

An ethnographic study of the introduction of internal supervisors to an internal coaching scheme

Mark Robson, York St John University, Lord Mayor's Walk, York. UK.

Email: mark.robson@yorksja.ac.uk

Abstract

Coach supervision is a current topic. With the support of the coaching bodies, supervision is increasingly regarded as a requirement to practice as a coach. However, the evidence base. There is little research that has focused specifically upon the supervision of internal coaches, this in spite of the reported growth in their use by organisations. Even less has been published relating to internal coach supervisors. The 'voice' of the internal practitioner, whether coach or coach supervisor, can hardly be discerned in the current coaching literature. This paper, based upon an ethnographic study that followed the introduction of a group of internal supervisors to their internal coaching scheme, seeks to describe their journey, through their own 'voices'.

Key words: supervision, internal supervisor, internal coaching scheme, ethnography.

Introduction

Successive Ridler Reports (2009, 2011, 2013) have indicated a growing trend in the use of internal coaches to provide coaching services to organisations. Surveys of coaching activity carried out on behalf of the CIPD over the last decade confirm this view. These surveys indicate that cost and value for money are the major drivers of this trend, confirming the view of Frisch (2001) and Maxwell (2011) that lower cost is one of the main advantages of using internal coaches. However, despite the growing use of internal coaches Maxwell (2011) acknowledges that there is little in the coaching literature relating to their supervision, agreeing with Frisch (2005) that internal coaches have been "flying under the radar of mainstream coaching" (p. 184). The argument has been made that internal coaches have the same need for supervision as external coaches (Maxwell, 2011), and that in Europe the major coaching bodies do not differentiate between external and internal coaches with regards to supervision (Clutterbuck *et al*, 2013). Yet surveys have found that the use of supervision by internal coaches has been relatively limited (Hawkins & Schwenk, 2006; CIPD, 2007; Knights & Poppleton, 2008), a situation that St John-Brookes (2014) believes persists.

In the European manufacturing organisation, where I am an employee and a coach, the first cohort of internal coaches was introduced in 2007. Externally facilitated supervision of these coaches was introduced in 2010 in line with the EMCC guidelines for supervision

published that year (EMCC, 2010). Within the coaching scheme a debate started about the appropriateness of this supervision provision for the coaches, fuelled in part by poor attendance figures. It was recognised that there were practical issues in alignment of coaches and supervisor's diaries, which impacted the frequency of supervision meetings possible. However, even when meetings were scheduled the coaching scheme administrator's experience was that coaches tended to withdraw from them at short notice, stating that they had other, work related priorities. Maxwell (2011) and St John-Brookes (2014) have expressed concern that internal coaches may see supervision as necessary only when a serious issue arises. In 2013, the debate intensified, after I, and nine other coaches participated in the supervision module of Sheffield Hallam University's (SHU) Coaching and Mentoring Masters programme as part of the on going development of our practice. The group consensus was that the potential benefits of supervision, as experienced during the module, were far greater than our prior experience of supervision had demonstrated; a solution to the lack of coach engagement with supervision was needed. Ultimately, in an effort to create this engagement, the decision was taken to introduce internal supervisors to support the internal coach community.

This paper is based upon a research project, undertaken for a Masters dissertation, which followed a group of eight internal coaches who took on the task of acting as supervisors for their fellow coaches (Robson, 2014). Both internal coaches, and the new internal supervisors were part-time volunteers, coaching activity being undertaken along side their 'day-jobs' within the organisation. The paper identifies the current discourses advocating supervision for coaches, and describes how supervision is currently provided. The factors that shaped the evolution of the supervision delivered in the study are then evidenced using the voices of the supervisor participants, and the implications of these findings for the current coach supervision discourse are discussed. The findings make a contribution to the, as yet, limited knowledge base pertaining to the supervision of internal coaches, in particular the delivery of this supervision provision by internal supervisors.

