Finding the source:

team coaching and the power of 'unlocking'

Team coach and supervisor, **Dr Katrin Hinzdorf**, demonstrates how she applies the concept of 'role lock' to help founding teams of start-up organisations find healthier dynamics, release blocks and move forward

As a coach, I've encountered time and again the dilemma of how, when a start-up founder team is blocked in terms of group dynamics, the whole organisation is impacted. This can result in the full collapse of the start-up, with all the financial fallout that entails, and, often, the end of a dream.

In my years of experience, I've discovered that one effective way to approach this blockage is through the concept of 'role lock'. Transactional analysis (TA) psychotherapist and coach Dr Charlotte Sills describes this as a specific kind of role rigidity that 'involves a single group member being entrenched in a role and becoming increasingly frustrating to the rest of the group, which then polarises against him or her'[1] (p.282), or which results in the group becoming passive, leaving that one person to carry the burden of responsibility.[2]

Role lock theory

'Role lock' was first introduced by group psychotherapists Bogdanoff and Elbaum in 1978 to describe the tension that arises when a group avoids dealing with an interpersonal issue.[3] This tension creates group anxiety and so the root issue is either avoided altogether, or adapted to a compromise that avoids the unpleasant topic. Yet, as long as the topic remains undiscussed, there is an unconscious need to resolve it; the group needs someone to address the topic in order to move forward and a 'role vacuum' is created. A group member whose intrapsychic impasse mirrors the issue slips into a certain role; for example, the person in the group most likely to question leadership in an aggressive manner becomes the 'war lover'[3] in a situation where the avoided topic is verbal feedback and being able to speak your mind openly.

Whereas Bogdanoff and Elbaum posited the theory of 'role lock' in psychotherapeutic group sessions[3], and Sills applied it to teams in which there is a clear and established team leader[1,4], I take the concept in a different direction. Here, I apply the theory of role lock specifically to founder teams, where everybody is allegedly equal, and there is no elected or enrolled leader.

What is special about a role lock in founder teams?

Founder teams of start-up organisations often start out as friends or family members; there is usually a very strong personal relationship between them. This dynamic might mean team members want to be seen as equal and avoid issues for fear of ruining their relationships.

Each of the organisations I have worked with involved the division of the company into different departments, each managed by a founder. In every team, I observed someone behaving as 'the difficult one'. This person seemed to fight for something, but was stuck, and the entire team seemed stuck as a result, while avoiding a particular topic. I wondered: Could it be that 'the difficult one' is the one who fights to ensure the integrity of the whole? Could the difficult one actually be the 'source' — the person who originated the idea of the start-up and the direction of the company, but who is not recognised as such?

The concept of the 'source' goes back to Peter König, a Swiss management consultant and specialist for systemic relationships in organisations. He claims that every organisation and every project can be traced back to a person who had the idea and the courage to take the first step, and thus take a risk. This person intuitively knows what is needed, but often has no words to describe it. According to König, a source must be heard and recognised, otherwise they will not come into their power and will either struggle, or withdraw.[5]

In my research, two hypotheses emerged from my work with a total of 11 founding teams:

1. One specific role lock is attached to the 'source' of the company (in addition to those identified by Bogdanoff & Elbaum[3]), who indicates the avoided topic of the team by standing outside of the group or assuming responsibility

2. There is a way to address and unlock the role lock in the team, and therefore in the whole company.

The importance of the source concept

Team A, four founders: Tim, Liam, Anne and Paul
Despite asserting that he wished for equality in the team, Liam would regularly question decisions, putting his own department front and centre, which led the others in the team to feel browbeaten. There were subsequent arguments about this, after which the team would return to being amicable. Liam soon became seen as the 'difficult one' in the team.

Tim initiated coaching for the entire team, but with Liam in mind. Tim often took the floor during our team meetings. However, he was not perceived by the others as the 'difficult one'. The year before, Tim had considered leaving the company – it had become too big for him, and he didn't see himself as 'a leader'. During the team discussion, however, it transpired that Liam was the source of the company. Liam was the team member who seemed to be trapped in a role lock, while Tim was the most sensitive, and sensed that something had to happen. Liam was always perceived as difficult by the others when a decision had to be made about something he didn't agree with, but he didn't show himself as the source and didn't step up to this role.

By using coaching to attend to a possible power struggle within the team, Liam began to acknowledge his role as the source and his responsibility in the company. Tim then felt liberated, and was able to leave the company through a conscious separation process, knowing that the leadership vacuum no longer existed, since Liam had taken responsibility as the source.

Team B, two founders: Maria and Isabell
Maria and Isabell had a small start-up company, still in its initial phase with investors. Investors also have their own ideas, and Maria was rather conformist and liked to follow the investors' wishes. Isabell, on the other hand, had a personal resistance to conformity, which led to defensiveness and confrontational behaviour. This in turn led to Maria withdrawing. A closer look at the dynamics between them revealed a personal issue, which was later addressed in individual coaching. It turned out that Isabell was the source.

