

Group supervision for coaches: is it worthwhile? A study of the process in a major professional organisation

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Abstract

This study sought to understand whether supervision provides real value to coaches, by observing the experiences of group supervision for internal coaches in a professional organisation. All participants appreciated the networking, learning and support gained from supervision but the work valued most by them related to case presentation. Findings suggest that more could have been achieved in this area if the group's objectives, and possibly its supervisory model, had been set out in very clear terms at its inception, and if the group met more frequently. The author concludes that most of the benefits felt by participants could have been achieved in other ways, with the notable exception of the opportunity to discuss their cases, particularly their difficult cases and it is suggested that this aspect of the process should be the focus of the coaching profession. It is also suggested that large organisations using internal coaches should develop some standard best practice guidelines on the quality and quantity of continuing professional development and supervision for those coaches.

Key words: supervision; coaching; coaching supervision; group supervision;

Introduction

In common with several other coaching bodies, the Association for Coaching (2005) has recommended that its member coaches receive supervision. Coaches from a clinical background, for example psychology or therapy, will be familiar with the idea of supervision and they may accept such recommendations without question. However, coaches trained outside such disciplines are unlikely to be enthusiastic about the prospect of giving time to, and paying for supervision unless it can be demonstrated that the practice provides real value to themselves and to their clients, and until there are some clear guidelines on appropriate supervisory processes for coaches. This paper considers these issues and, in particular, asks whether group supervision is a worthwhile experience for coaches working within a professional organisation.

Trained coaching supervisors are scarce so it is probable that coaches wanting supervision currently have to turn to therapist supervisors or to group supervision with their peers, and possibly a group supervisor/facilitator. This study focused on the latter – a supervision group (“Group”) established in a major professional organisation in order to support staff who carry out coaching as part of their role.

The Group comprised four men and four women, including the supervisor/facilitator and the author (as participant/observer). One of its most notable features was its diversity as its members had very different coaching roles within the organisation and also had very different kinds of experience and qualifications, ranging from accountants to teachers and human resources specialists. In addition some of the members had various other forms of supervision.

The Group's stated objectives were to:

- provide support for those who find coaching forms a significant part of their role within the organisation;
- act as a supervision group and support network to ensure that coaches can maintain the highest standards by allowing participants an opportunity to discuss situations they find challenging e.g. managing confidentiality and boundaries in coaching, ethical dilemmas, and/or 'difficult' clients;
- allow scope for the continued development of coaching skills through support from other coaches.

Over the 14 month period covered by the study the Group held five half-day meetings, the first of which was primarily given over to agreement of a Group contract. Thereafter in the first part of each session one or more members explained a coaching tool being used by them in their practice; then a volunteer presented a case and the group and supervisor/facilitator provided challenge, support and feedback. Over the five sessions some members presented more than one case while some chose not to present at all.

Methodology

The Group was established by the organisation's coaching department and comprised staff who were not full-time coaches but whose work activities included a high proportion of coaching. For the author this was an obvious opportunity, both to have the experience of group supervision and to carry out some research on a fledgling supervision group. Ethical clearance for the project was obtained from the organisation before the Group met and it was also agreed that the author would provide the department with a brief summary of the Group's progress with the aim of establishing best practice for this, and other future such groups. The research project was then introduced to members at the beginning of the Group's first meeting and all agreed to participate. The study was carried out on the basis that both the organisation and the Group's members would remain anonymous.

The research was aimed at understanding the personal experiences of the coaches and their supervisor/facilitator and was based on a phenomenological approach, from the ontological perspective that people construct their own reality. The primary question: 'Is supervision a worthwhile experience for coaches?' is, of course, impossible to answer in the course of one small study confined to a particular group of people in a particular type of organisation, and it was accepted from the start that the findings would not be generalisable except, perhaps, to the extent that other professional organisations who could relate to the context might find them useful when considering whether to establish similar groups.