Literature Review

Supervision for coaches is relatively new; the September/October 2013 edition of *Coaching at Work* magazine celebrating the tenth anniversary of its beginnings in the UK. Supervision of practice has a much longer history in the fields of psychotherapy, counselling and social work (Hawkins and Smith 2006). It is unsurprising therefore that the most widely used model in coach supervision is the 7-eyed model (Garvey *et al*, 2009), developed by Hawkins and Shohet (1989), which derives from the psychotherapeutic school (Pinder, 2011). Hawkins and Schwenk (2006) have defined coach supervision as

[A] structured formal process for coaches, with the help of a coaching supervisor, to attend to improving the quality of their coaching, grow their coaching capacity and support themselves and their practice. (p. 2)

From this definition three functions of coach supervision are discernable, these are

- development of the coach's practice,

- quality assurance of the coach's practice, and,
- personal support for the coach in carrying out their practice.

Within this definition the purposes of supervision previously identified by Kadushin (1976) in relation to social work– educational; supportive; managerial – and Proctor (1986), related to counselling – formative; restorative; normative – are clearly visible. It would appear therefore that coaching has taken advantage of the experience of supervision models built up, and tested, by these long established helping professions, though the evidence base for the specific benefits of the supervision of coaches remains, as yet, limited (Hawkins & Schwenk, 2006; Lane, 2010, 2011; Bachkirova *et al*, 2011).

Hawkins and Smith (2006, p.142) believe that supervision is a “fundamental aspect of continuing personal and professional development for coaches”. Survey studies carried out by Hawkins and Schwenk (2006), Armstrong and Geddes (2009), Grant (2012) and Lawrence and Whyte (2014) found that coaches see practice development as the primary reason for having supervision. De Haan (2012) acknowledges all the functions identified above but seems to regard the quality assurance function as primarily a means of reassuring those who procure coaching services. Indeed, a review of CIPD surveys of those who commission coaching services (CIPD 2005, 2007, 2009, 2011, 2012; Knights & Poppleton, 2008; McGurk, 2010) revealed almost no mention of the supervision of coaches beyond helping commissioners assure the quality of their services. The third function identified above, personal support for the coach, is supported by Hindmarch's (2008) small-scale study, which found that coaches use supervision to manage self-doubt generated by concern that their capability as a coach may not be up to the job. Also, Patterson (2011) has suggested that celebration of the work of the coach should be a supportive role for supervision. However, Lawrence and Whyte (2013, 2014) in contrast, based upon a survey of professional coaches in Australia, found that coaches said they seldom used supervision for support, because the need for such support seldom arose. As already stated, the evidence base for the benefits of coach supervision is currently limited (Hawkins & Schwenk 2006; Lane, 2010, 2011; Bachkirova *et al*, 2011), and is largely based upon advocacy rather than enquiry (CIPD Research Report 2012), highlighting the need for more research to establish the impact supervision has on coach practice.

A number of the professional bodies representing coaches and coaching, including EMCC and AC, require their members to engage in supervision (Lane, 2011), whilst others, for example ICF, encourage coaches to undertake supervision (ICF, 2016). In this way supervision is becoming a requirement to practice. In fact, in a paper discussing whether coaching was yet a profession, Lane (2010) described the need for supervision as being “uncontroversial” (p. 159), however, his view is not universally held. Garvey (2014: 1) in acknowledging the “professional bodies claim that supervision, as one of their rules, reassures potential clients or sponsors and ensures quality control” asks “is this not a form of neofeudalistic surveillance?” A survey of coaches in 2006 showed that whilst 86% felt that regular supervision was appropriate only 44% actually had regular on going supervision, although 75% of coaches who were a member of a coaching body had supervision (Hawkins & Schwenk, 2006). The main reasons identified why some coaches didn't engage with supervision then were that it wasn't required by the coach's organisation, that it was to

