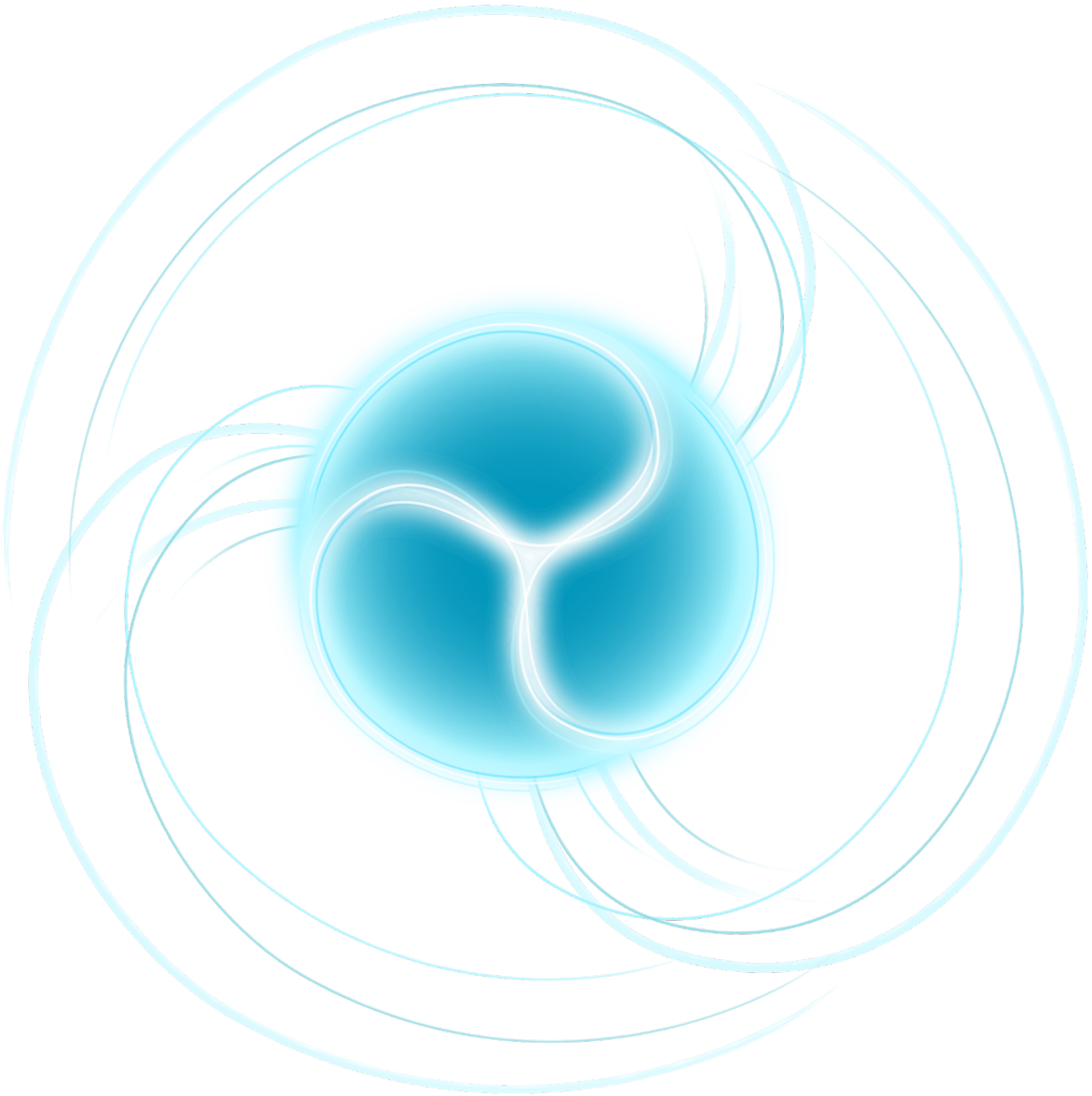

Illuminating opportunities for growth in a Team Ecosystem

"I, WE, IT Liminal Space Model" for Team Coaches

White Paper

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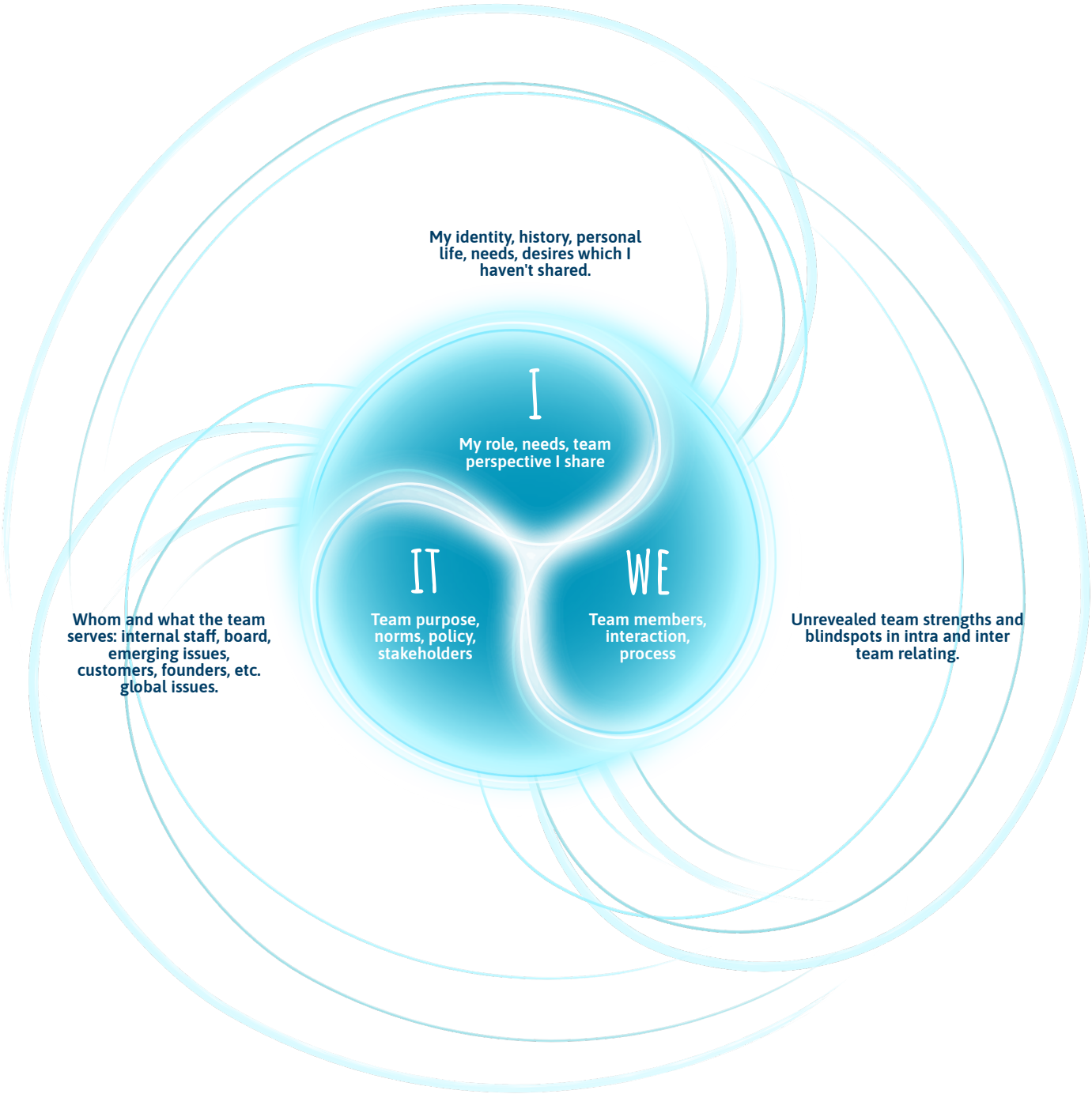


Figure 1: Image of our model

Introduction

"The model promotes understanding of a coaching approach. It assists the practitioner ... in navigating a coaching process and planning for improved effectiveness as a coach." (Lennard, 2010). Models in team coaching provide us with frameworks for describing and differentiating aspects of team coaching and associated activities of team coaching (Hawkins, 2022). As the field of team coaching develops, so too has the range of team coaching models on offer.

In this article we share an emerging model we have been developing for team coaches to support the teams they are working with to explore the team's unique ecosystem in service of helping them work more effectively together to fulfil their full potential as a team.

We describe the background to this work, we share our model and its component concepts, we offer some insights into how we have been using the model in our team coaching practice. We invite readers to road test this model, to share their perspectives on what resonates, what makes them curious, how they might use this model in their practice, and importantly share any learnings with us that we can use to inform further development of the model.

Background

At the outset of developing this model, we were particularly struck by the **"I"**, the **"WE"** and the **"IT"** of teams.