There was a possibility that the participation of the researcher in the Group sessions could lead to a familiarity with its members and processes that would mask important insights. This risk was minimised by the relative infrequency of Group meetings and the fact that none of the co-supervisees met in between those meetings. There was also a concern that the presence of an observer in the Group could inhibit members but during the interview process it became clear that members were far more concerned about presenting a case in front of a group of peers than they were about disclosing issues to a researcher.

Data collected included a summary of the participant/observer's own experiences of the Group and brief notes of each session but the findings, which are briefly summarised and also discussed in the following section, were primarily based on an analysis of semi-structured interviews. All of the Group members were interviewed, including the

supervisor/facilitator, and they were asked to talk about their experiences of the Group. In order to help their thinking process a list of questions was developed from suggestions on ways to answer the overarching question about, "What supervision means to me" (Carroll & Gilbert, 2005, page 14). Interviewees were given the list at the beginning of their interview with the instruction that they could use the questions as a prompt or, if they wished, could ignore them. Although their approaches varied, all of them referred to the list at some point during their interview.

Data analysis was carried out primarily on screen, with each transcript being broken down into identifiable categories in an iterative process. A level of triangulation was obtained by means of a second analysis carried out by a professional research manager. In order to strengthen the process of triangulation a summary of the issues emerging from their interview was sent to each member of the Group. There were a couple of relatively minor changes but also, interestingly, two members asked for two clearly conflicting findings to be modified. Each of these members had said that they thought coaches should have supervision but had suggested that they were too busy to have frequent supervision. This issue is commented upon below.

Findings and Discussion

Given the relatively recent emergence of coaching as a discipline, the literature relating to coaching supervision is scant. Indeed, it is mainly confined to discussions by leading professionals and coach training organisations about whether and how coaches should be supervised. Nevertheless, five major themes emerged from combining a review of the literature with an analysis of the data.

Group-related issues

The little that was found on coaching supervision groups is more exploratory than explanatory and is related to format. For example, the Association for Coaching (2005) suggests "There are many ways of providing group supervision" ranging from a similar format to the Group: "the supervisor, acting as leader, will take responsibility for apportioning time" to: "the coaches allocate supervision time between themselves using the supervisor as a technical resource".

This larger than average, very diverse Group probably faced more challenges than smaller more balanced groups, particularly in satisfying the needs of each member and in terms of group dynamics. Nevertheless the analysis raised a number of issues of general interest to anyone considering group supervision for coaches.

- Despite members' decision on the format of sessions at the initial contracting stage it was interesting to find considerable disparity of opinion on the lack of structure in the agenda: *I have kind of felt come on let's get on with it...what are we really doing here now and again* (Participant No 1 ("P1")); *I think having a loose structure...is good* (P4). It seems that Group members have only gradually begun to know what they want from their supervision sessions.
- The difficulty of organising an agenda to suit everyone was made more difficult by the relative infrequency of meetings. Some Group members clearly felt that there was both a lack of continuity, so that time was wasted in settling down together again at the beginning of each meeting, and that there was also insufficient time to bring their cases, a typical comment being: *we don't have enough time to explore anything in lots*

of detail, and we all have...lots of clients and lots of cases that we could talk about (P2).

Despite comments like this, members were ambivalent about how much supervision coaches need. On balance there was a preference for more frequent meetings, both to address the continuity issue and *because you learn how to be a supervisee as much as anything...you learn that you will be able to learn by bringing stuff more (P5)*. As mentioned above, two members asked for amendments on this part of their summary and there appeared to be a lot of internal struggling on this point. Members badly wanted to have the support they gained from the supervision, but were anxious about having to devote time to their personal welfare in a busy schedule. This point is returned to again below in a discussion on co-worker boundaries.

Bluckert (2003) recommends that experienced coaches have “a two hour supervisory session for every 30 hours of coaching” and trainees have “one supervision hour to every 10 hours coaching”. This would mean most of the Group would need to spend at least an hour a week in supervision at what would, one imagines, be a considerable cost to the organisation. In a wider context it would mean that the profession would need to convince beginner coaches of the need to set aside a significant proportion of their income at a time when they are trying to build their practices.

