

# The spaces in between

coaching the web,  
not just the team



Today's complex world calls for an evolution in how we approach team coaching. **Catherine Carr, Peter Hawkins** and **Naysan Firoozmand** outline a new era of 'systemic team of teams coaching' – one that looks beyond a single team to the web that connects us all

*'In today's world, no single team can succeed alone. The magic happens in the spaces between teams.'*<sup>1</sup>

**W**e are living through a time of rapid and interconnected change. Ecological and climate crises, growing economic inequality, technological disruption, geopolitical uncertainty and social transformation are no longer separate issues – they are interwoven, complex realities.<sup>2</sup> Organisations can no longer thrive by managing individual teams in isolation. The new imperative is to coach the web of interconnections that shape value, culture and purpose.

Systemic team of teams coaching (STOTC) is our response to today's complexity. While traditional team coaching still matters, it's no longer enough. Teams must act as dynamic nodes in a living network – partnering across boundaries and aligning with their wider ecosystem. STOTC is not just a method, but a fundamental shift in how we think, perceive, act and lead.

### The evolution of team coaching

Renewal Associates and its predecessor, Bath Consultancy Group, both led by Peter Hawkins, have been practising, researching and writing about systemic team coaching for over 35 years.<sup>3,4</sup> Carr and Peters extended this foundation with doctoral research and publications that helped review the field and introduce a practical coaching process framework.<sup>5-10</sup>

While organisational development was expanding, most team coaching still involved one team or a group of separate teams within an organisation. Most team coaching in practice was team building or single workshop development events. In team coaching, there was so much happening in the room that team coaches had ample dynamics and goals to work with without complicating it by 'going bigger'. Team coaches interfaced with a critical, usually senior, team and, indeed, could catalyse change.

Fast forward to today, and most team coaching still focuses on one team at a time. This remains vital – especially for senior teams – but it's no longer enough. Focusing only inward is a trap for both leaders and coaches. It's bounded, familiar, easier, and for newer coaches, it might already be a daunting task. But real transformation requires looking outward – towards the wider aspects of the ecosystem.

### Why systemic team of teams coaching?

The world doesn't suffer from a lack of effort or intelligence. What it lacks is coherence and collaboration. Siloed strategies, fragmented leadership and reactive mindsets no longer meet the moment. Inspired by pioneers like General Stanley McChrystal<sup>11</sup> and Chris Fussell,<sup>12</sup> who reimagined military operations by shifting from command-and-control to their Team of Teams® model, we see a similar need across all sectors, including healthcare, finance, technology, education and government.

To meet this complexity, organisations require more than better communication or leadership development. They need a shared purpose, co-ordinated collaboration and co-creation that connects distributed intelligence and partnership working across boundaries; not just within teams, but across them. Our new book: *Team of Teams Coaching: Using a Teaming Approach to Increase Business Impact*,<sup>1</sup> introduces STOTC as a strategic roadmap to enable inter-team alignment and coherence, collective value creation and systemic organisational transformation.

### The shift: from nodes to webs

In 2024, as research for our book,<sup>1</sup> we surveyed and selectively interviewed 76 global organisations that had experienced STOTC or at least systemic team coaching. We saw an emerging pattern: in larger organisations, leaders and coaching buyers now seek a more sophisticated value proposition. They want team coaches to lay out a strategic roadmap from the start. They ask:

- What now?
- What next?
- How does this align with our broader organisational priorities and purpose?

Coaches may begin with one team (ideally the top team) but are quickly asked how learning will cascade – down, across and outward. Success now hinges not just on how individual teams (the nodes) perform, but on how effectively they collaborate across boundaries (the edges). This is often where traditional models break down: decisions stall, trust erodes. This is where STOTC excels.

### The core of the systemic team of teams approach: coaching the connections

We define STOTC as *'an organisation and ecosystem-wide intervention designed to foster effective collaboration and synergy among multiple teams by focusing on partnering vertically, horizontally and transversally, as well as beyond organisational boundaries.'*<sup>1</sup>

This means we start with the purpose, not with the team. We ask: What is the organisation called to do by the wider ecosystem? What can only be achieved by aligning across teams and stakeholders? In this way, team coaching becomes a strategic, systemic and future-oriented act.

