

On Being A Coach....Reflecting with a Supervisor **Published in ICN Magazine**

In our last issue Michelle Lucas shared her thoughts on how reflecting with peers can help generate fresh perspectives and allow us to benchmark our work in the marketplace. Reflection can come in many forms and in this third and final part of this series we will take a look at reflection with the help of a supervisor.

Supervision is often poorly misunderstood – the word itself doesn't help as it gives the impression of someone who is looking over your shoulder and telling you what to do. However a properly trained coach supervisor will typically take a much more collaborative approach. There are three primary functions of supervision.

The first is known as **“restorative”** and gives us a clue to the origins of supervision from therapy and counselling. It's still pertinent to coaches because our clients issues can often have an impact on us – hasn't everyone had a nightmare boss at some point, who still makes our hackles rise at the thought of how we were treated?? The restorative function of supervision helps us “vent” in a safe space. Importantly where a client issue raises some unfinished business for a coach there needs to be an opportunity to work this through and on occasions identify that further work (coaching or counselling) might be beneficial.

The second function is known as **“normative”** – within an organisation this might be about ensuring the coaching being delivered “fits” with the model of coaching in that organisational context. For an independent coach it's more about whether their practice is congruent with their rhetoric. Occasionally the supervisor will identify some coach practice that hints that an ethical issue is in play. Here the supervisor may offer up their own experience of how a coach might be “expected” to act. Mostly, the supervisor will be curious about how the coach came to act in the way they did. The supervisor's primary aim is to raise the coach's awareness of the choices they have as well as ensuring the coach understands what best practice “should” look like.

The final and probably most obvious area of supervision is **“formative”** or developmental support. This is where the coach may work through times when they have been “stuck”, or encourage the celebration of successes and in doing so identify existing and new techniques to use in future. As a coach matures this developmental function becomes less about “tips and tricks” and much more about what is going on for the coach when with their client that could inform their coaching practice. Often this means the coach learns new things about themselves in the process. In this sense thinking of it as “formative” doesn't quite go far enough for me, rather I see this is a “transformative” function.

When working with independent coaches, a supervisor can sometimes find themselves drawn to another function – a coach may want to clarify how they articulate how their work to the market, their USP. Sometimes they want to problem solve how they get additional clients. These more commercial aspects are where a supervisor could put a mentoring hat on to support the on-going development of a coach's business.

Different types of Supervision ...

Most coaches who have had supervision will have received it on an individual basis. This is perhaps the classic execution of supervision because it gives the coach dedicated attention to review their

work. However, as the economy has tightened so has group supervision become more popular. It makes a lot of sense to share the cost of the supervisor with a group of coaches. This does however mean that each coach gets less time. But there are definite benefits in terms of witnessing a variety of approaches and learning through others. Just like coaching, supervision can be done face to face or on the phone/skype, and to a certain degree via e-mail.

Different types of supervisor ...

Not all supervisors will deliver both individual and group supervision, and in our book it's entirely legitimate to use more than one supervisor. However, it can be useful to work with a supervisor consistently and regularly – it gives continuity and your development can be more easily charted. Choosing a supervisor is a bit like choosing a coach. As an independent coach most times you have a choice and as an internal coach most times you don't! However, if you do have the opportunity for choice it can be helpful to consider the following:

- How do you know they are safe to practice supervision? Training? Accreditations? Testimonials? References?
- Do you want them to have a similar or different background to you? We've found it can be helpful for newer coaches to have supervisors from a similar background. The empathy is higher and they can provide more concrete examples to help learning. Typically a more seasoned coach will benefit from a supervisor with a different background – this makes it easier to be challenged, to become more curious and to pick up different techniques and philosophies.
- Do you get on? Rapport is often important, even if you are looking for someone to challenge you, generally you'll still want to like them!

So what's so special about supervisors?

A common question is" if supervision is a collaborative experience, why not just do it with a peer?" Firstly, as we discussed in the last issue of this magazine, we do think there is a place for reviewing your client work with a peer. However, but this is more accurately "reflective practice" rather than supervision. One of the biggest downsides of working with a peer, is the potential for collusion – especially if you review each others work on a reciprocal basis. Returning to the 7 eyed Model mentioned in part 1 of this series, eyes 5 & 6 are specific to reflecting with a supervisor.