- Inskipp & Proctor (1993, page 80) provide a summary of the tasks of a group supervisor that recognises “the twin – and overlapping tasks” of “managing the supervision work” and “building and maintaining a working group” and this is a reasonably accurate summary of the Group supervisor/facilitator’s role.

The Group all agreed that it is necessary to have a facilitator, not only for *disciplining of time, listening and knowing when to come in and play the role that they need to – a kind of steer (P4)*, but also as somebody who can, if necessary *contain a group dynamic (P5)*. However, there was much less clarity about the role of supervisor and there was some degree of confusion about what the role entailed. For example one member talked about *our facilitator (P7)* and, when this word was queried, said: *Interesting. Yes. Of the group I see that as a facilitated thing, rather than as a supervisor... but I would want somebody who’s got that more experience than a facilitated meeting (P7)*.

There was, however, almost unanimity on the fact that the role needs someone who is involved in this kind of work and has considerable experience. Their views are summed up by the comment: *What do I want from my supervisor? I guess I wanted them to have the experience, and having been there, seen it, done it (P2)*.

There are obvious tensions here for the profession as a whole. The Association for Coaching (2005) comments: “It is recognised that supervisors may be difficult to find”; the European Mentoring and Coaching Council (2004) also believes that “there may...be a shortage of qualified supervisors” and, interestingly given this statement, suggests a somewhat demanding list of 12 criteria to consider when choosing a supervisor.

- The effect of group dynamics was found to be an important contributor to members’ experience of the Group. Writers as diverse as Carl Rogers (1951), Mumford (1993) and Freud (1964) agree that groups provide benefits, such as identity, challenge, support and learning, but suggest that the criteria for group success are mutable simply

because different people experience the same event in different ways. This proved to be the case, because although everyone concluded that the Group had now bonded and was beginning to work well, this conclusion was tempered by the fact that some members expressed a high level of fear about the possibility of exposing their limitations to the Group. One participant said: *the sort of thing that bothers me... is more about losing control. So will I uncover that actually well I am rubbish... there's something I really ought to do that is a challenge that I am scared of undertaking?* (P1).

These and other similar comments suggested that it would be some time yet before a sufficient level of mutual trust in the Group would make it thoroughly successful as a supervision group at least as far as case presentation is concerned. This, obviously, is an important factor to take into account when organisations consider the provision of, and set standards for the effectiveness of, group supervision.

Expected content of a supervision session

There appears to be no consensus in the literature on an appropriate model for counselling/therapy supervision and, despite the fact that one of the suggested criteria for choosing a supervisor is “evidence of a theoretical framework(s) relating to supervision” (European Mentoring and Coaching Council, 2004), the literature revealed nothing helpful for coaches, with the notable exception of the 7 eyed model, developed by Hawkins (2005). Furthermore it was not even possible to find a clear definition of ‘coaching supervision’ in the literature, though there is some degree of consensus as to its purpose, as coaches and coaching bodies appear to have taken their stand on the arguments put forward by the counselling/psychotherapy world. It is:

- “a formal arrangement” (Association for Coaching, 2005), or a “formal process” Bachkirova, Willis & Stevens (2005);
- “where coaches discuss their work” (Association for Coaching, 2005)
- about “development of helping practice” (British Association of Counselling and Psychotherapy, 2005)
- “a supportive...context” (British Association of Counselling and Psychotherapy, 2005); and finally
- “a quality control mechanism for the client” (Bluckert, 2003).

In analysing the Group’s expectations from the supervision experience it was discovered that, despite considerable uncertainty as to details, members had entered the Group with some ideas about what would make it a positive and beneficial experience.

Bluckert (2003) suggests that coaches from non-therapeutic backgrounds “may actively resist the imposition of supervision” but one aspect of supervision wholeheartedly welcomed by the Group members was the widening of their network. Everyone mentioned their need for a network of coaches, all in similar terms: I wanted to build a strong network...a support network who were there for me (P6).