Done well, this approach transforms the fabric and impact of an organisation. Teams begin to map their interconnections and interdependencies. Leaders engage not just as sponsors but as partners. Culture becomes who you are, not something you declare.

### The five disciplines for organisational transformation

We have updated Hawkins' 'Five Disciplines of High Value Creating Teams'<sup>13</sup> to support STOTC. These five core disciplines underpin systemic transformation. These are not linear steps, but interrelated, mutually reinforcing capacities:

#### Purposing and repurposing

Purpose isn't a static boardroom statement – it's a living response to the world's evolving needs. It answers: Who do we serve? What unique value do we offer? What is being called from the future?

#### Clarifying: from vision to strategy

Purpose must be made actionable. Clarifying aligns teams on priorities, goals, structures and outcomes – turning vision into strategy.

#### Co-creating the internal network

Culture emerges in daily interactions. Co-creation fosters trust, cohesion and shared responsibility. It replaces siloed thinking and defensiveness with momentum and engagement.

#### Connecting with the ecosystem

Organisations thrive through their relationships – with stakeholders, communities and the environment. These are not externalities but drivers of performance. STOTC brings them to the centre.

#### Core learning and leading

Core learning is central to transformation, linking all disciplines and expanding collective capacity. It challenges assumptions, shifts mindsets and deepens presence. Leaders move from command to curiosity, becoming system connectors – not by pushing harder, but through synergy, partnership and purposeful collaboration.

### Two journeys: incremental and transformational

Organisations approach STOTC from different starting points. Some take a gradual, iterative path – what we call the *incremental* journey. Others make a bold, whole-system commitment from the outset – the *transformational* journey.

- **The incremental journey** – A single team or small cluster is coached. Insights are gathered, relationships are strengthened and the approach expands organically. It allows the organisation to adapt at its own pace. Over time, the ripple effects create alignment and energy for broader transformation. This allows gradual cultural change.
- **The transformational journey** – Major shifts like a merger, leadership change or market disruption reveal that the old ways won't suffice. STOTC is introduced as an intentional redesign. Leaders shift from command to orchestration – modelling new behaviours, enabling rapid learning and creating conditions for system-wide coherence.

### What drives or diminishes impact in STOTC?

In our research, we asked a core question: What truly makes the biggest contribution to positive results from STOTC? Responses fell into clear patterns.

#### What made the biggest difference?

- Senior leaders not only endorsed the process but actively engaged and modelled new behaviours
- Purpose-led inquiry helped teams ask, 'What can we uniquely do to serve our stakeholders?'
- Diagnostics and live coaching grounded insights in real-world data and practice
- External coaches brought a wider perspective and credibility
- Fostering enough psychological safety and relational maturity to have real conversations and instil deep accountability.

Our research showed that teams who experienced systemic team coaching and STOTC reported higher trust, stronger cross-functional collaboration and better decision making. Cultures shifted from defensive to generative; customer and employee satisfaction and engagement scores improved; and momentum built when teams saw their work contributing to a wider story, and the organisation making a greater impact in the world.

#### What diminished outcomes?

- Lack of understanding of systemic team coaching or its value
- Misalignment between coaching focus, team goals, and business priorities
- Inconsistent follow-up and lack of accountability
- Insufficient trust or psychological safety
- Business-as-usual crowding out commitments.



**CASE STUDY**

(Adapted from *Team of Teams Coaching: Using a Teaming Approach to Increase Business Impact!*)

**Peel Police: Building a team coaching culture**

In 2020, amid the COVID-19 pandemic, racial justice protests and rising public distrust, Peel Regional Police, a police force in the Canadian province of Ontario, faced a pivotal moment. Under the leadership of Chief Nishan (Nish) Duraiappah, they committed to reimagining policing through cultural renewal and stronger community connection.

Chief Nish recognised that meaningful change required transformation. He partnered with an external team coach to introduce systemic team coaching. Starting with the executive team, the effort quickly grew.

'We weren't planning to start with team coaching', Chief Nish said, 'but true effectiveness comes when your whole team embodies that systemic mindset.'

Over five years, coaching took root across the service. Key outcomes included:

- An emerging leaders programme
- Expanded executive coaching
- Women-in-policing initiatives
- A leadership development office to foster a coaching culture
- An internal coaching service.

