Coaching & Mentoring Supervision

Theory and Practice

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A French model of supervision: supervising a "several to several" coaching journey

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Introduction: supervision in France

Very few books related to supervision have been published in France, even in the domain of psychotherapy (Malarewicz, 1999; Delourme & Marc, 2008). Less than five are available. Recent ones specifically related to coaching are Devienne (2010) and Darmouni & Hadjadj (2010).

In fact, it is assumed and accepted that a well known therapist or coach, who is possibly the author of several reference books, who is involved in teaching and training, who often delivers speeches in the symposiums, "naturally" becomes a supervisor. No one asks if he has been trained, what his theories and frameworks are and what kind of logic drives his supervision practice.

But, slowly and surely, new supervision patterns are emerging and small communities of supervisors share how they work and how these processes can be improved. We cannot review all these different patterns but describe in detail only one: supervision of a team of coaches fulfilling an organizational coaching contract. Specific methodologies have been developed for this kind of supervision and the objective of this chapter is to explore the conceptual roots and show how the whole process is driven.

Organizational and team coaching

If many books have been written addressing organizational change, only few mention organizational coaching. Very few provide frameworks and perspectives that can assist a team of coaches working with multinational companies or on cross-border challenges and using a true coaching process. Most approaches rely on either the Organisation Development (O.D.) paradigm (Lewin, 1951; McGregor, 1971) or the Corporate Culture Change methods (Schein, 1985). Such models are either 'commitment based', trying to convince employees and middle management by showing positive images of the future, or 'compliance based', changing behaviours by imperatives.

Coaching for executives started to develop in the USA and in Europe during the 1980s. Team coaching began to be a reality at the beginning of the 1990s. Logically, organizational coaching should have emerged early in the millennium. In fact, its development has been slowed down by the existence of several strong 'compliance based' methodologies like, for instance, *business process reengineering* (BPR) (Stewart, 1993) and *performance management*. These methodologies assume a top-down approach with an 'external expert' or 'guru' role for highly paid consultants. Very often the resistance of the system is such that the mission fails (Millward, 2005, p. 243-292).

Organizational coaching has been conceptualized recently (Moral & Henrichfreise, 2008; Moral & Henrichfreise, 2009) and its development in France is very encouraging. The basic principles are as follows:

If we consider the many theories of organization, from the very beginning, with Frederick Taylor (1911) and Henri Fayol (1918), up to the most recent ones, we eventually come to represent an organization as a system interacting with its environment. Within this system, four subsystems are possible entry points when one wants to trigger a change. Our experience in France is that the first two are those on which coaches are working and the last two are beloved of consultants:

1. *Corporate culture*. Many authors have considered changing the organization by changing its culture: Edgar Schein (1985), of course, but also Ronald Burt (1999), John Kotter and James Heskett (1992), Gareth Morgan (1989), Millward and al. (2003), Weick and Quinn (1999), Giroux and Marroquin (2005), etc. ;
2. *Corporate structure,* which is more or less represented by a combination of the organization chart and the corporate processes, both being implicit or explicit depending on the country and the activity;
3. *Information technology,* which provides new opportunities not only in terms of communication between people but also in terms of managing data, information and knowledge. Recent technology development makes it possible to have organization patterns that were beyond our imagination a few years ago. Enterprises are more and more like cyborgs, half human, and half cybernetics;
4. *The decision system,* which carries objectives to execution, usually from top to bottom.

There are tight interactions between the four subsystems. Acting on one of them usually strongly impacts on the three others. Experience shows that while there

are four potential entry points, it is necessary to traverse all four subsystems to facilitate sustainable change.

At the levels of executive and management teams, coaches are now familiar with techniques that can be imbedded in an organizational coaching mission (Moral & Henrichfreise, 2009). For instance, Open Space Technology (Owen, 1997) and World Café (Brown, 2005) are appropriate to work with large groups.

