

Trust and safety in coaching supervision

Some evidence that we are doing it right

By its nature workplace coaching is a rather isolated profession where we can feel 'out on a limb' and exposed as we make split-second decisions within sessions. Supervision is a space for coaches to review their practice with the help of a dedicated professional who is specifically trained to quality assure and monitor those decisions, and develop our ability to engage in helping conversations. Supervision therefore provides an opportunity to learn from our own experience, to process and overcome emotions linked to our practice, and to scrutinise the boundaries of our work. Because of the scrutiny and exposure that this implies, there have always been concerns that supervisees may feel ashamed or judged, and as a result may not bring their most pertinent doubts or their most worrying mistakes to supervision, believing that that is the best way to protect themselves and/or their supervisors.

There is even some literature that confirms that feelings of incompetence, along with the evaluation and exposure inherent in supervision, have the potential to generate shame and withdrawal in supervisees (Cohen, 2015). Other empirical studies show that supervisees do not bring all of their most pertinent issues to supervision, sometimes for fear that the process will be too painful or shaming for themselves, sometimes due to awe or a need to shield their supervisor from sensitive issues (see, for example, Lawton, 2000, and Gray, Ladany, Walker & Ancis, 2001). In an earlier survey we did with coaches we found that a considerable percentage of them did not bring their most 'critical' moments to supervision (Day, De Haan, Sills, Bertie & Blass, 2008).

Recently, I decided to look into this problem in more detail. Might it be true that supervision does not cover or address the very aspects of practice that it was designed for? Might coaches in regular supervision still not gain access to their very isolation and their most existential doubts? To research this we set up a web-based survey for executive coaches, where they could, in a safe and confidential way, report about their 'most concerning / worrying / shameful episodes' in practice.

The survey had 9 closed questions and could therefore be answered in less than five minutes. It was distributed through my own coaching networks and the professional associations, and stayed open for two months (February and March 2016). In the end it was completed by 518 professional coaches (69% women and 31% men) from 32 countries with mostly more than 8 years' experience (57% more than 8 years' experience and only 10% less than 1 year experience). About 75% of the sample was over 40 years old, 53% over 50 and 18% over 60, so quite a senior sample of (mainly) coaches. Here are the results of this poll.

Supervisory arrangements

For every 40 coaching sessions 27% coaches report that they take more than 5 supervision sessions; 14% take less than 1 supervision session and 14% take more than 8 supervision sessions for every 40 coaching sessions. So it looks like most of these coaches take more than the 1 hour minimum that the EMCC stipulates for every 35 sessions.

In a CIPD report in 2006 (Hawkins & Schwenk, 2006), 88% of organisers of coaching and 86% coaches said that coaches should have regular ongoing supervision. However, only 44% of coaches received regular supervision and only 23% organisers of coaching provided it. In my poll we seem to be witnessing an uptake in the use of supervision in the coaching profession. This could be self-selection of course as those who do not take any supervision would be less likely to complete the questionnaire.

The participants reported quite a good balance and integration between group and individual supervision: 28% reported only individual supervision and 12% only group supervision, with an equal spread into the various other ratios of individual supervision

and group supervision we asked about (50:50, 75:25 and 25:75 individual and group supervision).

Satisfaction with supervisors

Supervisee satisfaction was on average just above 72 on a scale from 0: extremely unsatisfied to 100: extremely satisfied, i.e. in the normal range for helping conversations and service provision. What was interesting was that coaches were more satisfied with their current supervisor than with previous ones: the average percentages drop from 78% for the current supervisor to 71%, 71% and 70% for the three supervisors before that.

Trust and safety in supervision: the current state of affairs

The core of the questionnaire asked about the most concerning, worrying and/or shameful episode in the coach's practice over the last few years, i.e., about major issues of concern for the coach or consultant. When we asked if this most worrying episode had been brought to supervision we had 85% of coaches responding 'Yes and it was helpful', which is a very good result in my view.

Nevertheless, this meant that there were still 5% of coaches who answered 'Yes but it was unhelpful', testifying of an episode in supervision that must have been difficult. Another 7% answered 'I could have brought it to supervision but did not for some reason'. Finally, there were another 2% of coaches who did not bring it because they 'did not trust their supervisor' and another 1% (3 coaches in all) who wrote they did not bring it to supervision 'because it was too shameful'.