A defining moment came when officers used force on a distressed young man with autism. Though cleared of wrongdoing, Peel Police chose reflection over defence, asking: 'What could we do differently?'

Their response included:

- **Community engagement:** The young man's father shared his story with officers
- **Collaborative learning:** An autism collaborative was co-created with families and advocates
- **Systemic integration:** A flag-and-response protocol was implemented for autism-related calls.

This approach became embedded practice and earned national recognition, including the Community Safety and Wellbeing Award.

The real success? A culture that prioritised learning, trust and systemic accountability. As Chief Nish reflected:

*'It was simple – consistent, persistent messaging and modeling across all teams, and belief in our five-year vision to be the most progressive, innovative and inclusive police force in the galaxy!'*

Our research partners and associates particularly lamented 'business-as-usual crowding out commitments.' It's a challenge to secure time to do STOTC. It's even more of a challenge to protect it. We teach team coaches to be very clear in contracting throughout to determine critical outcomes the team coaching must achieve at multiple stages, and the necessary time commitment this will require.

The coach stays committed to outcomes – even when life intervenes. The result is a high-value creating team known for cohesion, cultural transformation amid change and measurable gains.

STOTC is not magic. It requires commitment, a clear road map and systemic coherence. Without these, change stalls, momentum fades and silos reassert themselves. With them, transformation is not only possible, but inevitable.

**The world doesn't need more isolated experts. It needs integrators – people who can move fluidly between roles, hold multiple perspectives and cultivate relational intelligence across human and ecological systems**

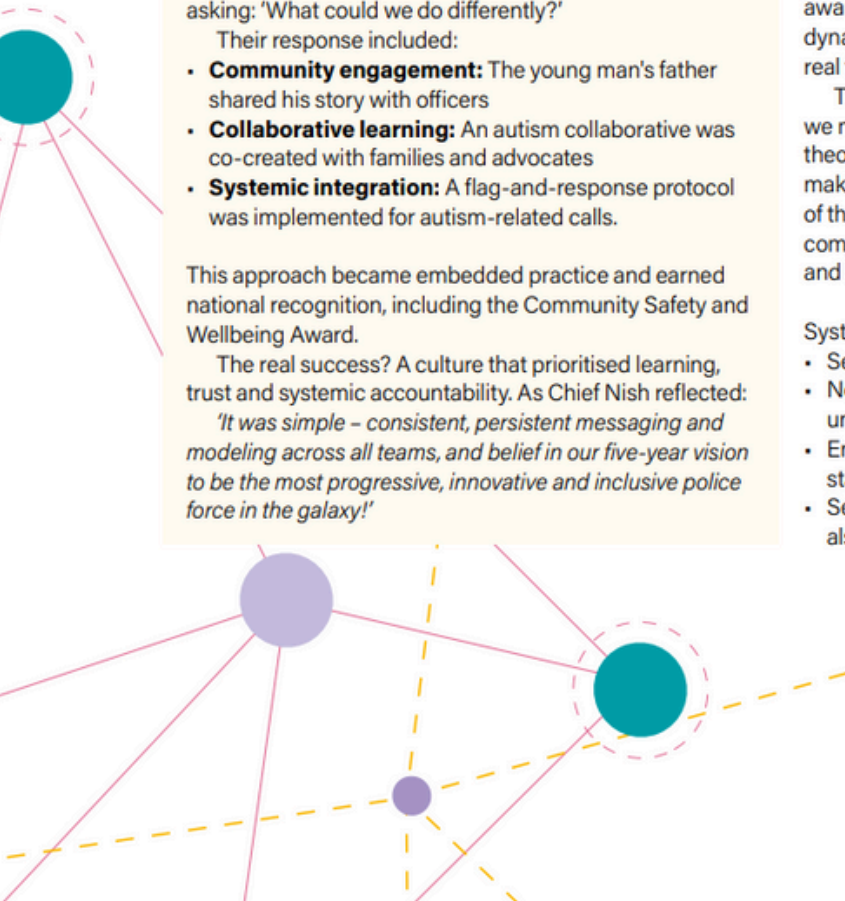
**Systemic awareness: seeing, sensing and shifting**

Perhaps the most significant shift STOTC asks of us is in our awareness and mindset. Before systems thinking lies systemic awareness – a broader, deeper capacity to sense patterns, dynamics, tensions and interdependencies as they emerge in real time.

