

Does a great coach need a supervisor?

Jan Brause, Beverley Collins and Christine Froebel explore the challenges of creating credibility for coaches and their clients within the coaching profession

In preparing this article we found ourselves asking some fundamental questions, such as why is supervision such a hot topic now? What do we get personally from our own supervision? What would the impact be if we didn't have supervision?

The purpose of this article is to reflect the process of enquiry and inquiry we experienced ourselves. Our exploration stimulated our own thinking and we invite you to join us in the spirit of curiosity as we share our own thoughts and experiences; much as a coach would with his own coachee as they externalise new and emerging thoughts.

Imagine you are exploring the intriguing 3D dot pictures, sit back and allow the context to present itself in a way that hard work and analysis can only frustrate.

This topic has relevance for you whether you are a coach, a learning practitioner purchasing the services of a coach or a line manager working as a coach in your organisation.

A perspective on coaching supervision

Until it becomes mandatory, coaches can choose whether they engage in the process of supervision. Why is supervision so

important for some coaches and apparently less so for others? Is there a view that they don't need it? Can't they find a supervisor they trust? Or maybe they are concerned at what a supervisor may 'find lacking in their practice'.

Very few of us would consider it acceptable to not have our car serviced at the required intervals. We recognise the benefit, either in rectifying a problem we are aware of, identifying a potential problem or in providing maintenance to ensure the optimal efficiency and performance for longer. We know how important this service can be for a third party when we come to sell the car.

In comparison, how many of us treat our own health with the same due care and attention? Unless we have a genetic disposition or have experienced poor health personally, we tend to visit the doctor only when we are aware of something 'not quite right'.

So, what does this tell us about our attitude to the process of supervision? Are coaches treating the health of their coaching relationships like that of their relationship with their own health? Will it take regulation (an almost inevitable next step) before supervision takes its place as the necessary health check for



the coach? How many coaches are losing out on the benefits of maintaining emotional resilience and objectivity in order to deliver consistently for coachees and their organisations?

What is coaching supervision?

In simple terms, supervision is a time in which the coach can reflect on all aspects of his practice, where he can receive formal and informal feedback on his work and where the interests of his third-party relationships and the quality of the work he does with others is central to the discussion.

Supervision helps the coach take a meta view of his work, his relationships with others and with the organisation. It ensures ethical practice and it provides added value for the coachee and his organisation by helping the coach step back and reflect on his practice, make sense of complex situations encountered in the working environment and identify alternative strategies for moving forward. In this way, supervision operates at many levels by providing professional development, quality assurance and ethical and emotional support.

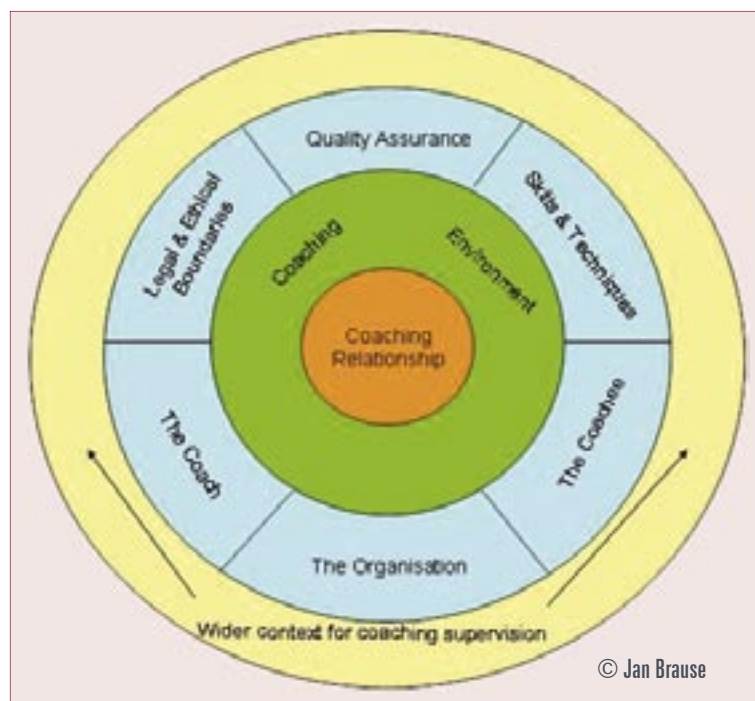
Supervision is a habitual activity that maintains peak performance and resourcefulness for the coach. For some, it is used proactively to prepare for a coming situation and for others it is used reactively to review a situation after the event.