These percentages are very low but they are nevertheless worth noting. Even within a generally positive picture in terms of safety in supervision there are still negative experiences that will go unreported.

General trust in the current supervisor was also very high: on average 86 on a scale from 1: 'do not trust at all' to 100: 'trust completely'. One participant wrote to us that for him trust does not just revolve around shameful and embarrassing issues but also around commercial sensitivities. This respondent continued by writing, "in my case I've established trusting relationships by finding supervisors who are geographically or institutionally distant from my immediate circle of coaching colleagues".

Results for male and female coaches were broadly similar, including their ratings of trust and satisfaction with supervisors. However, women do seem to bring significantly more of their 'concerning' or 'shameful' experiences to supervision (93% of them for women versus 85% for men), and women also report a slightly better experience than men when they brought those issues.

There were similarly lower ratings from younger coaches, coaches with less experience and coaches who take up less supervision:

1. Coaches below 40 are less satisfied with their supervisors than coaches above 50 (73% versus 79% satisfaction with current supervisor) and they also seem to bring less of their 'concerning' or 'shameful' experiences to supervision (75% of the below 40 versus 87% of the above 50; moreover, a very high 6% of under-40's say they did not trust their supervisor with it). Equally, trust levels are 7% higher in the over-50s compared to the under-40s.
2. We found the same differences for coaches taking up little supervision (a ratio of less than 2 in every 40 coaching sessions) as compared to coaches taking up a lot of supervision (a ratio of more than 5 supervision sessions for every 40 coaching sessions).
3. Finally we found again the same differences for relatively inexperienced supervisees (less than 2 years experience) compared to experienced ones (more than 5 years experience).

We even found similar differences when comparing the two largest countries in the sample, The Netherlands (147 responses) and the United Kingdom (113 responses). Dutch coaches seem to be less satisfied and less trusting of their supervisors and share

less of their most concerning issues with them. Perhaps this is because supervision is still relatively new in The Netherlands, compared to the United Kingdom, and because there is more 'peer supervision' in Holland.

Finally, we found hardly any difference between those taking up primarily individual supervision as compared with those taking up group supervision, with the first group of coaches being slightly but significantly more trusting and satisfied. One can imagine that individual supervision is indeed safer and more confidential than group supervision – what is surprising here is perhaps that group supervisees are almost equally trusting as individual supervisees.

Conclusion

Numerous other studies show a much bleaker picture in terms of safety and trust in supervision and that supervisees often do not bring their most pertinent issues to supervision. 50% of Cohen's (2015) 15 supervisees (coaches) had had an issue in their practice that evoked a sense of shame or embarrassment which they had not taken to supervision. As many as 84% of supervisees (trainee therapists) in Mehr, Ladany & Caskie (2010) reported that they withheld information from their supervisors in their previous session; and as many as 38% of the 158 supervisees (trainee clinical psychologists) surveyed by Moskowitz & Rupert (1983) reported conflict within their supervision relationship. 84% of those had been forced to raise the matter themselves, either because their supervisor had been unaware of the conflict or had not reviewed it or brought it up for discussion. Gray et al. (2001) found 13 supervisees (trainee therapists) specifically reporting a counterproductive event' in supervision. Time after time the literature shows that during the process of supervision supervisees expect more empathy, listening ability and support from their supervisors than they feel they receive (Moskowitz & Rupert, 1983; Lawton, 2000; Gray et al., 2001).

From the findings in this study I would conclude that perhaps the situation for coaching and consulting professionals is more positive than for other clinical professions and for trainees in coaching or other clinical professions. Firstly, many trainees and clinicians from other professions are under an obligation to attend a certain amount of supervision and they cannot in many cases choose their own supervisor. This is not the case generally for workplace coaches, which may mean on the one hand that those who really need strict quality monitoring and supervision are not getting it, yet on the other hand that those who undertake supervision are much more motivated and trusting of their (after all, self-elected) supervisors. Another factor that may play a big role here is that many coaches pay themselves or apply for budget to pay their supervisors, so that ordinary market forces play a role in making the supervision safer and dependable for them.

Erik de Haan, London, 9 April 2016

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