To lead and systemic team coach effectively at this level, we must develop our vertical capacity – what developmental theorists call our stage of adult development or meaning-making – the ability to operate beyond the prevailing mindset of the organisation.<sup>13-15</sup> This growth enables us to perceive complexity more clearly, engage with ambiguity more skilfully and support transformation more sustainably.

Systemic team coaches:

- Sense the 'system in the room' without being absorbed by it
- Notice what's disconnected or being re-enacted unconsciously
- Engage with the wider field – not only clients but their stakeholders, histories and ecologies
- See what is happening now in its historical context, while also imagining what is possible – and what must emerge.



This is a developmental practice, not a technique. Through the disciplines of regular supervision, peer dialogue and personal reflection over time, STOTC practitioners develop an inner capacity to navigate outer complexities. They become instruments of coherence and connection.

### The call for integrated development professionals

The world doesn't need more isolated experts. It needs integrators – people who can move fluidly between roles, hold multiple perspectives and cultivate relational intelligence across human and ecological systems.

STOTC calls for a new integrated profession: not just coaches or consultants, but practitioners who can:

- Co-create deep transformation
- Facilitate cross-boundary learning
- Engage whole systems
- Bring the voice of the stakeholder and ecosystem into the room.

In his recent book, *Beauty in Leadership and Coaching*, Hawkins outlines seven tenets of systemic coaching – principles to live by, not just apply.<sup>16</sup> This 'third way' goes beyond traditional coaching or consulting, integrating co-inquiry, co-design and embodied change. It includes:

1. Co-creating the coaching partnership
2. Engaging the full stakeholder system
3. Bringing stakeholder voices into the room
4. Attending to the wider ecology from the start
5. Working at the learning edge
6. Coaching relationships, not just problems
7. Fostering embodied, sustainable change.

These principles are not simply 'add-ons'; they are core to practising systemic coaching that truly addresses today's complex, interconnected world.

### If not us, who? If not now, when? If not working together, then how?

We are no longer in an era of incremental improvement. The challenges of our time demand transformation. STOTC is not a technique, but an approach that invites us to see what needs to emerge; listen to the spaces in between, and coach not just individuals or teams, but the living web that connects us all.

The future won't wait for us to get comfortable. The shift to systemic team of teams coaching is already underway. Coaching that focuses only on individuals or single teams is no longer fit for purpose. Our complex world demands more systemic connection, courage and engagement. The work ahead is collective – and the moment to act is now. ■

This article is based on the recently published book, *Team of Teams Coaching: Using a teaming approach to increase business impact*,<sup>1</sup> by Peter Hawkins and Catherine Carr, published by Kogan Page.

### ABOUT THE AUTHORS

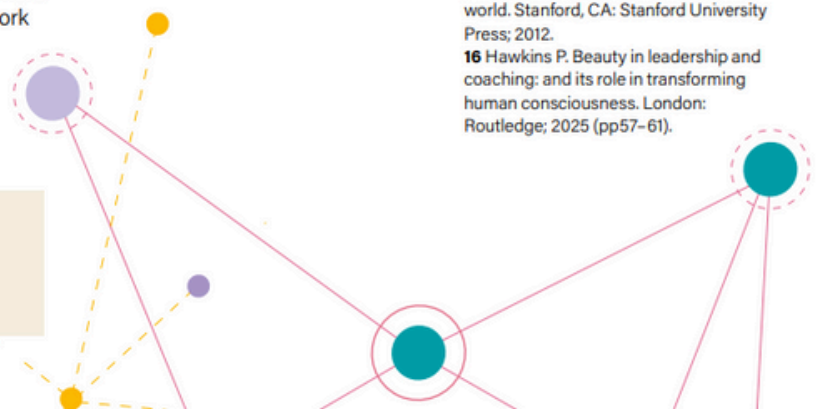
**Dr Catherine Carr** is a thought leader in systemic team coaching and organisational transformation, specialising in multi-team systems and cross-boundary collaboration. An associate of Renewal Associates, she leads Renewal's key training programmes. She is also a registered psychotherapist, master corporate executive coach, supervisor and faculty member at Royal Roads University.

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