We noticed that during the pandemic the focus on supporting the wellness of team members dominated the concern for **I**. While of significant benefit to personal resilience though the crisis, we wondered if it would be valuable for teams to gain awareness of their wider ecosystem. We believe that most of us are naturally more aware of what **I** want or need, and perhaps less so of what is needed by others, either the **WE** or the wider **IT** of the team in terms of the purpose required from our stakeholders. We thought that there could be value for teams and coaches to have a model that depicts and works with these aspects.

We believe there is potential to invite a much more deliberate focus on the individual "**I**" within the team, the collective "**WE**" of the team's members, and to work with the metaphor of the team "**IT**", the team identity, in ways that can be useful in the practice of team coaching.

Our work builds on other "**I, WE, IT**" models (Wilber, 2000), by including the concepts of team ecosystem and liminal space, which we see as particularly relevant to team coaching.

Key features of our model

It is our shared belief that how we frame and talk about teams makes a significant contribution to how we think about and respond to challenges of working as a team. The image of our model provides the framing, in this sense, and lies at the heart of how we work with the model with teams (see Figure 1).

Our model has two core components

1. Team Ecosystem

Thinking about a team from the perspective of an ecosystem focuses attention on the way in which individual elements connect and grow. Each element has its own role, so that it contributes to the development of the whole thing (Stokols et al, 2019). In our model, we see **I, WE, IT and the wider system within which the team sits** as key elements constituting the team ecosystem, where:

- **I** – focus here is on the individual – what is their role, their needs, their identity, their history and so on
- **WE** – focus here is on interpersonal relationships within the team, team dynamics; processes of decision making, communication, conflict
- **IT** – focus here is on the remit of the team - what are they required to accomplish, what team norms exist, what do stakeholders require of the team
- **Wider System** – the focus here is on wider systems involved, that can be ever changing and require the team to respond and adapt.

When we work in teams, there is always the opportunity to move between the perspectives of **I, WE, IT** and **wider system** the team is located in, in doing so, to be able to optimise our contributions in a team. What we are hoping to do with the model is to facilitate that agility, to invite teams to consider all aspects of the ecosystem.

2. Liminal Space

We use the gestalt language of liminal space (Denham-Vaughan, 2010) to describe the boundary, or threshold, between the **I**, the **WE**, and the **IT** and the **wider system** in which the team exists. This image of our model brings attention to individuals, teams, and team coaches, navigating these transitions, recognising that individuals influence the team and wider systems, and that the team and wider systems, influence individuals.

We see Figure 1 (on page 2) as a generative image (Bushe & Marshak, 2015). We advocate using the visual representation of our model to invite people to consider the liminal spaces between **I, WE, IT** and **wider systems**. Within the dialogic conversation evoked by the image, there is an opportunity for people to imagine new ways of thinking and acting in teams.

Inviting dialogic exploration of these transitions across the liminal spaces can be anxiety-provoking as what will emerge as team members cross the boundaries between **I, WE** and **IT**, cannot be known in advance. Yet, it is in supporting transitions of these liminal spaces where we believe the team coach can really help the team make shifts in its ways of working and being, giving teams a framework to learn and grow together by engaging their collective potential. In using this model, key considerations for teams become the exploration and collective meaning-making around questions such as:

- What is required from the **I**, in being a team member in service of the **WE** (team);
- What do individuals **(I)** need, from the other team members and the team to be the best version of themselves; and
- What is required of this team by the **IT** (ecosystem, organisation and stakeholders) and how does the **IT** (organisation and team purpose, vision, strategy, structure, processes) support and enable the **I** and the **WE**.

Appreciating that what's figure for each of us may well differ at any one point in time and is in continuous movement, this model invites team members to actively work together to bring the various transitions into awareness and help collectively to see the whole – the team's unique ecosystem. Working in this way, the team develops its collective ability to build its effectiveness based on what's happening within its wider systems that it needs to respond to, its individual member and collective team strengths, and its assessment of needs.

We propose that **"I, WE, IT Liminal Space Model"**, has the potential to enhance team effectiveness by:

- Enabling the team to form common awareness of the team ecosystem. This empowers the team to make changes to meet the system needs, whilst, at the same time, considering potential impact at an individual, team and system level **(I, WE, IT)**
- Achieving deep change at an individual level as team members find more of themselves in relation to the team and show up for who they need to be collectively as a team
- Drawing attention to transitions involved in ongoing connection, communication and change in teams

We have developed a bank of powerful team coaching questions that coaches might find helpful in early experiments of using our model in practice. These can be found in the accompanying **"I WE IT Liminal Space Model" Questions Handout,** see sample questions on page 8.

