little differently. Organizations use a wide range of group interventions with the intention of achieving positive change, often with little guidance about the merits of particular approaches in particular circumstances. In 1996 a classic study found that only 30% of organizational change programmes succeed, a finding confirmed by many other studies over subsequent years.¹ This book sheds light on why this might be, and offers data relevant to the business professional choosing between competing group coaching proposals.

The book in a nutshell

The book has six parts. The first part tackles the question ‘what is group coaching?”, and explores the differences between groups and teams. Part 2 connects group theory, which may be quite new even to the experienced coach, to group and team coaching. Part 3 introduces systems theory as a way of thinking about whole organizations. Part 4 reviews and provides advice in three main areas of group coaching: teams, learning groups and supervision groups. Part 5 covers specific issues and problems that arise in working with groups, offering practical strategies for tackling these, and for setting things up well from the start. Part 6 offers information about further resources.

Finally, this is a book that must be tested against experience, so that the insights it offers can inform practice. Please read it all in the light of your own experiences in groups.

Christine Thornton
March 2010
I am profoundly grateful to my partners in research, whose generous input is a foundation of the book: Amanda Bowens, Claudia Demuth, Hilary Fellows, Heather Williams and Tina Waterman-Roberts.

The following people made innumerable valuable responses and suggestions that have improved what you now read. They have been the group that fostered the development of the book: any remaining flaws are my responsibility and not theirs. Linda Aspey, Nick Barwick, Linda Bennett, Martin Bhurruth, Dick Blackwell, Sally Britton, Halina Brunning, Kate Buller, Alison Dale, William Erb, Irene MacWilliam, Morris Nitsun, Cynthia Rogers, Fiona Scrase, Meg Sharpe, Gill Smith and Katherine Tulpa, and the series editors, Averil Leimon, Gladeana MacMahon and Stephen Palmer. Thanks too to Joanna Forshaw and Dawn Harris, my patient and helpful editors at Routledge, and Judith Frank for invaluable help with the index.

I am grateful to my clients, colleagues and supervisees for our work together, which is reflected in the vignettes and in the ideas that the book presents.

Thanks to Jacki Nicholas for help on group telephone coaching, and to Christina Bachini, Kate Greenwood, Adrian Goodall, Mandy Gutsell, Andie Heming, Michelle McCue, Polly McDonald, Jonathan Wilson and all other AC members who generously shared ideas and information, whether or not I have been able to include them in the final cut.
Part 1
Introduction: what is group coaching?

This chapter
This chapter discusses what group coaching is, and reviews its uses. It explains what the rest of the book is about, and how it might be used.

Groups
Groups are everywhere. We live in small groups, from family to friends to work group, with untold impact on the quality of our lives.

Groups are powerful. They have great positive potential, and yet ‘bad’ group experiences are (rightly) feared (see Chapters 3 and 4). To work effectively with groups, we must harness their power to achieve change, while minimizing destructive elements. At their best, groups offer a profound encounter

This chapter contains:
• This chapter
• Groups
• Group coaching in organizations
• Underlying group principles
• Advantages of group coaching
• The need for standards for group coaching
• What is group coaching?
• When is a group a team?
• What every coach needs to know
• How the book came about, and how you might use it
• Group analysis: the fundamental dynamics of group life
• Systems thinking: the fundamental dynamics of organizational life
• The vignettes in the book are real examples
• What does the book contain?
with others that promotes collaboration, creative challenge and adaptation.

Groups are fundamental. Being in and learning to cooperate effectively within groups, is the root not only of business success, but of all our achievements as a species. Even a genius builds on the discoveries of those who have gone before – in the words of Newton, on the shoulders of giants. As a species our collective genius is to adapt, and we do so by learning from one another. For humans, ‘the relationship precedes the individual’.\(^2\) The individual develops a sense of self through interaction with others, and all our learning, from the earliest moments of life, occurs in a relational context. See ‘Learning, holding and exchange’ in Chapter 2.

**Group coaching in organizations**

Every company is a group – sometimes a very large one – organized by being broken down into smaller groups. In effective coaching groups, learning is multiplied as people learn from each other’s dilemmas as well as their own. Over time, these experiences can develop flexibility and interpersonal skills to a high degree. In this way groups can make a tangible contribution to business advantage, but equally importantly, influence the intangibles that underlie long-term business health and prosperity.

