

Christmas Crackers

Professor Peter Hawkins

Each year just before Christmas, I publish 13 Systemic Team Coaching one-liners. They are lines that have emerged spontaneously in training courses I have taught around the world.

2018

1. The team does not create the purpose, the purpose creates the team

The best research on effective teams, shows that the most important element is having a joint team purpose that everyone recognises and can only be achieved through the team collaborating effectively together. I used to work hard helping teams create their purpose, now I realise I have to help them discover their purpose – as the purpose is already out there in their business eco-system and in the future needs of their stakeholders, waiting for the team to respond.

2. Explore ‘future back’ and ‘outside in’

To discover the evolving team purpose, we need to explore with the team both what the future is going to require them to step up to and what their key stakeholders are requiring now and in the future.

3. Life sets the agenda

Traditionally coaching emphasises being on the client’s agenda. Systemic coaching proposes that we should be neither on the client’s or the coach’s agenda but focusing on what life is requiring both parties to work on together.

4. Never know better, never know first

Traditional coaching also talks about leaving our experience outside the door, but I argue the clients need all of us to be engaging with their issues, but we should never know better and never know first, but once we have enabled their creative thinking, we should bring our own thinking alongside, dialogically creating new thinking, neither they or we had previously thought.

5. Don’t tell, don’t ask: Frame the challenge, orchestrate the response

Both Leaders and coaches, often switch between a directive ‘telling’ style and an eliciting ‘asking’ style. Team Coaches whether they be leaders coaching their own team, or external team coaches, help frame the collective challenge and then orchestrate and enable the team to respond creatively and collaboratively.

6. Destination precedes design

Before you can design the orchestrating and enabling process, you need to know where

you and the team need to arrive by the end of the journey. Without knowing the possible destination(s) you cannot choose what vehicles you will need to get there.

7. Start every session with purpose and outcome of this session.

Every coaching session needs to start with some contracting to discover the joint purpose of the meeting and to explore what we need to collectively achieve together by the end.

8. Quickly get the team on the stage with you as the animator in the wings neither you or them in the audience.

Team coaches can fall into the trap of creating a new hub and spoke configuration, with themselves on stage. A good Systemic Team Coach quickly gets the team actively engaged doing the work, but then stays alongside them supporting, challenging, nudging, enabling the best work possible. As part of this the coach needs to get the team to talk to each other directly and not via the coach.

9. Coach the connections (internally and externally) not the individuals in front of the team.

Avoid coaching or commenting on individuals in front of the team, rather focus on the connection between team members and between the whole team and their stakeholders.

10. Locate the conflict or problem in a connection/relationship not in a person or part of the system.

The first rule of conflict is to locate the issue in a connection not in a person or part of the system

11. No such thing as an impossible boss, difficult team member, un-coachable team, just a mode of engagement we have not yet found.

I often say this may not be true, but it is a great way to start every day, for it interrupts the 'blame game' where we and teams locate the problem in someone else or another part of the system. It encourages everyone to bring it back to what it is I and we can do?

12. Design and prepare for every session but when you start be unattached to your plans.

They say you can judge a good film by how much is left behind on the cutting room floor. Good team coaching is similar. The preparation is important for the coach to be able to hold in mind all the many levels of the system and possible ways of approaching the team's challenges, but when the session starts one needs to be open to what emerges in the team and between you and the team.

13. Have fun, be creative and partner with ruthless compassion.

Team coaching is at its best when the team and the coach are enjoying it, but also when

both know they are stepping up to the challenges life is presenting, and they are creating value for others as well as themselves.

2019

1. Treat every difficulty as your next teacher sent from the wider system

Our choice is either to view difficult coachees, colleagues, bosses, organizations as problems to battle against, or as people who we have not yet found a way of connecting with and who thus present our next life lesson.

2. If you fill the meeting room with the voices of the stakeholders there is less room for egos

As human beings we tend to be self-obsessed and take things personally, which builds defensive egos. If we focus on what the future and our stakeholders need from us and bring their voices into the room, there is far less space for egos and personal conflict.

3. ABC of team coaching – Always Be Contracting

Thank you to my colleague John Hill from Northern Ireland who taught me this phrase – contracting is not something we do just at the beginning of relationship or start of a meeting – it is something we need to constantly attend to.