expensive, and that a supervisor could not be found. Grant (2012) also echoed the last two reasons. Based upon the fact that limited peer reviewed, primary data based, research on supervision has been published between 2008 and 2012 Garvey *et al*, (2014) suggest that perhaps “not as much supervision is happening as was anticipated” (p. 201). However, Hawkins and Turner (2016) paint a more optimistic picture, believing that “the past nine years have seen an exponential growth in [coach supervision]” (p. 31). Whilst in 2006 Hawkins and Schwenk’s survey identified that 44% of UK coaches had regular supervision, this had risen in 2014 to 92% of UK coaches who responded to the survey (Hawkins & Turner, 2016). In contrast to the 2006 findings, the main reason identified by the minority who didn’t have supervision was that peers and their own self-reflection adequately supported them. Interestingly, a third of those having supervision used “a peer arrangement so there was no cost” (p. 33), seemingly finding ways around the problems of cost and availability highlighted in 2006.

Turning from the debate as to why coaches should undertake supervision to the question of how it is delivered, it is reported that the most widely used supervision model available to coaches remains the 7-eyed model, adopted largely unchanged, from the psychotherapeutic school (Garvey *et al*, 2009). One-to-one supervision delivery is more common than group supervision (Hawkins & Schwenk, 2006; St John-Brookes, 2010), though Pinder (2011) believes that the group supervision model is both educationally and economically sound. Maxwell (2011) believes that use of group supervision will grow, particularly for internal coaches, because it is the most cost effective delivery method. It would appear that, based upon concern for cost, a pragmatic approach to the supervision of internal coaches is being advocated by Maxwell (2011). However, there appears as yet to be no evidence to indicate whether delivery of supervision one-to-one, or in a group, better serve the needs of internal coaches.

With regards to the supervisors themselves, the ‘expert’ supervisor model dominates current thinking (Stoltenberg & Delworth, 1987; Hawkins and Smith 2006; Grant 2012) It requires that the supervisor be an expert practitioner, in order to supervise a practitioner. There are also voices calling for supervisors to be trained in psychological theory (Turner 2010). Acknowledging the growth in internal coach numbers, and that internally led supervision would follow, Mahony (2009) urges caution, believing that delivering supervision requires “expertise and qualifications” (p. 33). However, Hawkins and Turner’s (2016) finding that a third of those surveyed who stated that they had supervision, did so through a peer arrangement, might indicate that the ‘expert’ supervisor advocated does not reflect some coaches’ reality.

As stated in the introduction, 15 years ago Frisch (2001) noted the emergence of the internal coach, and a decade on Maxwell (2011) believed, as Frisch (2005), that internal coaches were still “flying under the radar of mainstream coaching” (p. 184); this, in spite of the evidence of numerous surveys indicating that the use of internal coaches in organisations was growing. It is widely advocated that the supervision requirement for internal coaches is the same as for their external counterparts (Maxwell, 2011; Clutterbuck *et al*, 2013); however, in reality there is very little in the coaching literature specific to the supervision of internal

coaches (Maxwell 2011). With regard to internal supervisors the evidence base is similarly limited. Long (2012) and St John-Brookes (2014) have explored the benefits and risks of using internal supervisors versus external supervisors to support internal coaches. Their findings seem to mirror the pro's and con's of external coaches versus internal coaches, being around inside knowledge, fresh perspectives, confidentiality, cost and accessibility. However, St John-Brookes (2014) believes that the benefits of using internal supervisors outweigh the issues. Overall however, it remains the case that the voice of internal practitioners, coaches and supervisors, can hardly be heard. The study on which this paper is based sought specifically to listen to the voices of internal supervisors.

Methodology

In autumn 2013, the coaching scheme of which I am a member decided to introduce internal supervisors to support the internal coach community. The scheme comprised fifty coaches, and volunteers were sought from the thirteen coaches who had at that time completed the supervision module of the SHU masters course; eight coaches agreed to train as supervisors. These eight supervisors became the participants in the study. As one of the coaches chosen to be a supervisor, I was able to observe and interview my fellow supervisors over an extended period of time. In all I followed the internal supervisor introduction project for a period of eight months, from initial supervisor selection and briefing of the coaches, through supervisor training, to the second round of supervision meetings. I have remained a coach and a supervisor in this scheme since the study ended.