A "several to several" coaching approach

The definitions of coaching now include multiple to multiple as a category of coaching process. For instance the European Mentoring and Coaching Council (EMCC) quotes:

 "Within organizational contexts coaching and mentoring may include 'one-to-several' or 'several-to-several' coaching or mentoring activities/interactions. The coaches and mentors may be internal or external."

An organizational coaching request can be expressed throughout the organization in terms of its different forms - training, individual coaching, team coaching, leadership seminars, reorganization projects, etc... Therefore the coaching process needs to combine various competencies, such as consulting, facilitation, coaching, creativity and intercultural sensitivity. Coaching an organization means managing different interventions, at different places, at the same time, through different people in more than one language. Hence it follows that the coaches have to create a 'mirror image' of the client organization by creating a community of coaches able to connect to all levels of the client system.

Assembling several individual coaches who act independently will not be effective. They will focus only on the individual or team coaching missions with limited communication with their colleagues. What is needed is a community of coaches who are individually able to let go of their personal approaches in order to give way to some sort of collective and creative wisdom. The community has to be capable of using their system as a 'mirror image' of the client's system so as to sense the emergent opportunities and risks, to co-create appropriate interventions, to explore collective coaching and leadership and all questions which may arise during the coaching process.

Finally, these coaches have to be willing to take the risk of being excluded at any time, not because they are not good enough but because the client system rejects a specific coach symbolising its own scapegoat. There will inevitably be 'victims along the way' in organizational coaching carried out through this kind of

engagement. Incidentally, with respect to financial remuneration, innovative ways of 'getting fairly paid' are needed. This question has been addressed in details (Moral & Henrichfreise, 2008) but there is still room for improvements: clearly, organisations are quite brutal and unfair when excluding a coach.

In this approach the coaching process follows a very classical logic which was first mentioned by Lewin (1951): unfreezing-changing-refreezing. The difficulty is to pass the "wall of resistance" shown on fig. 1 which schematize the fact that a system in a stable state moving to another stable state has to come upon an unstable position. This figure summarizes some of the notions of the First System's Theory initiated by Ludwig Von Bertalanffy (1937). Since then new concepts have been developed to address the issue of the "wall of resistance" in a team.

Figure 1: Systemic approach of change
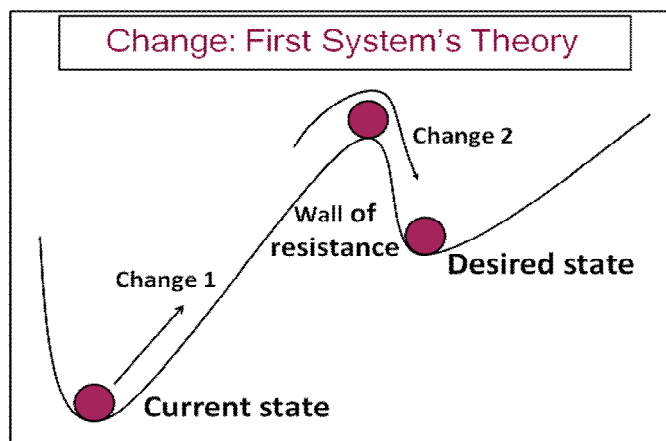
One of these concepts is the "triple point metaphor". In physics there is a combination of temperature and pressure where matter is at the same time a gas, a liquid and a solid. A very small variation of the conditions drives to one of the three states. The idea in organizational coaching is to enable the client team to reach a state where they can collectively appreciate the value of the past, sense the emergence of the new, and feel the freedom of choice. Then they can experience simultaneously the world of chaos, protection and emergence. At this point, minimal interventions like encouragement, a speech from a member of the board of directors (or an outside speaker) or a specific language can cause a group to 'collapse' to one of the three possible states: remaining in the past, embracing the future or getting stuck in the process of choice.