4. Systemic Team Coaching does not end - the prime responsibility just transitions from the team coach to our partners in the team coaching, - the team leader and the team members

As teams have to continually develop their collective capacity and agility responding to everchanging contexts, systemic team coaching will always be necessary. The job of the external team coach is to work with the team so they can gradually take over the full responsibility for coaching themselves.

5. Get every voice into the meeting within the first three minutes

If the coach talks too long at the beginning it becomes a seminar; if the team leader talks too long it becomes a briefing meeting.

6. Team members are more likely to own the agreed ways forward when they have been part of creating them

People don't resist change; they resist being changed. The role of the team leader is to frame the challenges and then orchestrate the team members to co-create the ways of responding.

7. How you say something non-verbally is more important than the words

Learning good team coaching questions and other interventions is not just about the words but about the tonality, look and embodied way we deliver it.

8. Always locate the challenge, problem or conflict in a relationship, not in a person or a part of the system

All real challenges are relational.

9. Turn blame statements into requests and negative injunctions to positive encouragements

One of the most frequent interventions we need to do as team coaches is to interrupt blame statements, whether about another member of the team, or external stakeholder, and invite the person to turn the complaint into a request and/or curious inquiry.

10. Avoid bullet point lists that fragment the challenge into lists of problems.

Instead create mind maps, virtuous and vicious cycles and other methods that show the patterns of interconnection.

11. As soon as we talk about ‘the system’ we stop seeing systemic interconnections because we have drawn a fixed boundary where none exist

Pay attention to the dance between the many systemic levels.

12. Wide-angled empathy is not just for the people in the team but for all the team’s stakeholders

The team coach needs to have compassion and empathy for all team members but also for all the wider stakeholders of the team (and themselves).

13. There is no such thing as a high performing team, only a team that continuously co-creates value with and for all its stakeholders

High performance is not a place of arrival, but is always in service of continually co-creating value with and for all our stakeholders, including people, systems and the more-than-human world. Therefore, high performance cannot reside within the team’s boundaries, or be owned by the team.

2020

1. Don't ask: Don't tell

Coaches can become addicted to questions and consultants to telling answers. The team coach needs to avoid both addictions and instead engage in collaborative inquiry, facing the challenges that life is presenting, where neither coach nor coachees have the answer, but together are discovering one.

2. Never know better: Never know first.

The best insights are co-discovered fresh between the team and the team coach. Pre-packaged knowledge is hard to both digest and own.

3. The quality of coaching can be judged by how much time is spent at the learning edge.

The learning edge is the place where the coachee and the coach don't have an answer, but it is clear to both that life is requiring one.

4. No such thing as Individual Coaching.

When an individual arrives in the coaching room (in person or electronically), their team dynamic; organizational culture; their family system; community and cultural patterns; and the wider ecology; are also part of them and how they shape and narrate their world. The stories they tell grow out of, and are framed by, this rich complex soil of systemic levels.

5. We should leave every coaching session, team coaching meeting and supervision session having created new learning that no individual knew before the session started.

The world needs new learning that is co-created.

6. Generals, missionaries, and colonizers have Missions; Teams need to have a collective Purpose.

Missions are about what we want to achieve in the world. Purpose comes from discovering what we can collectively do that the world of tomorrow needs.

7. The purpose creates the team, the team does not create their purpose but discovers what it is.

Purpose is discovered by exploring who our work and life serves and the changing needs of those stakeholders.

8. Turn problems into challenges and challenges into opportunities.

Problems, like puzzles, have solutions, but challenges require new thinking, doing and being by the team and its members.

9. Listen to the emerging pattern, not the individuals or the separate issues.

Individual issues are nearly always symptoms of an underlying pattern. Transforming a pattern usually requires new perspectives – new lenses through which to view the issues.

10. Always triangulate

Team coaching requires a team, a team coach and a joint purpose. Team coaching helps teams move beyond either-or debates to find a third place, and from binary negotiation with partners and stakeholders, to create win-win-win arrangements.

11. Co-coaches need to work as a team and role-model effective teamwork.

When there are 2 team coaches there are 3 elements – team coach one; team coach two; and their relationship/teamwork. The third element impacts the team as much, if not more than the first two.

12. Turn your stakeholders into Partners.

It is so easy to experience stakeholders as a multitude of conflicting demands and miss that all stakeholders are also resources that we can invite into partnership, achieving together what we cannot accomplish apart.