Put simply, if people feel more connected to a larger, worthwhile undertaking, they work harder and stay longer because they feel good about themselves and their place in the company, and in the world. All executive coaching is to some degree a bridging process, helping the individual make sense of, and work effectively in, the context of their organization. Better than any other kind of intervention, well-run groups can foster feelings of connection and common purpose.

Groups are essential to the development of effective leadership and collaboration skills. New advances in neuroscience persuaded Daniel Goleman to extend his concept of emotional intelligence to *social intelligence*, a more relationally based understanding of the interpersonal competencies
needed to inspire others to be effective. Groups are by far the most effective method for developing these competencies.

In difficult economic times, successful companies understand that planning long term, and keeping staff well motivated and involved in solving business problems, is critical. We have all heard of ‘groupthink’, the reductive process through which group members systematically exclude information needed to make better quality decisions when faced with challenges (see ‘Groups and decision-making’ in Chapter 5). Properly led groups, on the contrary, can help people face hard realities together, fostering resolve and generating creative, realistic solutions to business challenges. Groups can help individuals overcome stress and other ‘knee-jerk’ responses to threat or change, and so work productively once again. In troubled economic waters, this may be the difference between sinking and swimming.

Group coaching includes two broad areas: team coaching, and coaching learning groups, which are groups that have come together for the purpose of learning. A global survey of group coaching conducted in 2008 identified that around 60% of group coaching was targeted on intact teams, and around 40% on coaching groups of individuals from different organizations. The group coach is always working with one of these. This is a simplification, but it is a useful one for the practitioner. The differences between teams and learning groups are discussed further in ‘When is a group a team?’ below.

Underlying group principles

Given all this, our general ignorance of the dynamics and principles of group life, at least at a conscious level, is remarkable. It is perhaps only sustainable because it is balanced by a non-conscious shared ‘knowing’ about group life. That is observable in every gathering, and includes a commonly felt sense that people learn in groups.

To use this to advantage in business coaching, we must grasp more fully the group processes that can underpin, or undermine, learning and change. We must engage with the non-conscious as well as the rational. If we understand
better the non-rational obstacles that overturn our carefully laid plans, we are better placed to overcome them; if we understand how group processes can rally people around a shared goal, people in our organizations will flourish and work with ingenuity.

This book articulates these underlying group principles. It illustrates how they apply to group coaching in a business context. In all groups we can attend to the fundamentals that encourage people to engage with and learn from each other.

There are important differences between groups, factors such as organizational context, size, longevity, physical proximity and individual capacities, which promote and/or limit the group’s capacity for learning. The art and science of group coaching is balancing a realistic assessment of the state of affairs and the people in it, including the coach, with a sense of the transformational potential of the group situation.

**Advantages of group coaching**

Groups can be highly time- and cost-efficient for organizations. They can also be highly inefficient, for example if in the grip of ‘groupthink’ (see Chapter 5). A group coach works with several people simultaneously and helps them harness their power to help each other. In a challenging business environment, coming together to reflect on pressing problems can generate ideas tested and refined to a robust degree of usability, provided the group coach enables the team to engage honestly with the real challenges. The need to develop skilful group discussion has rarely been more pressing.

The opportunities for learning are multiplied by the number of different individuals in the coaching relationship, since everyone brings different skills and experience to the table. Some of the factors that enhance learning in a group context are:

- the availability of role models
- the amplification of learning responses in a group setting
• the power of peer pressure
• the pressure to engage with and understand business realities, including unpalatable ones
• the opportunity to identify with something larger than ourselves and feel part of a greater endeavour
• the ability of peers to correct and challenge each other in a direct and natural way
• the strengthening of identification with the company and its goals and values
• the development of flexibility through direct and repeated contact with others’ different views and approaches
• learning to live more comfortably with uncertainty and chaos, since group experience is never predictable.

In addition to the benefits of peer coaching and learning through peer exchange, group coaching helps teams build collaboration and understand more fully each other’s styles, strengths and weaknesses. In all groups there are personal learning opportunities, through quietly comparing ourselves with others, to understand more fully our own strengths and weaknesses. In a coaching group this process is greatly enhanced, because individual learning is an explicit goal and members can voice these thoughts, and test them against the perceptions of others.

Disadvantages to group coaching arise where groups are too large for individual attention to be given, where contribution levels vary too much (i.e. some members dominant, some very quiet), and in cultures and situations where loss of face is very important, inhibiting exchange. Most of these disadvantages can be addressed by careful design of the group, as regards size, composition, methodology and coach skill set.