What are we understanding about the utility of our model?

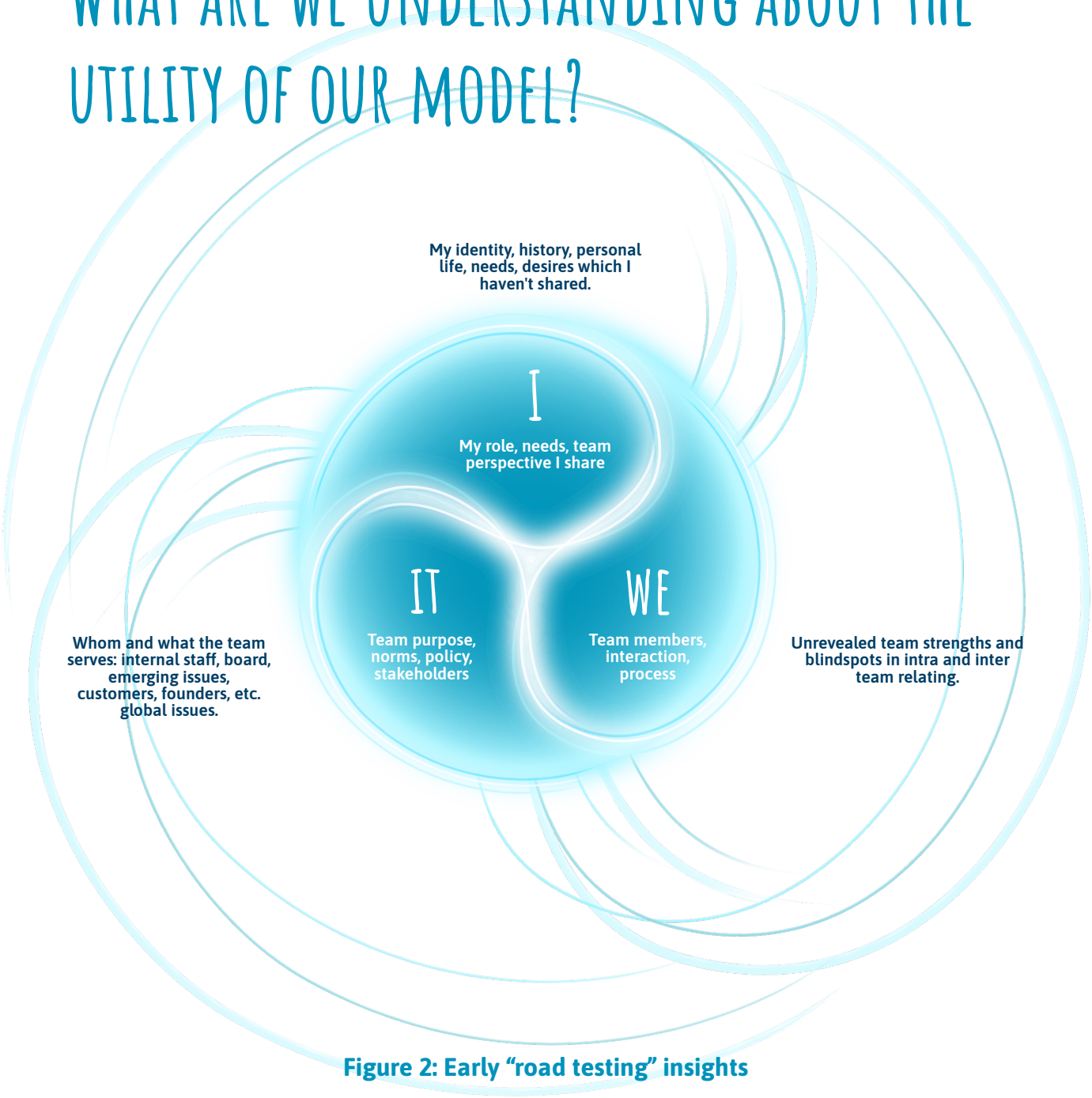


Figure 2: Early "road testing" insights

Road Test

- Team Coaches
- Teams being coached

First Impressions

- Useful model
- Face validity
- Easy to explain – 10 mins
- Extensible

Observations / Insights

- We all focus first on I
- Crossing boundaries can be aided from both sides
- Covid, WFH & Global teams need to understand each other more broadly

Questions

- Could it support dialogue and trust?