In formulating the research strategy, I was concerned that the research base on supervision, though growing, remained limited (Hawkins & Schwenk, 2006; Lane, 2010, 2011; Bachkirova *et al*, 2011), and for internal coaching schemes was more limited still (Maxwell 2011). Therefore, rather than make and test assumptions based upon this limited research base, I sought an inductive research methodology that would enable the voices of the supervisor-participants to tell their own story based upon the experiences that were most significant to them. To achieve this objective, it was clear that a longitudinal study would be required to enable me to 'listen' to the supervisors as they developed their practice. Further key considerations in the methodology selected were the importance attached to retaining the trust and support of colleagues by being open with them, and, the belief that the research process should have as one of its objectives making a positive contribution to the development of the supervisor's practice. The methodology adopted was ethnography, the researcher's role being that of overt participant-as-observer (Gill and Johnson 2010). This approach was informed by Watson's view (2011) that:

We cannot really learn a lot about 'how things work' in organisations without doing the intensive type of close-observational or participative research that is central to the ethnographic endeavour (p. 204).

Over the eight months of the research period data were collected in a number of ways to capture the participants' stories. I took field notes during the five formal meetings the supervisor group had, as well as during the training workshops, and, following all informal

discussions with supervisors and the scheme management. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants following key events such as the training workshop and supervision meetings. This resulted in a total of sixteen interviews. E-mails and documents generated and circulated were also collected, and, I maintained a personal reflection diary to capture my own thoughts and feelings as both a supervisor and a researcher throughout the project. A thematic analysis approach (Bryman, 2012, p. 578) was applied to this data, using Bryman's concept of a theme (p. 580, key concept 24.2), being a category identified in field notes and interview transcripts. A table was created which contained the individual pieces of data gathered from the notes and interview transcripts; these were repeatedly reviewed, and over time grouped into themes. I sought to compare the emerging findings to the existing literature, and, to identify themes that appeared to impact on the supervisors, relating these to their behaviours', personal reflections, and the actions they took. To enrich the data and deepen my understanding of what was taking place I used the emergent themes from this analysis to direct further data collection in later interviews. As a final check the themes that emerged were shared with the participants to determine whether they considered them representative of their own lived experience. It was not necessary to change any of the themes as a result of this consultation.

Themes identified

In this section of the paper I wish to emphasise the 'voices' of the participants by including their direct quotes, taken from interview transcripts, e-mails and field notes, to evidence the findings presented. It should be noted that for some of the participants English was not their first language, and that this is sometimes apparent in the quotes used. However, I have preferred to leave their 'voice' unaltered, believing that the meaning remains clear. Where I use a quote, the person who originally made the statement is identified (*Participant A to G*); where notes that I made during the study are used I identify them as from the *Researcher*.

Concern for capability

In the first meeting during the study period, volunteer coaches were asked to confirm their willingness to act as supervisors. The following note suggests that some felt 'capability concern' - "*Clearly most people 'anxious' about their ability to do this!*" (*Researcher*). Later, on hearing which coaches he would be supervising *Participant F* expressed his concern that "*these are experienced coaches, senior people. I feel doubts, like coaching. What if it doesn't go well?*", whilst *Participant E* wondered aloud "*am I exposed?*". This seemed to result in the new supervisors focussing on the boundaries of their role, the need for a consistent approach and concern for their own support mechanisms, as a means of managing their doubts.