Three of coaching's leading professional bodies – the Association for Coaching, the International Coach Federation and the European Mentoring and Coaching Council – have joined forces to debate this issue and to gain clarity and consistency on coaching supervision and what it means for the coaching profession.

How does supervision differ from coaching or mentoring?

Coaching focuses its attention on the coachee and his issues –

The context for coaching supervision – meta perspective



usually business or performance related. Often, coaching is from a non-directive position where the coach does not provide advice or guidance but, through skilled questioning, observation and feedback, he encourages the coachee to work out the solutions for himself.

Mentoring is a service provided by someone who has considerable experience in the field in which the mentee works or knowledge of the subject matter involved. In this way a mentor can offer guidance and advice on business practice or performance requirements. The mentor has 'been there, done that and got the T-shirt'.

Supervising in this context is a process that focuses its attention not just on the coach but also on the relationship the coach has with his coachee and client organisation. It holds a third dimension in the relationship and in this way really does start to deliver a 'super' (over) 'vision' (view) on the broader relationships the coach is holding.

It is through this meta perspective (illustrated above) that supervision takes into account the

quality and effectiveness of the relationship for the benefit of the coachee. The many facets to this relationship include *the coach* and his challenges, *legal* and *ethical boundaries*, *quality assurance* of the coaching practice, *skills* and *techniques* used by the coach, *the organisation* in which coaching takes place and what the *coachee* actually brings to his coach.

Supervision scenarios

SCENARIO 1 Supervision before the coaching experience – coach perspective

I had been contracted a few years ago to work with a new coachee who was at the head of his organisation and in the public eye. My initial delight and anticipation of the challenge was soon replaced by some doubting questions:

Will I really be able to help this individual? What expectations might he have of me? Will I be able to meet these expectations? What if I don't deliver? Am I good enough?

What I was able to explore with my supervisor at the time focussed on the level of contracting with

the coachee and how I would establish our working relationship, identifying goals and outcomes, and my own self-perception in relation to the coachee.

Through questioning, observation and sharing experience with my supervisor, I recognised that my self-doubt or unhealthy mindset, if not managed effectively, could have a detrimental effect on the relationship I could build with my prospective coachee. Together we were able to explore a way that I might manage my concerns, including the first meeting and contracting. I became aware of how my anxiety may be projected onto the coachee, which could lead to a distancing from him and a negative impact on the coaching relationship.

The process enabled me to move back into my healthy mindset, approach the challenge with renewed energy and enthusiasm and, more importantly, build an effective coaching relationship that enabled the achievement of defined outcomes.

How is this different to being coached? I may not have recognised the impact of past experience on the current situation nor would I have received the direct feedback and support that I had asked for in supervision if I had been working with a non-directive coach.

How is this different to being mentored? My supervisor was not an expert in personal relationships, neither had he coached someone at this level, so he was not in a position to offer advice from a position of expertise.

SCENARIO 2 Supervision during the coaching experience – coach perspective

I have been coaching four senior managers from a traditional public sector environment. The desired outcome was to work flexibly to meet each individual agenda. The sponsor identified a requirement to support a leadership programme and individual feedback from the

coachees as evidence of success. While enthusiastic and curious, I felt uncertain about working so ‘flexibly’ without an explicit contract or platform for evaluation.

The first session with the coachees raised the following issues: *The time available to identify and deliver individual outcomes. Will the outcomes meet the undefined expectations of the organisation? Were the selected coachees in the right place for coaching? Recognising personal tension working in this environment.*

My objectives from supervision were:

- To deliver quality coaching and be equally present at the first and last sessions
- To explore my anxiety about working so ‘flexibly’
- To be clearer about what is important to me as the coach

We believe coaching supervision helps build credibility in the profession. Do you?

- To discuss how to manage counselling issues arising during coaching.

Working through these issues with my supervisor helped me confirm the importance of building into the contract the purpose of coaching and to recognise how my anxiety about the lack of structure had produced counter transference. Through exploration, questioning and sharing experience with my supervisor, I recognised the impact of transference from my own past in a hierarchical organisation. I was also able to identify transference issues through the coachee and give myself permission to stop safely and sensitively when the circumstances were not right.