When they both dealt with the concept, they were able to understand their dynamic and work with it. Otherwise, it would have led to further withdrawal and even separation from Maria. Isabell took her place as the source and assumed responsibility for the company's DNA. By consciously engaging with the source idea and recognising the special intuition of the source, Maria was able to connect even more strongly with the company and behave more consciously. They were also both able to speak authentically with one voice at subsequent investor meetings.

Both cases featured the division of the company into different departments, each managed by a founder. After the teams had recalled the original source idea of the company, it was evident that the company had diverged significantly from that foundational idea. In the process of reflecting on this, the source began to take responsibility for the original idea, understanding that it was up to them to ensure the integrity of the whole.

It is important that everyone is well versed in the original idea of the company so as to work to its ethos and create strong sub-sources. If the named source does not dare to take their place and wants to hide within the group, this creates adaptation within the group that hinders innovation. Indeed, every founder team in this study reported stagnation as a consequence.

Why doesn't the source want to stand out? Is this reluctance connected to a fear of being alone? Fear of the responsibility of ensuring the integrity of the whole, and of making decisions? Fear of being the group's guiding presence, so jeopardising the group's supposed equality? In every team, I observed that the source felt this divergence most strongly, behaving as the 'difficult one'. Facing these fears and inner blockages individually and as a team in the protected setting of a coaching session led to clarity and a way out of the role lock. Role lock around supposed issues of power and control therefore deflected from the real issue of the source's fear of standing up and taking responsibility for the founding idea – a subject also avoided by the team.

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How coaching can help

Bearing in mind the additional founder team-specific role locks that I have outlined above, coaches should pay particular attention to whether a team member exhibits any of the following behaviours:

- They fight for recognition;
- They want to assert their energy and ideas;
- They isolate themselves;
- They do not seem to be in their power;
- They appear emotionally unpredictable and are thus perceived as the 'difficult' one.

My experience and research with 11 founder teams has shown that in all cases, the person exhibiting such behaviours was the source of the company. The source will continue to behave this way until the whole group addresses the avoided issue behind their behaviour. Otherwise, the blockade will ultimately lead to the implosion of the entire founding team. All sources have a creative vein and are part of a founder team in which everybody desires equality. In all 11 teams, the avoided topic was the fear of standing up and taking responsibility for the original idea of the company. Because of this avoided subject, no personal recognition can be given by the other team members. Therefore, the fear of 'standing up' and the need for recognition are in a tensile relationship within the source, because s/he feels the inner struggle most. As the source becomes seen as the 'difficult' one in role lock, they reveal the subject that the whole team has been avoiding, and which is also, by extension, avoided by the whole organisation.

In all founding teams, an engagement with the source concept led to the previously supposedly 'difficult person' acknowledging their place as the source and developing the courage to take responsibility for the company's DNA. The founders then made better and more efficient decisions, took on different roles, and learned the importance of recognising and strengthening the source. In each case, releasing role locks had a major impact on the entire organisation.

Knowledge about the group dynamic concept of role lock offered fresh ways to illuminate a fixed dynamic. If a group is not performing, ie., working smoothly and connectively, then the coach needs to work on the group dynamic. Coaches can bear in mind the concept of role lock when asking questions to determine the circumstances shaping the behaviour of a team member. Exploring the topic that an individual has drawn attention to, and which the group, conversely, avoids, the coach must also help the role-locked individual(s) recognise how their impasse (block)[3] or valency (power)[6] is part of an established pattern. Accordingly, my own approach to founder teams via team and individual coaching works to address these issues.

When working with a founding team, the results of my research recommend asking for the source at the outset of coaching. Experience shows that there will either be a sense of immediate relief in the room, or that the team won't dare to face the question and suggest the company was a 'joint idea'. Yet, with a mindful process, including methodological clarity from the coach, declaring a company to have only one real source can produce rapid, beneficial effects. When the source dares to show themselves, and the others recognise the source, the group realises that they need not be concerned that a hierarchy will emerge, only greater clarity to a natural order of things. This allows freedom, especially for the source, as everyone can admit that the previous dynamic had led to the source being perceived as a difficult person. At the same time, issues of responsibility and appreciation become clearer, issues that had been hitherto avoided by the group, and by the whole organisation.

More generally, teams should learn to regularly take time to reflect on their interactions and dynamics. You may find that one person is permanently filling a psychological role, rather than this role 'rotating' as it would in a healthy team dynamic. It is then important to look more closely at the issue that this person embodies – the issue that the team has been unconsciously avoiding. If you get the person out of the role lock, you release the block that is holding the whole team back. ■

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr Katrin Hinzdorf is an occupational and clinical psychologist. She is an accredited master coach and accredited supervisor of the EMCC (European Mentoring & Coaching Council). For the last 17 years, she has worked as an individual and team coach for international corporates, banks, family businesses, government agencies and non-profit organisations. Based in Berlin, Katrin is particularly dedicated to helping founders and start-up teams on their journeys. She loves to share her knowledge and experience in podcasts, at conferences, in international webinars and articles as well as block sessions at universities.

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