13. Team Coaching never ends it only transfers.

Team coaching is not carried out by the team coach alone, but by the partnership of the team, the team leader, the team members and the team coach together. When the team coach gradually leaves a team, the team coaching is continued by the remaining partnership.

2021

1. Don't do what the team can do for itself, or you can do for them

Discover what you can do together that neither you nor the team can do apart.

2. People don't notice what they are in the middle of

When your head is down and your shoulder is to the wheel, it is hard to see what is around you. Sometimes you need to stop pushing, pause and come up for air and a fuller perspective. When talking about organizational culture I often quote the Chinese proverb the last one to know about the sea is the fish. The culture is what we stop noticing when we have worked somewhere for three months as it becomes part of our way of seeing, hearing and acting. We absorb it and it becomes part of who we are.

3. Resistance is just energy flowing in a different direction from yours

Kurt Lewin, an early grandfather of organization Development taught Force-field analysis, if you encounter resistance don't push harder, for every force creates its equal and opposite force. Instead, we need to create a connection between where our energy is flowing and the different direction their energy is flowing in.

4. Coach the connections not the people

The biggest challenges lie not in the individual people but in the connections between them and between one team and another and the organization and its stakeholders. Just coaching the individual world leader will not solve the climate crisis – we have the knowledge, the resources, the will, what we lack is the We.Q; the collective collaborative intelligence.

5. Coaching is always a three-way partnership between a coach, a coachee (or coachee team) and the challenges that life is providing the coachee

Coaching is not done by the coach, or even just by the coach and coachee in partnership, but by the partnership of the coach, coachee and the generous challenges that life is constantly providing.

6. Coach with compassion of the heart and a ruthless sword cutting through the discussion to what is truly necessary.

It is easy to have compassion alone or just ruthlessness. But far better to combine both in service of those you work with and what is required from their stakeholders requires mastery.

7. Collaborate – compete with others in a way that co-creates greater value for both our separate and joint stakeholders

Good competition raises the quality of the performance of everyone who takes part. Bad competition is winning at the cost of the other.

8. The ecology is our shared home and the substance of our being, not a problem to be solved

Many at Cop 26 talked about the climate crisis as a technical problem to be solved but it is this approach to issues that has got us into our present mess. The environment is not a thing and is not external to us. We are just a small part of the ecology's greater whole.

9. Whatever you are part of, is also part of you

The ecology is present in every coaching room and in every individual, it flows through us in the air we breathe, the food we eat, and the thoughts and ways of being we absorb.

10. Selfishness is self-destructive

Any species that destroys its environmental niche ends up destroying itself. Any individual or team or organization that tries to maximise their success at the cost of others around them – will find their success is short lived. All sustainable success is co-created and co-owned.

11. Our boundaries and borders are never ours alone: they are always co-created with those on the other side of the fence

Governments talk about 'controlling our borders' and organizations talk about 'Protecting our IP' – but borders and boundaries always involve at least two sides, so it is always best to find out what works for all parties.

12. Generals, colonizers and evangelists have missions – organizations and teams have a purpose

We create our Mission but discover our purpose – which is what we can uniquely do that the world of tomorrow needs. If there was not a pre-existent need in the world, the organization and team would never be created. The purpose precedes the team.

13. If you just capture your learning in a notebook, you end up with a shelf of clever notebooks.

If you embody the learning in action, your learning is alive and growing I have found that one of the best ways to learn is teaching others what you have learnt. Learning sticks if you try it out in practice straight after the course.

2022

1. For this particular ‘match’ which of my inner team do I need have on the pitch, which on the substitutes bench and which do I need to rest, so they can be used on another day.

This was inspired not just by the Football World Cup, but also by Marita Fridjhon’s question: “How do we bring our best self to each unique encounter and leave our worst self at home watching T.V.”! We all have an internal team of different sub-personalities, and every systemic team coaching encounter requires us to be choiceful of which we bring into play.

2. “Love does not consist of gazing at each other, but in looking outward in the same direction.”

This quote from Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, is as applicable to teams as it is to personal relationships. Often the best way to develop trust is to have a joint challenge that requires us to collaborate, shoulder to shoulder, looking in the same direction.

3. Destination precedes the journey; it does not come at the end.

It is the love for the destination that inspires the journey and creates the route we need to take – read Cavafy’s great poem Ithaka.

