

# THE ZEN OF GROUP COACHING

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## **The Hedgehog Effect: The Secrets of Building High Performance Teams**

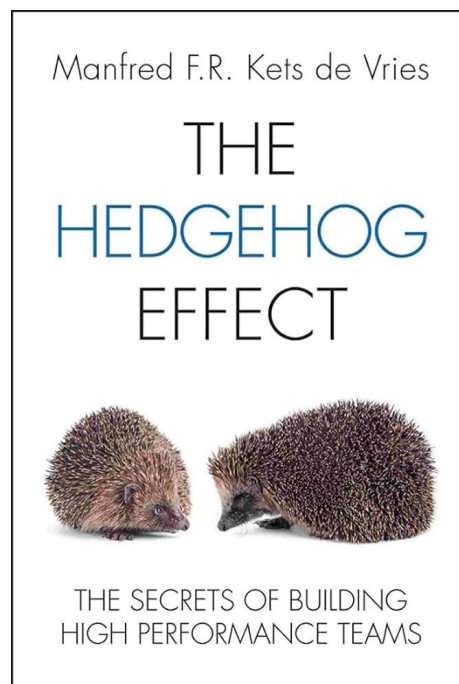
by Manfred F. R. Kets de Vries

In *The Hedgehog Effect*, Manfred Kets de Vries presents the case for leadership group coaching as an experiential training ground for learning to function as a high performance team. His group coaching model, incorporating living case studies, has been developed over more than 20 years of delivering programs to top-level executives and sets the standard in the field of leadership group coaching.

Written for coaches, consultants, leadership development directors, and anyone working in or with teams, *The Hedgehog Effect* begins with an in-depth analysis of what teams and groups are all about. The intricacies of leadership coaching are illustrated with an elaborate example of a team coaching intervention. In Part Two, the author applies a psychodynamic lens to the dynamics of teams and groups, taking a close look at relationship patterns, how groups evolve, and the phenomenon of the group-as-a-whole. Part Three takes a more systemic perspective, addressing the challenges that change processes pose for people in organizations, and how to create best places to work. Kets de Vries supports the whole with the story of an organizational change initiative accomplished through group coaching.

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**You cannot teach a man anything. You can only help him discover it within himself.**

Galileo Galilei

**We make a living by what we get. We make a life by what we give.**

Winston Churchill

**Leadership is the art of getting someone else to do something you want done because he wants to do it.**

Dwight Eisenhower

Once upon a time there was a stonecutter who was very dissatisfied with his lot. He wanted to be more powerful. One day, he passed a wealthy merchant's house, and through the open gateway glimpsed the man's numerous fine possessions and important visitors. "How powerful that merchant must be," thought the stonecutter enviously. "I wish I could be like the merchant and no longer a modest stonecutter."

To his great surprise, his wish was granted. Suddenly the stonecutter was the merchant, enjoying more luxuries and power than he had ever dreamed of, and was envied and detested by those less wealthy than himself. But soon a government minister passed by, carried in a sedan chair, accompanied by attendants, and escorted by soldiers beating gongs. Everyone, no matter how wealthy, had to bow low before the procession. "How powerful that official is!" said the stonecutter aloud. "I wish I could be a government minister."

And as suddenly as before, he was the minister, carried everywhere in his embroidered sedan chair, feared and hated by all around, who had to bow down before him as he passed. The stonecutter liked his new position very much.

One hot summer day, the minister was feeling very uncomfortable in his stuffy sedan chair. Looking up, he saw the sun shining down on the land. He realized that the sun that was more powerful than any minister—indeed it must be the most powerful thing in the world. It shone down on all things. Everything grew because of the sun. The sun had deadly powers. "I wish I could be the sun," said the stonecutter. And so he was.

A few days later, as he shone his power down on the inhabitants of the land, a large storm cloud passed beneath him, blocking his rays from the earth. Frustrated, the stonecutter realized that the sun was not the most powerful thing in the land if a simple storm cloud could diminish his greatness.

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So he wished to become a storm cloud. And he pelted down rain and threw out bolts of lightning, and thunder resounded all over the land, demonstrating his mighty power. He flooded the fields and villages and was cursed by everyone. But soon he found that he was being pushed away by a great force—the wind. “How powerful it is!” marveled the stonecutter. “I wish I could be the wind.”

Then he became the wind, blowing tiles off the roofs of houses, uprooting trees, feared and hated by all below. But after a while, he ran up against something that would not move, no matter how forcefully he blew against it—a huge, hulking rock. He tried to move it but, despite all his efforts, it would not budge. “How powerful that rock is!” he thought. “I wish that I could be a rock.”

So he became the rock, and was more powerful than anything else on earth. Then one day, he heard the sound of a hammer pounding on a chisel, and felt himself being changed. “What could be more powerful than I, the rock?” he wondered. He looked and saw the figure of a stonecutter.

The challenge for the stonecutter was to discover his inner power, beauty, creativity, and love. He would never feel totally happy until he fulfilled this inner need to be satisfied with who he really was. Would the stonecutter have realized his inner potential faster if he had had a wise guide? Who knows? Perhaps a sparring partner might have saved him from the complicated journey he embarked on, giving him the right advice at the proper moment, or just listening to his thoughts after each transformation. By asking open-ended questions, and pushing him gently, a well-trained outsider might have helped him recognize that he could achieve his goals in a much more straightforward way.

Think of what would have happened if the wise guide had been able to convene a group that included the stonecutter, a merchant, a government official, and so on. Each would have spoken about their own realities, and the stonecutter would have come to understand his own unique position in the world much sooner.