Identifying what is the resistance and when it appears is quite central in the organizational coaching process. In the case illustration described later, the resistance emerged when the triple point was attained: seminars with the client team were more and more intense and the objective of the coaching mission became visible. At the beginning of the most critical seminar, the CFO replaced the CEO who decided to give priority to a customer call. In the previous seminars the opening speech of the CEO was always encouraging the participants to think long term and to forget about their current business difficulties. This time, the opening speech given by the CFO was abruptly short term achievement oriented. This broke the momentum but the coaches were hopefully able to identify this as a major resistance and use the negative energy to push the participants into a "Change 2". Temptation was high to cope with the CFO request and use the seminar to set short term action plans.

Supervising a team of coaches: concepts

As a consequence of the above, supervising a team of coaches involved in an organizational coaching mission is not like supervising a person or a group. Technically speaking, attention given by the supervisor to what is variously called "parallel process", "systemic reflection", or "isomorphism" has to increase. As we have put in place a team of coaches that mirrors the organization, we can expect this mechanism to occur intensively and extensively.

The mechanism under these names was first identified by Searles (1955) who called it "reflection process" and gave the following definition: « *Processes at work currently in the relationship between patient and therapist are often reflected in the relationship between therapist and supervisor* »

A lot of attempts have been made to give an explanation of this mechanism. The fact that something is replicated from a system to another was the source of several theories combining identification and projection (Miller & Twomey, 1999).

In France we often use the term "systemic reflection" to identify this phenomenon. Isaac Tylim (1999) described it as enactments that occur during group supervision. These enactments differ from counter transference where the therapist or supervisor is given the role of an actor from the past. Typically, contradictions, missing elements in what is reported, symbolic interactions, unexpected emotions, unusual behaviours should be considered as signs of the systemic reflection.

The members of the group of coaches are receiving the representations and affects embodied in the group of clients. Due to the coaching relationship, events taking place in the client groups are shared and the enactments within the supervision process may be regarded as metaphors of what is happening in the organization. The supervisor's tactic is to anchor his or her interventions in those metaphors. Such metaphors are sometimes extreme: at some point of the mission described later, the three coaches suffered intestinal disorders which were not medically explainable. The supervisor gave attention to what was reflected from the client organisation to the group of coaches and the symptoms "magically" disappeared at the end of the supervision session.

This is the principle. We can imagine that everything will depend entirely upon the subjectivity of the supervisor if nothing else is done to provide some reliability to the process. A frame has to be set.

Supervising a team of coaches: some practicalities

Firstly, the supervisor is not the leader of the team of coaches, neither are any of the coaches. This is congruent with an important systemic concept which can be summarized with the analogy, "it is difficult to make your bed without getting out of it".

Secondly, in order for the supervisor to be fully available for the detection of the systemic reflection, he delegates to the members of the group of coaches the facilitation, the time management and the meta role (Cardon, 2003, p. 173-205).

Thirdly, there should be a high degree of regression within the supervision group. The frame is set in such a way that the reflection process is amplified as much as possible, but also controlled as much as possible. This is done by enforcing a combination of functioning rules based on an interesting contribution made by Altfeld (1999). He had the idea of creating a supervision frame favouring the emergence of the systemic reflection: one of the participants presents his own view of what is happening with the client, and the other participants can react to what is presented or to the comments of anyone else, but only at the emotional level. Altfeld's hypothesis is that all the reactions of the participants can then be interpreted as systemic reflections. This layout helps to make the difficult affects explicit, but its key value is to help the supervisor to understand the core issues of the client.

Fourthly, Tylim, like Altfeld, considers that a solid frame (including for instance a code of conduct) is also a factor amplifying the systemic reflection. Therefore they both recommend interpreting the interactions within the frame to regulate regression and allow progress.

