

The effect of network (inherited) trust in organisational communities upon life coaching psychology practice

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Summary

Background

Coaching psychology's evolving focus

Study

Considerations in adopting life coaching in the workplace

Findings and Discussion

The complex ways in which trust figures

Research and practice implications



Traditional focus of coaching research and practice

Emphasis upon performance “to enhance the skills, knowledge and performance of their people, targeting specific skills and goals.” (CIPD, 2026)



Dropping by



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Shift in coaching research and practice

McLeod (2003, 2012), Sparrow (2007) and Dryden (2011) reported the increasing emphasis within workplace coaching upon whole-person, life- and emotion-oriented coaching.

Harvard Business Review survey of 140 coaches who had been hired to coach company executives found that during the coaching sessions personal issues came up 76% of the time. (Coutu et al, 2009)

But any movement towards life coaching in a workplace is *situated*

Whilst we coach individuals, we need to acknowledge *context*



Who's this? Who's arranged this? What will she do?



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The role of the organisation

“Organizations have a direct impact on the bond, task, and goals of the working alliance by facilitating the coaching process, influencing the coaching agenda and contract, and through coach selection”
(Kruger and Terblanche, 2024)



Exploring the *situated* nature of coaching

Goodyer (2025) conducted a doctoral grounded theory study exploring emergent themes in adopting life coaching in the workplace:

Phase 1 – storytelling of personal or relayed experiences of workplace coaching to establish the ways episodes are construed (43 participants)

Phase 2 – follow-up interviews to explore the interpretations coachees made (20 participants)

Phase 3 – exploratory interviews with coaches focusing on the key issues raised (10 participants)



Phase 1 findings

Considerable ambiguity about what constitutes coaching

Clear sense of coaching being beneficial

No real knowledge of the terminologies for different forms of coaching

Strong evidence for coaching addressing personal and emotional issues

Elements of unease

- Suspicion over management's purpose for coaching

- Trust

Phase 2 findings

Repeated references to the trust environment including trust of:

- subordinates
- peers
- managers
- departments
- organisation

“Because what happens in that difficult personal situation is when you are trusted and you’re recognised, is that inside you, you want to get back to the organisation as quickly as you can because you feel that, you know, the way you’d been treated has been so professional. But also, you know, with a high sense, I guess of emotional element to it, and you feel like they treated you well.”



Phase 2 findings (cont'd)

Trust can be endemic:

“These are people I’ve worked with for years and I trust them. They’re like me, came up through the ranks, speak like me and understand things like me”

or dynamic:

“My feelings towards organisation were not good, I don't - I mean I think it wasn't possible to trust in that situation -- I think it was because we had just gone through a huge restructure. There was probably a bit of misunderstanding, or actually mistrust more like -- There was probably some questions about why the organisation was taking certain decisions and if things didn't quite add up for people and they just didn't agree.”



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Phase 3 findings

Coaches were seen to have struggled when confronted with coachees who had a wide-ranging low level of trust. For example, one coach reported a coachee saying:

“kind of false, saying that the emphasis of bringing your whole self to work is OK, but not if you can't trust a person to help you when you need it.”

Coaches could feel that have been *imbued* with distrust from the offset.



Findings resonate with other literature on distinctiveness of contexts

Long recognised that attraction, selection and attrition factors create homogeneity in organisational communities (Oh et al 2018)

Similarly in personality profiles of different occupational groups (Anni et al, 2025)



Trust and Distrust context differences

Assessing workplace trust and distrust (Wildman et al, 2025)

There are distinct high trust (e.g. airline cockpit crews) and low trust environments (e.g. competitive sales).