### **Group coaching: a social learning experience**

In group coaching, participants engage in a social learning process. They learn through identification with each other and the coaches. There is an enormous emphasis on mutual self-help. One powerful dynamic at play is individual-to-group, that is, the group’s focus on and reaction to the issues raised by the person in the hot seat.

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The second powerful effect is what I call the “cloud dynamic.” Like cloud computing that connects the user to resources that are based in the “cloud,” as opposed to actually possessing them, cloud dynamics refer to themes in the mind of the group-as-a-whole that are brought out as the group creates a collective consciousness during the discussions. These themes could be, for example, anxiety, irritation, envy, competitive feelings, boredom, awe, or a collective sense of release as one member gets a burst of helpful insight. Often these “clouds” are left untouched by the group, even though the themes are affecting everyone in the room.

“Cloud” observations can be helpful when the group discussion seemed to have come to a halt. For example, by describing a dream, or recounting a metaphor or a well-known film, they voice the group’s unspoken annoyance with an individual’s irritable behavior patterns.

Zen masters tend to be extremely adept at cloud observations. For example, there is the story of the great Taoist master Chuang Tzu who once dreamt that he was a butterfly fluttering around. In the dream, the idea that he was a person was alien to him. On the contrary, he was only a butterfly. Suddenly, he awoke and found himself lying there, a person once again. But then he thought to himself, “Was I before a man who dreamt about being a butterfly, or am I now a butterfly who dreams about being a man?” Or, to shift focus while being in a team building session, “Is the fantasy that haunts me, my fantasy, or is it the fantasy of the group-as-a-whole?”

### **Each team has specific moods and identities of its own**

Frequently, without conscious awareness, some members of a group will take the initiative to articulate things that have been left unspoken by others. Fantasies, dreams, screen memories, erotic expressions, transference reactions, somatic conditions, or mood states may be externalized and resonate within the group-as-a-whole. These revelations can lead to insights, and open the door to change.

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### **What are your dreams trying to tell you?**

Reflect on a recent dream and ask yourself what it represents.

- My dream represents a conflict that has been bothering me for some time.
- My dream represents an impending crisis.
- My dream represents an important insight about my life.
- My dream represents a specific mood state.
- My dream represents another way of looking at myself.
- My dream represents relational transference patterns concerning a person I know.
- My dream is defensive, covering up an issue I don't really want to deal with.
- My dream represents the solution to a difficult problem.

**Can you find one of these themes in your dream? If so, pay attention—these dreams can help you to better understand yourself.**

### **As group coaching unfolds, individuals' habitual modes of relating will be re-enacted within the microcosm of the group.**

They will repeat effective as well as potentially maladaptive behavior within the here-and-now of the team, making for very illuminating interplay between individuals and the dynamics of the group-as-a-whole.

Thus a team intervention becomes a kind of laboratory where the interpersonal dynamics of the various individuals are displayed—not only manifest behavior but also more latent patterns. These dynamics offer excellent opportunities for the members of the group to witness and comment on these behaviors, and their consequences. Encouraged by other members of the group, each individual may explore new ways of dealing with previously rigid, ritualistic behavior. The insights provided in the group are often carried over into the individual's larger social environment.

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### **A very important element of the group dynamic is the cathartic experience.**

To tell one's life story—and to be listened to respectfully—can be very liberating. What's more, while listening to other people's life stories, the participants also come to realize that they are not alone in their confusion. The realization of the universality of some problems—seeing that others struggle with the same problems—can bring a great sense of relief. This “just join the human race” effect has great benefits. Mutual identification—a sense that you share a commonality with someone else—offers many opportunities to discuss other ways of doing things. It also makes for mutual support and guidance.

Through participation, observation, and interaction with others, members of the team start to change habitual thought processes, feelings, and behavior patterns. Peer and coach pressure, and the provision of continual feedback, influence behavior modification. Gradually, particularly if there is more than one team building session, the members of the team gain greater self-confidence in engaging in courageous conversations, develop new leadership skills, and become better solving their own problems and coaching others.

### **The difference between plain glass and a mirror**

Let me end this chapter with a short story told to me once by one of my student coaches, who had been concerned about one of her clients, a hard-working, creative man whom she had helped in his career. When she met him the first time during a team coaching session, she had been impressed by his selflessness, and his willingness to help the other members of the team. His talents had taken him to the top of the organization and it had been a long time since they last met. As she was one of the presenters in a conference in the town where her former client's company had its head office, she had contacted him, telling him that it would be nice to meet once more. He had been very pleased for them to meet—but for her, the meeting was a disappointment.

Her former client had picked her up from her hotel. The conversation had stumbled along as he showed her some of the sights of the city. He had asked her opinion of his sports car; during the conversation he had done a fair amount of name-dropping, mentioning all the important people he knew; he also wanted to show her his private airplane. She remembered that even before his success as an executive, he used to be very socially attuned—status had been important to him—but now he seemed to care only about the luxuries the world was offering him. Upon returning to the hotel, she invited her ex-client for a drink in the lounge.

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As he got up to leave, she asked him to look out the window: “What do you see?” “I see lots of people minding their own business,” was his answer. “Now, please look in this mirror,” said the coach, showing him the mirror hanging over the fireplace in the lounge. “What do you see now?” His ex-client looked, and smiled at what he saw. “I see myself.”

“You know,” the coach said, “the difference between plain glass and a mirror is the reflective layer of silver on the back. Sometimes when we add a little silver, all we can see is ourselves.” She hoped by her comment to remind him of his more altruistic side, which seemed to have been lost over the years, but also, more importantly, of the humility and emotion he had felt, and expressed gratitude for, when his peers had given him honest feedback about his leadership style in their group coaching session. She hoped to remind him that the opinion of others is often less warped, and therefore more valuable, than one’s own self-image.