The literature suggests a need for supervision as a place to review and reflect on your practice (Rogers, 2004), to maintain adequate standards (Association for Coaching, 2005) and to get “support and ongoing learning... a quality control mechanism” (Bluckert, 2004). Everyone in the Group talked about the learning involved, although two people were not sure they had brought any specific learning objectives: *What learning objectives did I bring? Well that's a really good one...I don't know how specific we've been about that* (P3); *I'm not sure I brought any learning objectives to supervision* (P1).

As some of the Group had other forms of supervision and in view of the fact that the Group met only quarterly, it is unsurprising that members did not expect much help on their cases. A typical comment was: *I was never expecting... supervision for... difficult issues with clients because, not because I didn't want to share all of that 'cause I'm up for doing that but I didn't feel I'd get enough sort of air time* (P2).

Two members wanted to compare their skills and knowledge with that of their peers - a role for supervision that was not identified in the review of the literature. These members said they wanted the Group for: *benchmarking me just to check that I'm not useless, but also about what are others doing* (P1); *I expected to check my assumptions that I know stuff... I wanted to check out my own quality* (P3). It is suggested this may reflect a general lack of a clear and uniform training and development path for internal coaches and, indeed, for many coaches in the UK who, however experienced, are practising with little understanding of their own competency levels in relation to those of their peers.

Positive experiences of coaching supervision

Ray & Alterkruse (2000) discuss how group supervision can “alleviate the sense of intellectual and emotional isolation felt by beginning counsellors” and this aspect comes through strongly in members’ comments: *I'm getting something, some sustenance from it* (P2); *I think it's a necessity. Having now, been in the isolated position, and now being in a group, I would feel, God I don't know, quite aggrieved really to be taken out of that group now* (P6).

All members of the Group were enthusiastic about the opportunity to hear about new models and coaching tools: *good to learn of a methodology and how it is used in the organisation* (P5); *useful to widen my approach* (P3). It is, however, fair to point out that this learning is more ‘awareness raising’ than deep learning that would enable members to go away from a session and use a new methodology. In addition there was learning for those members who had hoped for a benchmark: *it's given me confidence I've not been out of line* (P1).

Even though the idea of case presentation was not in most people’s initial objectives, this was an obvious strength of the process: *there are insights from others that I might not have had* (P4); *that case study - that's just panned out really well... so that there have been some direct consequences out of this group* (P1); *I'm finding that the most valuable aspect of it is all of our cases* (P2). One member who had presented a difficult case described the Group’s response as *arms around* (P4).

One further strength of the supervisory process was the help it provided to members in recognising and dealing with client boundaries. As internal coaches in an organisation Group members have to deal with a range of stakeholders who potentially include their client, their client’s sponsor, the ‘personnel’ function and the client’s line management. All members of the Group had concerns about this aspect of their role: *something really helpful for me here last time about where my responsibilities lay and where not. Gave me clarity re boundaries* (P7).

Difficulties experienced with coaching supervision

Bailey (2004) comments that “Supervisees benefit more from supervision when they learn how to make the most of it” and it is reasonable to argue that the Group had not yet had sufficient opportunity to do this in only five meetings. Two major difficulties encountered

by members were identified and, although the group format has exacerbated these issues they are, it is suggested, going to surface in any newly initiated supervisory process undertaken by internal coaches at the request of their employing organisation.

The first difficulty relates to the organisation setting of the supervision. As Peter Hawkins said (at the Association for Coaching 2006 conference) “for a supervisor, coaching supervision involves three clients – the client, the coach and the organisation” and this seems to be a particularly relevant comment in the context of a group of internal coaches who have to deal with the fact that they, too, are employees working within the organisational culture and subject to its disciplinary rules.

Though the Group had felt some benefit from discussions of client boundaries, there was no such comfort in the area of co-worker boundaries. In contrast there was a resigned acceptance that these boundaries exist and have to be managed: *I've got working relationships with half the people around that table. ...Has that held me back in any way though? It might have done* (P2).