Case illustration

Company X is facing a declining market trend and its Marketing and Sales division is anticipating difficulties within its senior executive group of roughly sixty high level directors. In particular, it is expected that motivation will drop and that key executives will leave. A well-known coach is called in to propose a preventive intervention, in the form of team coaching. The objective of the team coaching is to develop some sense of solidarity within the top executives of this division. The current situation is as follows: 6 sales executives have responsibility for the income in their respective geographical areas (Europe, North America, Eastern Europe, Middle East, Asia, Africa, and South America). A second group of executives also have marketing responsibility but it cuts across geographical boundaries. For instance, one of them is in charge of worldwide development of maintenance, technical support and parts. Another one manages the so-called "global accounts". The third category of executives in the team is made up of those in charge of support functions such as the financial controller, the chief lawyer or the communications director. An assessment of the current culture in this division is carried out with the CTT (Cultural Transformation Tools) tool (Barrett, 2006). It shows that the current values describe a very individualistic corporate culture.

Consequently, in addition to the split between professions, there are splits between young and old, men and women, westerners and easterners, etc. These splits generate unstable alliances and chaotic conflicts.

In order to transform this team coaching into an organizational coaching programme, it is decided with the client to include the *change agents* and *influencers* who can be identified within the division. The "High Potential Managers" succession plan is used to select these people.

As the client group is a large and international one, it is decided to create a coaching community by grouping together three different coaches who represent three very different profiles: two men and one woman, with different educational backgrounds, each speaking two languages and presenting various types of expertise facilitation and coaching skills. A previous, successful common coaching experience is an additional criterion. Furthermore, the leading coach

who was contacted by the client decided to experience the role of the 'meta' coach, meaning to stay in the meta-position, inter-connecting the different interventions and acting as the client's contact point.

The coaching community meets via telephone conference calls and regular face-to-face meetings in order to ensure more thought-provoking conversations, to clarify possible inter-relational cultural difficulties, and allow space for co-creation, learning and exploration. In addition, the group of coaches is supervised in a monthly three-hour session by a specialist in this kind of supervision.

The organizational coaching strategy was set up as follows: to respect the client's search for a cohesive culture and to help their leaders abandon their current 'silo behaviour'; the option of creative chaos based upon the idea of "letting go of control" was proposed, as well as a series of interviews throughout the organization with the intention of finding the unifying source for organizational coaching. The coaches were assigned randomly across the organisation to conduct the interviews. The idea was that self-organization could emerge.

During the third supervision session, the supervisor notices that the relationship between the three coaches starts to look like the relationship between the three groups of executives in the client's team. The same patterns slowly but surely develop, as the coaching journey proceeds. The supervisor is then able to recognize the signs of systemic reflection and help the coaches to understand the client issues. Once the systemic reflection is identified and made explicit, the supervisor can work with the team of coaches on the future actions.


Evaluation of the model

The model is quite demanding and requires the closest attention from the supervisor. Of course, for a given mission and team of coaches the supervision starts with the usual process of helping the coaches to structure the sequence of workshops with the client. Also, at the beginning some interpersonal and personal issues within the coaching team need to be cleared up. The first two supervision sessions usually address these questions. It is when the mission is really underway, when coaches and customers are stretching their legs, that the model is fully deployed. At the end of the mission the normal process of assessing the journey is done. Therefore the tense period is hopefully limited to the middle part of the supervision journey, say from the third to the seventh session.

Organizational coaching is a growing market segment in France. A small number of coaches have developed methodologies and are training more and more coaches in applying this approach. The response is very enthusiastic because this approach appears to be very effective. Supervision is an essential element of the process. At the beginning, pioneers have been supervisors but currently, a coach who has a combined experience of organizational coaching and supervision can act as a supervisor for a team of coaches involved in coaching an organization.