The first boundary issue to surface was around language and geography. *Participants G* and *E* were concerned about the risk of misunderstandings if the supervision group did not share the same native language, believing this could impact their ability to "*do the job properly*". For *Participant G* this concern arose from personal experience of having a line

manager whose first language was different to her own. The coaches to be supervised were spread across Europe and several supervisors were also concerned about the impact of travel commitments on their 'day job'. These concerns had to be accommodated in constructing the supervision groups. During the supervisors' training they sought to establish responsibility boundaries: between supervisors and coaches, and, between supervisors and scheme management. For example, it was agreed that supervisors would log whether coaches attended supervision, but that the scheme manager was responsible for 'managing' those coaches who failed to attend.

The belief that the supervisors should adopt a consistent approach across their practices emerged when they considered how to make initial contact with their coaches:

[We should] consider how we demonstrate that we have a clear group approach to supervision: starting off our groups in a uniform way, same initial contact mode and timeframe with a common framework (Participant C e-mail to group)

This desire for a uniform approach became a key focus during their training; resulting in agreement on the framework for contracting with coaches, support options to be offered to them, and responsibility boundaries. The group pushed the consistency agenda until the point of rebellion was reached - "*the framework being established is becoming so rigid that it's stifling me!*" (Participant E); "*the framework is becoming a cage*". (Researcher). The driver for adopting a uniform approach appeared to be concerns not to out perform each other, rather than a belief that there was only one correct way to provide supervision.

The importance of the supervisors supporting each other again arose very early in the project.

I hope that the supervisors will come together, to help each other.... I'd like a common approach, with some flexibility, rather than the risk of separation or fragmentation. (Participant C)

The supervisors agreed to meet to review their supervision practice on a quarterly basis, the same rhythm as the planned supervision provision. The facilitators of the initial supervision training supported their first meeting. Thereafter a peer supervision approach was adopted, with one supervisor acting as group facilitator at each meeting. They further agreed to provide peer supervision of each others coaching practice, and, to monitor supervisor capacity versus demand and support each other if required. Sharing their experiences was clearly important to them – "*I want to use the group [of supervisors] to help me calibrate my own view of whether I'm being successful.*" (Participant F).

Coach buy-in

At the start of the project briefings were held for all coaches to inform them of the intention to introduce internal supervisors. The feedback received was overwhelmingly

positive with high levels of support expressed for the initiative, which was seen as a positive forward step. However, based upon their previous experience, of poor attendance at externally facilitated supervision, the supervisors were sceptical

Are the coaches committed? (Participant C)

Will they turn up, and keep turning up? How committed will they be? (Participant G)

Will my coaches be around in six months time? Will some drop out? (Participant A).

The difficulties they experienced trying to establish dates for the initial supervision meetings compounded these concerns. However, attendance at the first meetings was more than 90%.

A consequence of the supervisors' concerns about coach commitment was their focus on how they should contract with their coaches. The topic of contracting dominated discussion during the first day of training.

It was right to take time to discuss contracting in some detail. I want to come back to it again during the second day (Participant B)

Discussing power/hierarchy dynamics in the final practice session emphasised for me the importance of contracting (Participant F)

I have clarity on ownership. I'm a supervisor not a nurturing parent. The coaches have choices and responsibilities (participant E)

Interestingly the external facilitators of the training, both experienced coaches and supervisors, became visibly frustrated at what they regarded as the supervisors' obsession with contracting; one acknowledging later that he had become "grumpy" as a result. The discussions about contracting were used by the supervisors to establish not only how they would contract with their coaches, but also to establish the responsibilities of, and boundaries between supervisors, coaches and scheme management. For the facilitators however this was regarded as less important than the need to practice use of a supervision model. It appeared that the priorities identified when viewed from within the organisation were different to the priorities seen from an external perspective. All supervisors subsequently reported that they spent significant time in their first supervision meeting on contracting.

The first round of supervision meetings appeared to have a positive impact on coach buy-in. Supervisors found it easier and quicker to set up second meetings, and, faced with the dilemma of which side of the summer holiday period to hold the second meeting most coaches opted to pull their meeting forward. Several supervisors reported that having supervision had motivated some of their coaches to "do a bit more" (Participant B, echoed by C and D), that they hadn't deliberately reduced their coaching activity.