Indeed, for a group to be a coaching group (as opposed to, say, a training course or a lecture), it must be small enough that attention can be paid to individual learning needs. It is not that learning cannot take place in larger groups. It is that coaching is fundamentally addressed to individual learning, whether in a one-to-one or a group context. Even team coaching, where learning goals are shared, relies on individuals learning and changing their behaviour.
The need for standards for group coaching

At the time of writing, the boundaries of group coaching are less than clear. For instance, many coaches do not clearly differentiate intact teams from other kinds of group. This book offers a definition of group coaching and the standards that should be applied to doing it, hoping to stimulate a broader discussion in the profession as a whole. Lewin, a ‘founding father’, commented that in group dynamics, theory and practice are closely interlinked: 9 practitioners together must address these questions.

The world of coaching is a broad church, with a plurality of orientations and skill sets. It is helpful to be clear and rigorous about the conditions and standards that enable a group to engage in mutual coaching, but unhelpful to be very prescriptive about what activities might be included. The question of standards is important, because group coaching carries a higher risk than individual coaching of being diluted through mislabelling. For example, getting a training group involved in discussion is not group coaching, nor is a one-hour telephone teleclass for 25 strangers. Individual learning can occur in either of these, but sustained attention to individual development cannot.

In order to be coaching, there must be attention to the learning needs of the individuals in the group, only possible in smaller groups; the group must also meet over time so that learning can be incrementally built upon, fine-tuned and consolidated. As well as size and longevity of the group, the nature of the relationships is important. A coaching group has to be small enough for all participants to be active learners through interaction with each other. It is here that the unique benefits of group coaching can be reaped.

To achieve the highest possible standards of group practice across the profession, we also have to clarify what outcomes group coaching can offer. In Chapters 6, 7 and 8 we discuss some likely outcomes in coaching teams and learning groups. More importantly, the book offers some principles that can be applied to all group coaching contexts by thoughtful practitioners. Whatever their modality, group coaches should be conversant with the dynamics of group
life. And in fact, group coaches tend to be drawn from among more experienced coaches.\textsuperscript{10}

The book therefore argues for an inclusive definition of group coaching as regards styles and processes, combined with a rigorous definition as regards issues affecting standards of practice, such as numbers and longevity.

**What is group coaching?**

A coaching group is:

a small group of people meeting together in active participation on several occasions, for the purpose of learning, including developing new capacities and skills. Participants learn through exchange and interaction with each other.

Rather than one specific method, group coaching is the application of principles of group dynamics to a variety of methods, in order to increase the effectiveness and reach of the results. The interaction between participants is a key element.

Group coaching takes place in small groups, that is, groups of up to ten people in team coaching (where the learning objectives are shared), and rather fewer in learning group coaching (where the objectives are individual). The typical size of an action learning set, for example, is six. (See ‘Learning group coaching versus team coaching’ in Chapter 7.) Groups larger than ten are unlikely to offer enough attention to individual learning needs.\textsuperscript{11}

Experience suggests that the ideal face-to-face size is around five to eight – large enough for a good range of experiences and views, and for individuals’ moment-to-moment intensity of involvement to vary, and small enough that all members feel some impetus to participate. On the telephone, where participants as well as coach must work harder to interpret aural clues, the most effective size is smaller still.

In a smaller group than this, the experience is less rich for participants, and there is pressure on the coach to adopt a dual role of both coaching and participating. In a larger
one, there is not enough time for everyone to participate actively and time limits attention to individual learning needs. If an intact team is larger than this, it may be worth subdividing it for the purposes of coaching, while coming together for some whole-team activities.

As groups get larger, participants move to a more receptive style of learning, as in a lecture, where we receive information and opinion and quietly evaluate it. There is a brief discussion of some creative methods for working with larger groups in Chapter 5.

In larger groups we are more likely to tune out, which is why training groups are routinely broken into smaller units for active tasks. Tuning out is also more likely in telephone groups, where visual communication signals are not available, and e-groups, where, unlike leaving the lecture hall, we can vote with our (virtual) feet without anyone necessarily noticing.

Coaching does not happen in one meeting. All coaching relationships, individual or group, imply some longevity of engagement – the learning takes place over time, and so involves meeting on a number of occasions, with the opportunity to sustain and build on previous learning through repeated reflection. What is distinctive about group coaching is that the relationship is multiple. Each member of the group can relate to the coach, to each other member and to the group as a whole, with the added learning choices and possibilities implied.