4. The Systemic Team Coach needs to focus on the needs of those not in the room, as much as those who are present.

These include past, future or absent team members; the full range of stakeholders, the wider community, future generations and the ‘more-than-human’ world of our shared Earth.

5. Do Not let small groups have an individual report back to the large group.

The sharing of the dried up remains of a past conversation creates death by serial feedback. Enable the whole sub-group to turn what happened in their small sub-group as a springboard to start a new even richer conversation in the larger group.

6. Be precise with your intent and instruction or you will confuse the team.

Many coaches are excellent at asking open-ended questions but as a systemic team coach you need also to enable activities and action, and this requires be clear about the purpose the activity serves and what you are asking the team members to do.

7. Mobilise the contribution of your extra team member.

A recent executive team of 6 were complaining that they lacked the resource to do everything that was needed. I asked them how they were utilising the seventh member of their team. Who is that they asked. I replied: “She is called synergy.”

8. If you have no idea what to do next pray.

This can be to any God, higher power, the eco-system, life etc; it is only important that you pray to an entity bigger than you. By praying we stop ourselves trying to be heroic or solve the issue by ourselves and develop a humility that asks for help and takes us to the learning edge.

9. We all have the capacity to double our impact in the world – but not alone.

Don’t just ask what I can change and what I cannot change, but rather what I can change: a) alone (very little), b) change by a new collaboration with others, and c) influence others to change.

10. Managers delegate tasks, leaders need to commission outcomes.

Many leadership teams, get stuck delegating tasks and wondering why the responsibility boomerangs back to them. Leadership Teams that learn how to commission other teams, with a clear definition of what needs to be achieved, for whom, by when and within what constraints – and then gives the ownership of ‘how to do this’ to the team, achieves much more.

11. Originality consists in returning to the origin

This lovely quote from the great Catalan architect Antoni Gaudi, connects with my constant inquiry in how we work from ‘source’ rather than from effort.

12. To do things right first you need love, then technique.

Another moving Antoni Gaudi quote I discovered in Barcelona this year and I realised, I would rather help 100 systemic Team Coaches fall in love with teams and the world they serve, than help 1,000 learn the basic competencies.

13. Insight is created in the Neo-cortex of our brains, but change is always embodied.

This connects with an earlier one-liner “The Coaching Road to hell is paved with ‘aha’ moments and action plans that never get enacted.”

2023

1. We need to coach the connections, not the person

For coaching to move beyond very expensive personal development for the already highly privileged, we need to coach the connections, between the leader and their team, between the team and the team of teams; between the organization and all the stakeholders; between the various functions and organizational issues.

2. Turn blame into need and complaint into request

The biggest loss of energy and time in team meetings comes from spending time on polluting BMWs, which stands for Blame, Moan and Whine. We can make a big difference by turning every blame or complaint about the present or past into a clear request about the future. (see also my blog on Grumble to gratitude.....)

3. Discover the extra team member beyond the persons in the room, she is called synergy

Many teams tell me how pressured and over-worked they are. In one leadership team of 6 who expressed this, I said you are not making use of the 7th member of the team. They said they were only six and asked what I mean by the seventh member. I said, “she is called synergy.”

4. Team coaching requires a team of team coaches.

To work systemically it is often more effective to co-coach a team, with two systemic team coaches. But then it is essential the two co-coaches turn up as a team that is more than the sum of the parts and not as a relay-race.

5. The team is not your client but your team coaching partner.

When team coaching, the team is our coaching partner and the client is all the stakeholders that team co0creates value with and for.

6. An effective team takes responsibility for each other's performance, learning and well-being.

I learnt this from my colleague David Clutterbuck, which I think captures very well the movement from individual accountability to collective mutual accountability.

7. Is your inner team more than the sum of its parts?

I wrote a blog on this earlier in the year which was very popular, for we all play many roles in life and how they work as a team, makes a big difference to both the quality of our lives and the positive difference we can make in the world. Do you internal team members collaborate or compete with each other?

8. A Purpose without a plan is a dream.

We discover our purpose from what we can uniquely do what our stakeholder world of tomorrow needs? But if we then do not turn this purpose into a plan, it remains a dream and we are surrounded by unmet needs.

9. When we are in the spotlight, Only the ones behind us can see our shadow

Carl Jung said the greater the light the darker the shadow and this is true for nearly all strong and charismatic leaders. We all need help from those who are behind us and in our shadow: our team members, followers and our children and partners.