The organisation is not a single entity and co-worker boundaries are not simply a matter of balancing a range of confidential issues. These coaches are expected to demonstrate to their line managers (via a time log) that they have used their time ‘profitably’ and they demonstrated considerable unease about spending time on personal development when they could be spending time on their other duties. One member asked, for example: *would the business see it as a necessity? Not. You should...know coaching you go and do it. You don't need any back up* (P3).

A further complication here is that internal coaches themselves face boundary issues outside the Group simply because of their knowledge of the organisation and its people: *obviously if I'm sitting in the same pool as my potential clients ... I'm giving them that outlook even though I might try not to* (P1).

Secondly, although fear of self-disclosure emerged as a strong factor in some members' experience of the supervision process, it is difficult to judge whether this was an issue about supervision itself or whether it was more a function of group dynamics. Issues relating to self-disclosure in any supervision situation are presumably going to be magnified by the fact that it is being carried out in a group situation and some members of the Group were very aware of this: *it can start to feel like ooh, the spotlight's on me and you know, maybe you start to question yourself, and the way you do things* (P7).

The rationale for coaching supervision

Interviewees were asked what effect the process had on clients and, though some members said there had been a definite positive effect, one comment in particular seemed important: *Perhaps that's a good challenge for supervision. Is there a kind of what's the output this month, as I'm not sure we've addressed that? It's assumed tacitly and indirectly through our supervision group* (P3). The Group is unlikely to be unique in this respect. Comments in the literature primarily relate to counselling and therapy but they suggest that the question ‘Does it help clients?’ is a major unresolved issue. For example: “supervision as it is normally practised tells us absolutely nothing about the client” (Mearns, 1995). The Association for Coaching (2005) talks about “Protection – of the client”, but no literature was identified that provided a well-evidenced rationale for the supervision of coaches.

Coaching is not counselling or psychotherapy and one could argue that we should not assume that we can blithely transpose one set of standards across to another arena. It is,

surely, important to recognise that there is a difference between coaching and the more clinically-based disciplines and it cannot be right to decide that one discipline can adopt the practices of the other, merely because there are similarities, without providing a rigorous justification for the decision.

Starling & Baker (2000) comment that “the body of literature on the effect of clinical supervision is limited” and if this is the state of play for a long-established process it appears we have no persuasive evidence for the efficacy of the embryonic process of coaching supervision. Indeed, it is puzzling to find so little debate about whether it is appropriate simply to extend a process designed for counsellors and psychotherapists to coaches. While pointing out that “supervision is stressed as a vital aspect of good practice for coaches”, Bluckert (2005) admits that one of the reasons that practices common to therapy have moved into the coaching arena is because “an increasing number of therapists have added coaching to their portfolio”.

One strong strategic challenge to the concept of supervision for coaches discovered was the Oxford Brookes University Coaching and Mentoring Society’s comparison between coaching and counselling. Interestingly, this not only attempts to specify the reasons for and benefits of supervision, but even “makes the case for a higher need for supervision in coaching than in counselling” (Bachkirova et al, 2005) because of greater boundary issues, the fact that coaches do not have personal counselling, and a possible need for coaches to focus on the organisation’s goals.

In support of this conclusion, one clear vindication for the introduction of the Group might be the way in which it addressed feelings of isolation in these internal coaches. Many members had felt alone before the Group was formed: *You’re getting something you don’t have, and you’ve kind of been running on empty without it* (P3).

A further argument in favour of supervision arises from an interesting sub-theme about consistency and whether there are (or should be) common coaching practices across the organisation. This may seem a narrow point, but extrapolated to a wider scenario one might ask whether there are common coaching standards and practices across all coaches. Group comments on this area included: *A doesn’t know B, and A and B’s methodology rarely coincides and what you get is a lot of confusion into the system. So I guess I was hoping for a common language. Are we ever going to get there? I doubt it. But at least we’re more aware of the language of others* (P3);

Finally, the findings suggest that everyone was in favour of continuing the Group process. Those members who only had the Group were adamant that it should continue, and even those members who had one-to-one supervision did not want to give up the additional supervision provided by the Group. A couple of members wanted an enhanced programme with a mix of Group sessions and one-to-one supervision.