Notes from the Wild – First Impressions & Usefulness

We have been "road testing" our model with other team coaches and with teams we have been working with (See Figure 2). First impressions on sharing our generative image and seeking feedback have been along the lines of "Oh, that's, that's useful"; "It has what I was thinking of face validity, which is if you look at it, it seems like oh, yeah, that makes sense." Sharing the model (Figure 1) can be done in 10 minutes. It seems to land well when it is used to support dialogue and trust building and co-creating psychological safety early in a team coaching assignment.

Courtesy of the movie "Eat Pray Love", many of us have learned the beautiful Italian word Attraversiamo which means let us cross over. The liminal space in our model is that medium of crossover between **I, WE** and **IT** and the **wider system**. In developing our model, and with our clients, we really began to pay attention to significant crossover moments, where there was a shift in the team, something happened that enhanced the team identity, and added to the effectiveness and satisfaction of the team.

Sample Questions and a Client Example

The questions we've included in Table 1, and our supporting handout, are just some questions that team coaches could use to explore the liminal spaces within team ecosystems, in service of the team developing its effectiveness over time. We offer these questions in the knowledge that you will develop even better ones yourself and develop your own methods. The objective here is to grow your curiosity to road test the model and share your experiences in doing that with us.

The supporting handout can be accessed here.

Sample Questions

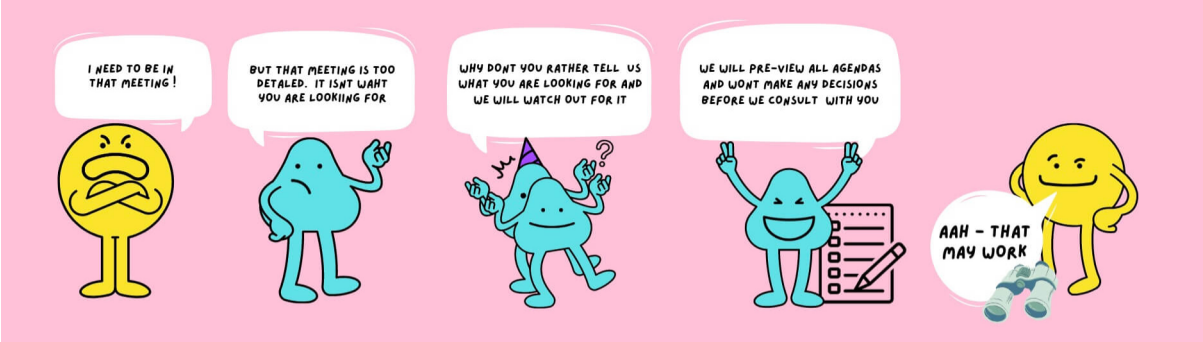
What would the questions in this space be illuminating?	Sample Questions to move through the Liminal Space
How can I and WE be more intentional in terms of how we show up?	**I to WE** • What do I need from this team to be my best self? • How might past experiences of being in teams be influencing how I show up now? **WE to I** • Under what circumstances do we as a team cede to the request of an individual? • What can we do to bring your best self forward? • How does our team leverage every team member's strengths into how we work?

What would the questions in this space be illuminating?	Sample Questions to move through the Liminal Space
What is IT, the true need or objective of the team, that WE need to pay attention to?	**WE to IT** • What do we imagine our stakeholders need from us to be fully satisfied? How are we checking this out? **IT to WE** • What does the organisation reward and how does this create patterns of behaviour that impact us working as a team vs competing as individuals?

What would the questions in this space be illuminating?	Sample Questions to move through the Liminal Space
Can individuals demonstrate the link between their role and the wider purpose?	**I to IT** • What does it take from me to put aside my needs for the good of our team purpose? **IT to I** • What stakeholder needs or changes can individuals that are close to them make us aware of? Are we noticing individuals that have strengths in championing the purpose and organisational voice?

Table 1: Examples of liminal space questions

Client Example



The "I" who couldn't let go and the "WE" who invited him over for the sake of the "IT"

I met Bob, in my capacity as a team coach. He presents as a strident, energised director of a high profile biotech company. In our first conversation, he shared how he felt he was the custodian of risk for the company. His approach to discharging this role was manifesting in a range of behaviours that were impacting negatively on the wider director team. A key issue for his colleagues was his vociferous insistence that he join all tech, product and operational meetings, regardless of the fact that he was creating a bottleneck due to pressures on his availability and alienating his fellow directors in the process, often disrupting meetings to focus on his issues, rather than whatever might have been the planned purpose of the meeting.