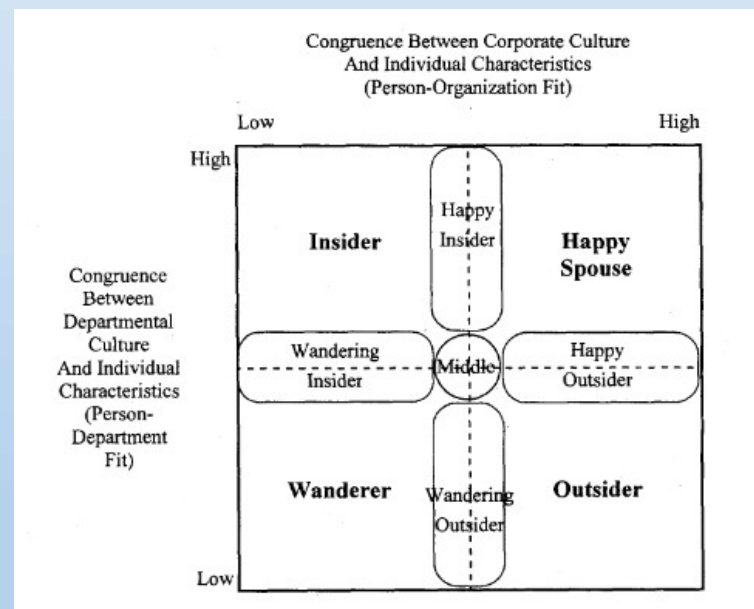
Workgroup differences e.g. Team Climate Inventory (Anderson and West, 1996)

Societal differences (Dheer et al (2026)



Trust and Belonging

- Belonging (feeling at home and in safe company) can also operate at departmental and organisational levels (Park, 1999)



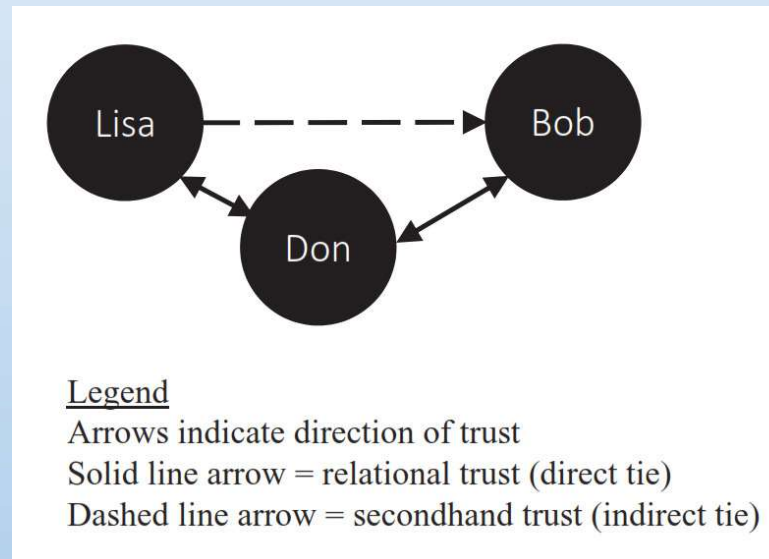
Network Trust

McEvily et al (2021: p180) argue that *“apart from forming as a result of direct interaction, trust also flows through the indirect connections linking individuals to one another and emerges from the inherent design features of the network itself”*



Network Trust: Secondhand

“Generalized positive expectations about the motives, intentions, and behaviors between actors who are not directly connected to each other, but are indirectly connected in a bounded social structure” (McEvily et al, 2021, p183)

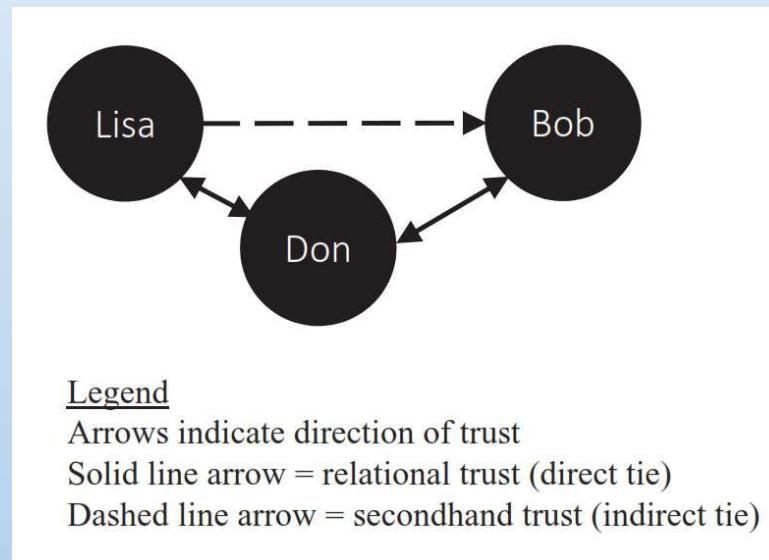


Lisa hasn't met Bob, but she trusts Bob because of her trust in Don and Don's trust in Bob. She *gives* him her trust.