10. When the rubber hits the road, the road nearly always wins.

Reality is stronger than the best developed strategies and plans of any individual of group of humans. As one of my teachers said Those who do battle with the reality of what is, never win." So, we need to welcome reality as our teacher and partner.

11. To work from source is to realise that the source is neither just inside you nor just outside you.

When our work is in flow and we are working from source, we are not doing the work by ourselves, but in partnership with the world we beyond us, and the inner and outer merge.

12. We are not our emotions but the space in which they happen.

The more you can witness your own emotions without identifying with them, the greater you ability to witness the emotions of others with compassionate empathy, without becoming collusive or reactive.

13. "Beauty is love made sensate."

Let me end with this wonderful quote from my friend and teacher Elias Amidon, as it captures in five words much of what I a writing about in my 2024 book published by Routledge: "Beauty in Leadership and Coaching: and the transformation of human consciousness."

2024

1. “Life is in love with becoming.”

Discovering this while writing my new book, “Beauty in Leadership and Coaching”, just published by Routledge, was an epiphany for me – that in all of creation no moment and no being have ever been repeated, life (including us) are always giving birth to the new.

2. “Let me live my life like a river flows, constantly surprised by its own unfolding.”

John O’Donohue, Irish Mystic and Poet

This beautifully moves us from the cosmic in one above, to a personal prayer or aspiration, that I share with this inspirational poet.

3. Every problem is a challenge in disguise and a generous lesson from life.

These are the first steps in the practice (which is in the book on Beauty) called from “Grumble to Gratitude”. Just simply reframing every problem as a challenge and a learning opportunity, changes our, and our coachees, fundamentally changes how we engage with the issue.

4. “Whatever the question about the future, the answer is learning.”

This quote from Richard Gerver Author and thought leader, echoes number 3 – we should welcome the fact that everyday is a school day.

5. It is hard to be a good ancestor unless you first learn to be a good descendant.

We need to honour all we have received from those who came before us, in order to pass on more fully, what we can to the coming generations. This summer my friend and colleague David Presswell said something very similar “it is hard to fully embrace life when we judge how it came to us.”

6. Wisdom is the knowledge we receive, that we have tried out in practice, learnt from experience and feedback and reflected on.

I often quote Krishnamurti, who would say in all his talks – what I tell you is not true, it is only true when you apply it in your life and discover its truth yourself.

7. True team leaders and team coaches are more in love with what the team could become, and the beneficial value it could co-create with others, than with their own success.

I never ask a team leader what they want from team coaching, but rather what the team need to become to co-create more beneficial value for all their stakeholders.

8. Culture does not change by PowerPoint, but virally through enactment and role-modelling of the culture that is needed.

First, we need help to see the culture we are immersed in, as it has become part of us and how we experience the world and our habitual ways of doing and being. Then we need help in stepping into the culture that is needed for the future, and live it before we try and advocate it to others.

9. When a senior position in an organization becomes vacant, it is too late to develop the internal candidates for the short-list.

We are helping several organizations integrate their future strategy and organizational development, with their succession planning and the leadership development required to have a strong pool of future-fit leaders, ready for potential promotion.

10. When we start a new job, both parties, like marriage partners, often fall in love with what they want the other to be, rather than what they are.

In the new year I will be sharing a blog on a new approach we have trialled with a couple of organizations, called the “Pre-appointment – Pre-Nuptial.”, to minimise the disappointment of only later waking up to the reality of the organization we have joined or the person we have appointed.

11. People do not buy products; they buy the difference the product will make for them.

To create beneficial value for all our customers and clients, we need to be constantly curious about their changing needs, and what we can uniquely do to meet them.

12. Don't feed people the menu, but discover their deeper hunger, otherwise people may end up eating the menu and wondering why they are still hungry.

From coaches to consultants, I meet many who are ‘selling potential solutions’, before first discovering what is the need and where is the deeper hunger.

13. The difference between inquiry and enquiry: En is the start of end. The thinking stops; In invokes the idea of going in and thinking – the start of dialogue.

This was a lovely phrasing by Andrea Leven-Marion (student on Practitioner in Systemic Team Coaching 2024-2025), to my teaching on the difference between Enquiry that is seeking a factual answer, and Inquiry inviting a collaborative exploration.