Conclusion

This research raised some issues that should be considered by any coach entering group supervision for the first time and there are some findings that relate to a wider context.

Frequency of supervision

There was insufficient time for a real focus on members’ cases – to the extent that those cases presented were the subject of almost intense Group challenge, as though members needed to get as much from the experience as possible. If a supervision group were to be primarily concentrating on case work it would, it is argued, be necessary for it to meet

frequently enough for each member of the group to be able to discuss his or her own cases regularly and address any problems before the next coaching session. This tends to lead to a conclusion that busier coaches will need more frequent supervision, which is somewhat at odds with current thinking that more experienced coaches (who, one might expect, are busier than new entrants) actually need less.

Supervision for internal coaches

For the most part, the Group felt the supervision process was supportive and developmental and the organisation's objectives had, to some extent, been fulfilled - the Group did, clearly, provide a network and a support function for its members and it addressed a need for continued development through support from other coaches.

However, there is doubt about whether the Group allowed participants an opportunity to discuss situations they find challenging e.g. managing confidentiality and boundaries in coaching, ethical dilemmas, and/or 'difficult' clients. Members had clear reservations about the adequacy of support at a case supervision level, partly because of the infrequency of meetings, partly because of some members' fears about the risks of self-disclosure, and partly because members were nervous about spending too much time on something that, though they saw it as a 'necessity' might be seen by their line managers as 'a luxury'.

It is suggested that there is considerable scope for further research into this last point and, indeed, scope for large organisations using internal coaches to develop some standard best practice guidelines on the quantity and quality of continuing professional development and supervision for those coaches.

Objectives of supervision

It is recommended that the objectives for such groups should be set out in very clear terms in order to maximise the benefits of the process. It is probable that the Group could have been more effective if members had expected from the start that everyone would be routinely discussing their current clients (whether or not they had particular problems with those clients), possibly within the context of a formal supervision model. This would, of course, have reduced the amount of time spent on models and tools and members might have needed to consider whether they should have an additional forum for more direct learning.

In considering the things valued by the Group and how important the 'supervision' process was to their achievement it is fairly obvious that:

- learning and development could take place in the context of continuing professional development, either within the organisation or via programmes run by coaching bodies;
- networking could be achieved during the very process of continuing professional development where coaches can meet on a regular basis;
- clarity on internal client boundaries could be achieved via a formal written agreement that binds all parties in the organisation and sets out, explicitly, the responsibilities and levels of confidentiality in the 'triad' of coach, client and organisation;
- a level of clarity about the coaching/therapy boundary could be achieved via a set of ethical questions that coaches can work through at any time when they feel their client may be in need of more in-depth work than can be provided in the coaching situation.

What cannot, it is argued, be achieved in any other way than 'supervision' is the opportunity to discuss a difficult case, to explore one's feelings about a client, or to bounce ideas around on how take a 'stuck' client forward, or to have advice from someone with more experience or a different point of view on subtle boundary issues that are not covered by one's contract. It is suggested that this aspect of the process should be a major focus for the coaching profession, and it should be the subject of some further research that can begin to demonstrate whether (or not) real benefits are available to both coach and client. Such research will need to take account of the weaknesses of supervision, for example the need for coaches to 'learn how to be a supervisee', and particularly if it is in the context of a group it will need to be relatively long-running to allow members to get through the initial 'forming' stage and develop sufficient trust in each other to have the confidence to present their cases for challenge.

If that can be achieved, coaches will have an experience that can produce the exciting results described by participant number 2: *ideas are flowing all the way round the room, you know, light bulb moments, and it's happened every time which is fantastic.*

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