The coaches' needs

In this study the ‘voice’ of the coaches was experienced through the supervisors. It was agreed with scheme management that it would be inappropriate for the researcher to sit-in on supervision meetings at this early stage of the implementation. Resource limitations prevented the direct collection of data from coaches. Whilst this created a limitation on the study a number of themes were reported by the supervisors to have emerged across most or all of the eight supervision groups. So, what did the supervisors report that the coaches, as supervisees, wanted from supervision? Their focus appeared to be very much on their personal development and learning, though not necessarily expressed as a desire for academic input.

.... mainly what they would like [is] to have very practical sessions..... giving examples of anything that you're struggling with, helping each other, discussion with how other coaches have reacted in a similar situation. So a very practical approach.... (Participant D)

It was clear that their previous experience of supervision, externally facilitated, had been very theoretical and sometimes “*over my head*” (*Coach in Researchers supervision group*). Bringing coaches together triggered an eagerness to share and explore experiences.

A further ‘need’ that emerged was to have their thinking challenged by both the supervisor and the group. This appeared to be a means for the coach to validate their approach. *Participant A* explained this as “*re-assurance from the fact that there are others out there undertaking this and re-assurance in terms of what they do*”. The initial supervision sessions generated both ‘live’ issues that coaches faced, and topics of a more general nature, such as the role of goals, development versus performance coaching, and line manager engagement. Coaches sought to use supervision sessions to explore and develop their understanding of such topics.

The role that coaches assigned to the supervisors was that of facilitator and process owner.

..... they weren't looking to me to be some kind of expert, or some kind of teacher. They recognised that I was the supervisor but more of a process facilitation thing. (Participant G)

..... more moderator than manager. Helping the group to agree what they wanted [to work on]. (Participant D)

Helping the coaches recognise which issues were appropriate to bring to supervision was a key role for the supervisors – “*My role became to ‘shine a torch’ on issues that emerged, as the coaches didn't necessarily see the issues themselves.*” (*Participant E*)

For the coaches their supervisor was an opportunity to access the coaching scheme, and for some to vent their frustrations. Interestingly however when challenged coaches did not want to sacrifice supervision time to discussion about the scheme. Some supervisors reported

that their group began to self-regulate, with group members closing down someone who was perceived to be wasting the time the group had together.

Some things came out about the scheme and I said 'I need to be clear about my role as supervisor. I'm supervisor, not scheme manager and therefore some of the things that you are raising or wanting to discuss, whilst I'm not averse to discussing them I don't want that to dictate the supervisions. If you want to ring fence, having a discussion about what works from a scheme perspective or not maybe that's something we will discuss... not at the expense of our personal coaching.' And everybody went 'Well yes! I agree with that'. (Participant E)

Supervisors did in reality form a communication conduit between coaches and scheme management through which issues could be, and were raised. This proved to be a source of learning and coach scheme improvement. For example, an issue raised at one supervision session resulted in training for all coaches and supervisors on recognising when a coachee or coach was not well, and needed a different kind of support than coaching.

One group also showed signs of self-regulation in relation to quality assurance of a coach's practice (*Participant B's group*). One coach informed the group that he had agreed with a Line Manager to coach one of that manager's direct reports because there were "*some issues*". Before the supervisor acted several coaches expressed their concern that the coach had failed to insist that the Line Manager use the scheme procedure for coach/coachee identification and matching. The coaches were concerned about conflicts of interest and coaching conversation confidentiality. As a result of their intervention the coach involved withdrew from the arrangement and directed the Line Manager to the scheme management.

One 'need' not directly raised by coaches was 'personal support'. However, the importance of support in reality was demonstrated in two ways. Several coaches brought up issues that were old, but still troubling them.