**Group coaching:**
- requires active interaction between participants
- requires a small group (3–10)
- takes place over time
- has a learning focus directed by the participants, not the coach
- involves some face-to-face engagement
- learning groups require individual goals, teams a common goal.
Coaching requires that the learner be involved in setting the learning objectives. A training course with fixed content is not a coaching group, though many group principles still apply, particularly those about starting and ending well, and encouraging transfer of learning. (See Chapter 11.) A training or management development programme, with repeated meetings over time, can be designed to incorporate group coaching sessions, and these can maximize the impact of what is learned.

The fifth point in the box, the need for face-to-face engagement, is perhaps the most controversial. For further discussion of telephone and distance coaching, see ‘Coaching virtual teams’ in Chapter 6 and ‘Group telephone coaching’ in Chapter 7.

When is a group a team?

Slightly more than half of group coaching assignments are directed to coaching intact teams. The most fundamental question about any group coaching assignment is: is this a learning group, or is it a team?

All teams are groups, but not all groups are teams. A team has an explicit shared purpose and/or task, usually in a broader organizational context. It usually exists before and after the coaching intervention, with communication patterns and a network of relationships already established.

Teams and learning groups have different kinds of objectives. In team coaching, common learning goals are important; this does not preclude individual feedback and learning, indeed it requires it. The individual learning is however in the service of the team achieving its shared purpose more effectively.

Where group participants are not members of one intact team, but have come together as relative strangers for the purpose of individual learning, the coach is instead dealing with a learning group. The group’s goal is the self-directed learning of its individual members; the variety of goals, together with the commitment to aid each other’s learning, results in a deep, cross-fertilizing learning experience. This richness of learning arises from the fact that learners set
and work actively on different learning goals, and does not preclude sharing profound insights, nor the significant refining of members’ interpersonal and collaborative skills; in fact, in a successful learning group, these outcomes are inevitable.

The team/learning group distinction is not a philosophical one, but geared unashamedly to the needs of the

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**Learning groups**

The ‘learning group’ is a group brought together for the purposes of learning. The coach usually works with the group from the outset, and is present at all meetings. Members are not close colleagues, nor in the same team, nor are they in competition in the normal course of working. They may work for different organizations. Examples of this kind of coaching group are the action learning set, the Balint group, the reflective practice group, the professional development group, and the supervision group.

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**Teams**

From the coach’s point of view, a team is a work group with shared goals or tasks, usually in a broader organizational context. The team is varied by size, longevity, diversity, stability, and boundaries of membership and purpose, all of which affect how the group coach can work (see Chapter 7). New kinds of team structure, teams with fluid, single-task-focused or time-limited boundaries, and the possibility for truly global teams created by advances in communication technology make team coaching highly complex. We cannot assume stable membership or geographical propinquity; there are new uncertainties, and, especially in cross-cultural teams, broad possibilities for miscommunication.
practitioner. It is critical in designing effective learning interventions. To add another layer of complexity, if we look at the organizational level, learning groups are often used by larger companies as a tool for wider organizational change. They seed culture change across a company, by developing individuals in strategic positions in different teams.

**What every coach needs to know**

All executive coaching, group or individual, takes place in an organizational context. The diagram overleaf sets out the context of individual coaching.

The coach working with the individual-in-the-organization must have knowledge in at least three fields: psychological literacy to understand the client, good interpersonal skills to facilitate the learning process, and a grasp of organizational life that enables a joint understanding to develop, with the client, of the work context.

The effective group coach needs all these, plus knowledge of a fourth field, group dynamics. See ‘Developing the capacity to hold a group’, ‘Holding as time goes on’ and ‘What enables the group coach to hold a group effectively?’ in Chapter 2, and ‘The roles of the group coach’ in Chapter 4.

**How the book came about and how you might use it**

I have been a professional working with groups for twenty-five years. In my work, I became fascinated by the processes through which individuals learn in groups, and eighteen years ago began the process of training as a group analyst. As I began to conduct analytic therapy groups alongside my work with organizations, I became excited by the encounter with group analytic theory. It seemed to me that what I was learning could account for much that I had observed in all kinds of groups. (I was already convinced of the value of systemic and analytic views of whole organizations and individual behaviour.) I became convinced, through my experiences in groups, of the fundamental similarities in the
The context of coaching