Coaches can inherit trust

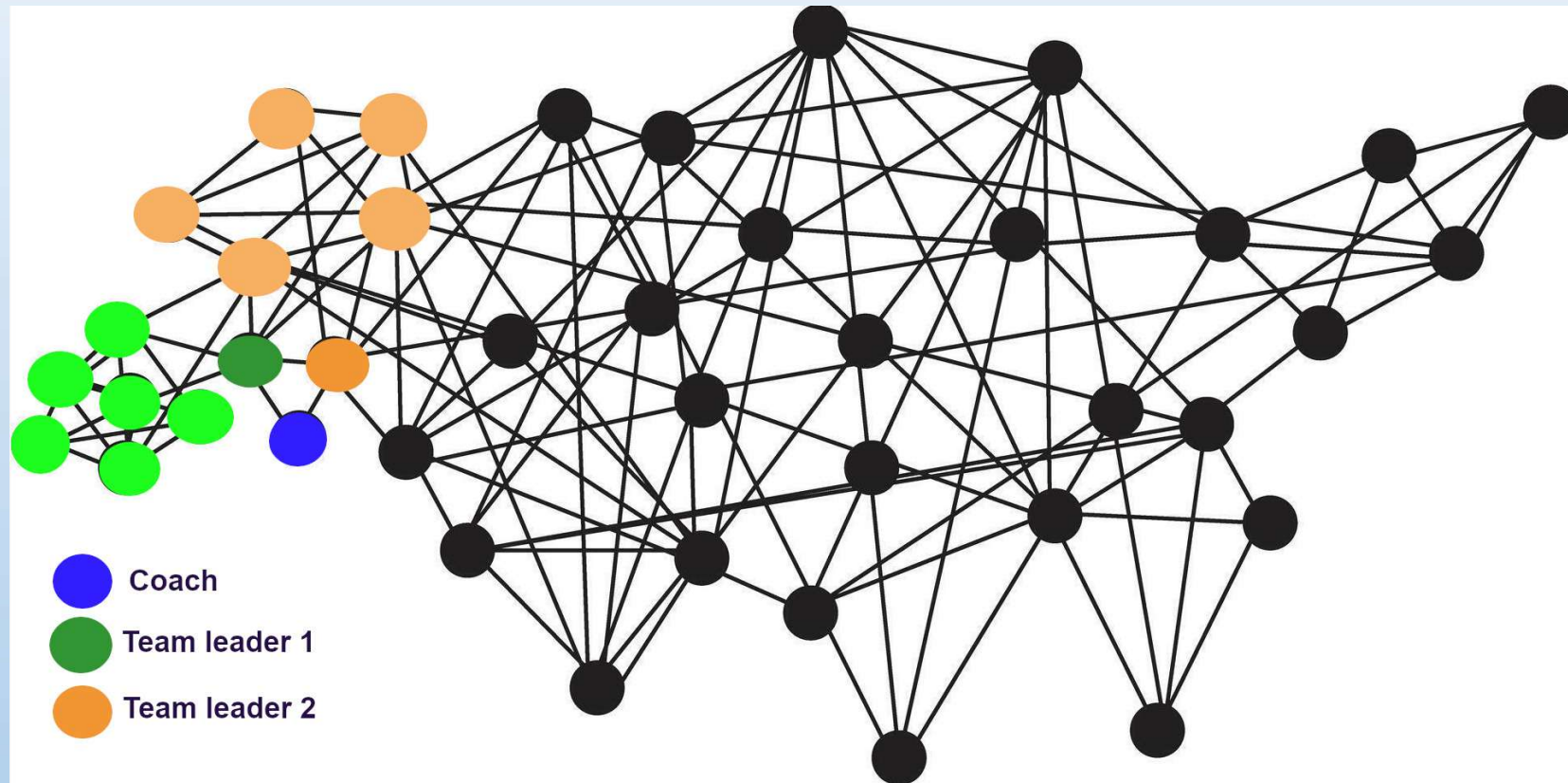
Imagine Bob is a coach, Don is HR Director and Lisa a prospective coachee. Bob *inherits* trust before he has even met Lisa.



Coaches enter a trust network and are construed accordingly.



Impact of network trust



Research implications

We need further research to understand how inherited trust shapes coaching in specific organisations and communities



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Practice implications (1)



Assess the ground and adjust accordingly



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Practice implications (2)



Consider ways to operate in or enhance the trust milieu
alongside coaching



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Thank you!

Any questions?



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