There was a sense of stuckness in the team. They had been struggling with this issue for some time. I wondered if they might find the **"I, WE, IT Liminal Space Model"** of use. I shared the image of the model with them and it caught their interest. I invited them to try an experiment – essentially working with one collective ground rule "we will respect your ask and have your back", and two questions:

- "what I (Bob) need from each of you?"
- "what do our stakeholders need?"

The presence of the image as a focal point for the conversation brought a calming effect, a more relaxed and supportive dialogue. Speaking from "I", Bob described feeling the pressure of managing all the business risk. His colleagues started to see how this pressure was affecting Bob and began to explore ways of supporting Bob. The focus on stakeholders needs (IT) helped depersonalise this from an "I" "WE" opposition, enabling Bob to be more specific on what he needed from colleagues. They arrived at an understanding that enabled them to move forward. Bob agreed he didn't have to be in all meetings, if he:

- knew the meeting agenda
- was kept in the loop of any commitments made beyond the current contract
- was informed of any potential new relationships
- and his colleagues did a monthly review of contracts

Using our model as a frame, we see how it helped Bob's colleagues reach out to help him cross the liminal space between I and WE, in service of IT. They are collectively enacting this new agreement which will be reviewed in a month's time, for their continued learning and teamwork.

Conclusion

Like any model, the **"I, WE, IT Liminal Space Model"** helps us to explore and open up areas that we (as team coaches) and the team may well be blind to. But just as with any model "the map is not the territory" (Korzybski, 1983) and Heffernan (2020) counsels "the temptation to try to simplify complex systems is how you get them wrong … what gets left out or what changes can turn out to be vital" (2020: 88).

For this reason, we would love to hear from readers. Beyond engaging with this article, we would love to have you join us at our upcoming *Team Coaching Studio Community Webinar* in *TCS Meet* on the *Mighty Networks* community platform. We will be inviting the community of team coaches to explore:

- In what ways might our model resonate with you and your practice as a team coach?
- What pique's your curiosity about this model?
- What do you like about the model?
- What do you think might be missing from the model?
- How might you use this model in your team coaching practice?

We are also inviting community members and any team coach interested to "road test" the model and share learning with us from its use in the field. Our contact details are overleaf.

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Profile of Authors of the "I, WE, IT Liminal Space Model"

A truly international group of team coaches who connected through the Team Coaching Studio Diploma in Team Coaching Shona, Rachel, Alana and Sandy are passionate in supporting teams to understand and explore their unique ecosystems in service of helping the team work more effectively to fulfill their potential. Their experience in the field is demonstrating how team effectiveness, relations and psychological safety is enhanced by illuminating and using the often undercapitalised liminal space in a team ecosystem between **I, WE** and **IT** identities and the **wider system**.

Dr Shona Brown

Based in London, England, Shona has a particular interest in building effective leadership for staff and service user-led improvement and integrating equity and inclusion throughout the organisational development approach. Her work involves executive and career transition coaching, small and large group facilitation, and leadership team development.
https://www.linkedin.com/in/dr-shona-brown-frsa-a94b9268/

Rachel Doogue

Based in Wicklow, Ireland, Rachel believes that great leadership is something you find inside of you by being more of, not less of, yourself. Rachel supports leaders and teams to liberate themselves to do their best work navigating through discomfort and relishing the challenge of achieving growth in highly complex environments. Her work includes executive coaching, team coaching and group facilitation.
https://racheldoogue.com/

Alana Jossel

Based in Johannesburg, South Africa, Alana Jossel is a team coach, whose focus is on helping teams reach their full potential by deepening awareness and understanding of self and team; enabling meaningful dialogue in service of the team's goals, vision, and strategy. Alana brings a powerful combination of IT and business experience to the services she provides, including executive coaching, team coaching and leadership development.
https://www.coachingworks.co.za/

Sandy Smith

With bases in Seattle and Whidbey Island, Sandy is a Master Coach, Certified Team Coach and Individual and Team Coaching Supervisor. Before her career as a consultant and coach, Sandy held executive positions in the telecommunications and software industries, including founding two technology companies. She believes that leadership skills are developed from the inside out, beginning with values and purpose. Sandy's approach to organization development is grounded in research, applied behavioural science and her own personal experience. She is strongly invested in shared learning.
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