Eye 5: the relationship between the coach and the supervisor. This operates at a number of levels, all of which hold useful information. What types of intervention the supervisor makes will probably be based in their "assessment" of the coach's developmental level. A supervisor will be considering what the coach is "ready" for. Hawkins (2006)¹ has articulated a 4-stage model to Coach Development. If you are interested in finding out more there is a quiz and further references on our website. There may also be some parallel process going on – this is where the way in which the coach is working with the client, also plays out in the supervision room. For example: often a coach will bring a client case to supervision where the client is stuck and is looking to the coach to "tell them what to do". The coach then comes to the supervisor "stuck" in knowing how to help the client and asking the supervisor "what should I do?". That's parallel process.

Interestingly, if you map over time what you choose to bring and not bring to supervision – this also says something about the relationship. Do you always bring problems and therefore keep a "mentor – mentee" dimension to the relationship? Do you always bring your successes because you want affirmation and recognition from a "tutor"? Do you bring "impossible" situations because you are looking to "test" your supervisor? It can be an interesting question to consider what you are not

1 Hawkins, P (2006) cited in Hawkins, P & Smith, N. (2006), *Coaching, Mentoring and Organizational Consultancy. Supervision and Development*. Maidenhead: Open University Press

bringing to supervision. For example, often you can get stuck into a routine of only reviewing “your struggles” – it can prompt a change in your relationship dynamic if you start to bring your successes.

Eye 6: the supervisor herself. Just like eyes 1 & 4 where both the client and the coach have their baggage to content with, the supervisor doesn’t come in “clean” either. So it’s important the supervisor has clarity about her own “stuff”. Because it is this “stuff” that might be prompted either by the coach in front of them and/or the ultimate client. It is essential that the supervisor has a good sense of where things bubble up from, because the supervisor is an important “conduit” for the parallel process. The supervisor needs to tap into how she is experiencing the coach and understand how much of that experience is being provoked by the supervision content and dynamics and how much is being prompted by her own “private” experience.

The supervisor uses her “here and now” experience to articulate things that are emerging for her which may stem from things which are just beyond the coaches conscious awareness. Inevitably so much can go on in a coaching relationship that we may only be able to respond to a proportion of it. Much is “experienced” but not all of it processed at a conscious level. In “re-living” the coaching session in the supervision room, the supervisor may physically experience how things were at the time (the height of empathy) almost “on behalf of” the coach. She may also be reminded of similar experiences of her own and be able to share those experiences to help raise the coach’s awareness of what may have been going on for them. Of course sometimes the supervisor gets it wrong. She’s actually experiencing some of her own “unfinished business”. Handling this authentically and in a way which does not undermine her credibility is a one of the toughest moments that a supervisor has to manage. Her challenge is to continue to be available to her client, the coach in the room when some “unfinished business” has just surfaced.

With all of this going on, it’s perhaps not surprising that in our view, supervision is best carried out by a trained and experienced coach supervisor.

Intensity of supervision

Some coaches take the view that they will “have supervision when they need it”. We always find that a bit worrying. That’s a bit like saying you’ll have your car serviced when it breaks down ! We also don’t think that the more experienced you are as a coach, the less supervision you need. In fact one of the key dangers we see in “seasoned” coaches is a tendency for complacency and a lack of self-doubt - two characteristics that are positively evident in coaches fresh out of training. In our view “self-doubt” is often where good coaching questions and certainly good questions for reflection come from, whereas complacency is more likely to blunt our awareness.

There are some guidelines from the professional bodies which match the number of hours you spend coaching to the number of hours you need in supervision – 20 to 1 is typical. However, what we have noticed is that coaches who aren’t particularly busy, can “atrophy” and lose their sharpness. On going group supervision is a great antidote to this, because it’s not always necessary to bring a case of your own. However, you can still contribute to others cases using the experience you do have and you can learn some things through “osmosis”. Usually a group session reminds these coaches of how much they love the coaching work and it energises them to go and see if they can find some new clients to add to their practice.

Summary

The intention of this 3 part series was to help you consider the importance of reflection to your coaching practice, whatever your learning style. Finding the mix of individual, peer and supervisor related reflection that works for you can be tricky. Changing work and personal commitments are likely to challenge the reflection habits you develop. So have a variety of means for reflection so that

you have some contingencies if your preferred methods fail. The most common comment we get from coaches at group supervision once they have shared their coaching dilemma, is “pew ! so it’s not just me then!!”. Almost all coaches will at some time struggle with “professional loneliness” – it’s almost inevitable in the one-to-one nature of the work we do. You support your clients – but who is supporting you ? So reach out to your fellow coaches – you know what they say, a problem shared, is a problem halved. More importantly the more you can reflect on your issue alone before sharing with others, the greater the insight you are likely to generate with your colleagues.

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http://www.greenfieldsconsultancy.co.uk/CoachingSupervision/Reflective_Resources.htm