Key points for further reflection

Organizational coaching is in its infancy. We have now an idea of what to do if the situation matches the first systems theory (see fig. 1) where there is a "wall of resistance". But the enterprise's development could follow one of a number of paths, such as the two illustrated in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Change in the second and third system's theories
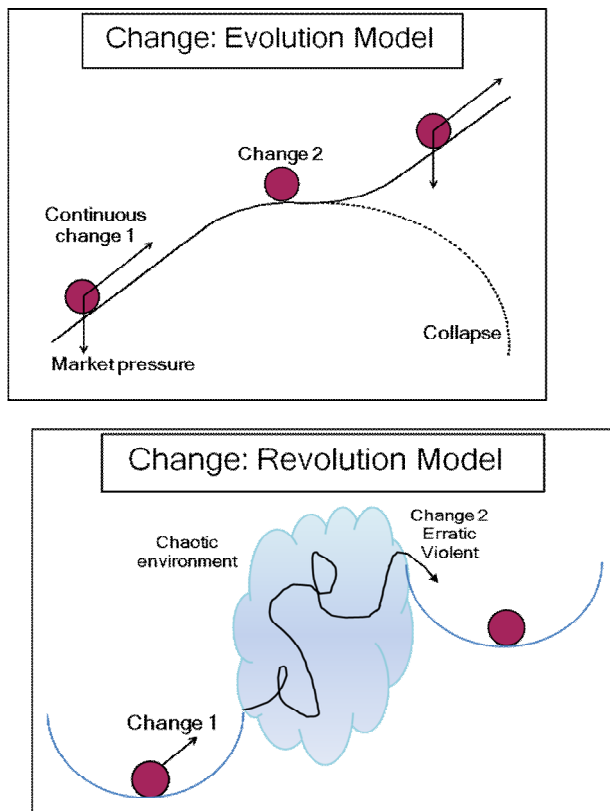
We do not see many of the "revolution models" in industry and commerce. Such changes have been seen during the French revolution in 1789 or the Russian revolution in 1917. This model is part of the second System's Theory initiated by Heiz Von Foerster (1973) and specifically addressed by René Thom (1972) in his theory of catastrophe. Instead a lot of companies correspond to the "evolution model" because the challenge is to adapt to a continuously changing market. When change is permanent, the issue is to change faster than the environment and there is no "wall of resistance". "Change 2" occurs during a "pause" where key decisions are made. For instance, in an environment where the price/performance of the technology is sharply declining, IBM and Hewlett-Packard followed this pattern when they moved from hardware and software to services. At the same time Control Data and Univac collapsed and a possible hypothesis is that they were unable to cope with such a model. There is still a lot of research to be done on organizational coaching and an enduring key question is how resistance to change occurs and how to help the client to go beyond it.

Identifying the "wall of resistance" of coaches during supervision helps client teams and organizations to pass their own walls of resistance. The proposed approach invites us as coaches and supervisors to be more focused on the systemic aspects of work. We have to develop new reference frames to address properly the current evolutionary environment and to find ways to coach very advanced companies like Google. Theoretical studies (Kaneko &Suzuki, 1994) suggest that evolution, itself driven by a changing environment, leads the system to this "edge of chaos". It is our ambition, as organizational coaches and supervisors of organizational coaches, to help locate this exact point and work from there with the client.

With our current knowledge, the role of coaches and supervisors is to find the most appropriate entry to a tunnel through the "wall of resistance". The first step consists in analysing the four subsystems (culture, structure, technology, decision process) and encouraging clients to consider all of them - instead of focusing only on the one familiar to the HR community (culture) or management (decision process). Rather similar is the Ken Wilber (2000) Integral Model of four quadrants, or the Bolman & Deal (1997) Four Frames Model (structural/systemic, cultural/symbolic, psychosocial, and political).

The second step is to use the team of coaches as a replica of the organization and analyse this replica during supervision. The third step is to co-create a coaching program which precisely addresses, at the client level, the difficulties identified during the second step.

This approach, compared to other approaches, is not a rigid frame like a methodology. On a sailing boat, the skipper uses the rudder as much to understand what the boat wants, as to maintain a direction.

Learning more

Organizational coaching, team and group coaching and their supervision are new areas in the coaching industry. Readers who would like to invest in these topics can begin with:

Hawkins, P. & Smith, N. (2007) *Coaching*, Mentoring and Organizational Consultancy: Supervision and Development, London: Open University Press.

Thomton, C. (2010) *Group and Team Coaching: The Essential Guide*, London: Routledge.

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