What did I learn from supervision? The experience enabled me to move into a healthy mindset to

approach future challenges. I re-framed perceived ideas about public sector environments and recognised the importance of feeling in control of the pre-contract, when I don’t ‘own’ the client. I acknowledged the need to avoid compromising my own values and identity as a coach and that my measures of success are reflected in what the coachee wants. This learning not only applies to this particular scenario; it also has great value for me in working with other clients in the future.

SCENARIO 3 Working with emerging themes – supervisor perspective

I have been working with a coach for a number of months now. At a recent session, rather than consider a specific situation relating to her coaching practice, we chose to consider at a more holistic level her coaching caseload. We did this by her sharing the detailed notes she completes at the end of each coaching session and sends to the coachee. Her coachees are from a variety of organisations and are at varying stages of the coaching relationship.

I asked her to describe the notes. She began by describing how important they are, how the detail matters and that she has to make sure that they are with the coachee as soon after the session as possible. We talked more about ‘importance’ – to whom, with what purpose and any feedback from the coachees.

As I read through the notes, there were themes that struck me. The notes mentioned several times how the coaching was of benefit and in general terms what they were going to do next as a result of the session. What they did *not* record was the activity as a result of the previous session, where the raised awareness came from and what the coachee was doing differently outside the sessions as a result.

The coach sat and reflected when I asked who the notes were written for. After a long pause, she said

that they were for her benefit. It was important for her to know that the coachee recognised the value of the sessions and activity outside the sessions, as a result, was of less interest; *she* owns the notes, not the coachee.

Having been on holiday, she hadn't had time to complete the notes prior to the next session. She recollected that the coachee hadn't noticed that none had been sent. So, what next? I asked. She thought for a while and said: "The notes need to be the coachee's reflections, the coachee's commitments, the coachee's awareness, not mine."

We then agreed that the next session would be to consider her anxiety about whether coachees receive benefit from her coaching. Her anxiety about being 'good enough' is one I guess we all experience from time to time. Her new awareness about this anxiety may not have happened if we had not taken time to consider her coaching practice in this holistic way.

Preparing for supervision

As we can see from the scenarios, supervision is not something to be taken lightly. To get true value, it needs careful thought and preparation. What the coach needs support in will very much depend on his level of experience.

A newly-trained coach may be asking the question "*Am I doing this right?*" or "*Am I asking the right questions?*" His focus will likely be on knowledge, skills, methods and techniques. He may see the supervisor as someone who can provide structure and ease his anxiety.

A more seasoned coach is likely to have more self-confidence and be more independent in his work. What he might be looking for from his supervisor is to gain insight, to reflect and review from a meta perspective, and to gain more wisdom rather than knowledge around his work.

Preparation for the coach means taking time to reflect on his coaching work and asking some



basic questions such as:

- What recent issues have I become aware of in my coaching work with others?
- What anxieties do I have about working with a particular client?
- What has been particularly challenging or exciting about my work?
- What concerns do I have about particular relationships I have with clients?

It is also useful to reflect on the following questions:

- What aspect of my work am I reluctant to share and why?
- Am I hiding some parts of my work from supervision?
- Do I edit what I bring to my supervisor?
- Am I willing to bring only problems or successes to supervision?

So does a great coach need a supervisor? You decide

At the start of this article, we invited you to join us on a journey of both enquiry and inquiry and to engage with us from a place of curiosity, whatever your relationship with coaching might be. It may be that this article has raised more questions for you and, if so, we delight in your interest and encourage you to explore further some of the resources offered at the end of this article.

Our own belief is that, as interest in coaching and what it can bring to organisations grows, it will not be good enough for coaches to wait until there is a problem to be addressed. Clients and organisations will be seeking coaches who are pro-active in maintaining the health and welfare of their practice and, when regulation arrives, they will be well prepared.

We believe coaching supervision helps build credibility in the profession. Do you? ■

Resources

1. Association for Coaching website: www.associationforcoaching.com
2. European Mentoring and Coaching website: www.emccouncil.org
3. International Coach Federation website: www.coachfederation.org
4. CIPD report *Coaching Supervision – Maximising the Potential of Coaching*
5. Michael Carrol & Maria C. Gilbert *On Being a Supervisee, Creating Learning Partnerships* Vukani Publishing, 2005

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