There was one person who was quite concerned about a relationship that had ended nine months ago. It was interesting that they got back to the situation and they were still concerned. I think it was that they got quite a lot from the group but what that told me is that the protection element is really on. Because this person you could see they were actually quite upset about the whole thing. (Participant C)

The other indication of the need for personal support was the strong preference for group supervision. It was made clear that one-to-one supervision was available, but though noted and appreciated it was hardly taken up. A coach commented to the scheme manager that one of the key positives for them about group supervision was the "*sense of community*" generated.

The organisational context

Throughout the study the supervisors were concerned whether they had the support of senior management. I felt this anxiety whenever topics such as travel costs, time away from 'day job', or competing Business priorities were discussed. *Participant D* summed up the concerns of the supervisors when he asked, "will this initiative be seen as cost effective? Is it a [Business] priority?" That the organisational context was always capable of imposing itself upon the supervisors and coaches was powerfully demonstrated to me in a period of two weeks towards the end of the research period. Attendance at my first supervision meeting had been 100%, and all the coaches had accepted the invitation for the second meeting. However, three of the six coaches had to pull out of this meeting at short notice due to other Business priorities. The final interview with *Participant B* was planned the following day, but I was unable meet him because he was made redundant with immediate effect 24 hours before. And, the following week two supervision group meetings had to be cancelled because they were scheduled on the day that the company announced the restructuring of a region of its operations.

The other impact of the organisational context experienced was on the coaches' commitment. As already stated coach buy-in was high, and enhanced by the supervision group experience. This led a number of coaches to make plans to increase the level of their coaching activity, and CPD. However, the evidence was that these good intentions expressed during supervision sessions were not always capable of being followed through. Following a discussion with the scheme manager I noted that "[coaching is] only one activity amongst many [for the coaches] and therefore constantly at risk of being de-prioritised versus other Business needs" (Researcher)

Discussion

The extent of coach take-up of supervision is unclear. It has been suggested that take-up lags behind advocacy (Hawkins & Schwenk, 2006; Salter, 2008), and perhaps still does (Garvey *et al*, 2014). However, Hawkins and Turner (2016) found that the proportion of UK based coaches who report having supervision has increased significantly, to 92%, versus a survey conducted in 2006 when 44% said that they had supervision (Hawkins & Schwenk, 2006). Maxwell (2011), drawing on the work of St John-Brookes (2010) and Butwell (2006) has suggested that support for internal coaches sometimes falls away after initial training, and that internal coaches may regard supervision as a luxury rather than a necessity. Indeed, the supervisors in this study were sceptical about the level of coach buy-in, based upon their previous experience of supervision of the schemes' coaches. However, this was not the experience of this study, where coach demand and attendance levels remained high both during the study and in the fifteen months following its conclusion. Further, although One-to-one supervision delivery is reportedly more common than group supervision (Hawkins & Schwenk, 2006; St John-Brookes, 2010), in this study group supervision was clearly preferred. It seems clear therefore that in this case the group supervision delivered met a 'need' in the coaches, what one coach expressed as the "sense of community" that meeting as a group engendered. This preference appeared to be driven, by the coaches' wish to utilise the experiences of other coaches to develop themselves, and have their practice validated by their peers. It was also clear, from coaches' comments of being motivated to "do a bit more" that

the sense of community generated by coming together within supervision groups helped them to be able to carry on. The *Scheme Manager* summed up the impact on the coaches as “*Much needed, it was the right move and gave another burst of energy I think to everyone*”.

The structure that emerged in this study resonates strongly with the concept of a *community of practice* developed by Lave and Wenger (1991). They looked at the Master-apprentice model of knowledge acquisition and identified that in many cases knowledge was acquired not from the Master’s direct ‘teaching’ but instead by ‘learning’ from both master and the wider group around this dyadic relationship; other apprentices for example. For the coaches in this study the opportunity to come together with other coaches appeared to exert a strong motivational pull. Lave and Wenger (1991, p. 122) believe that the individual becomes a “member of a community of practice” and that “this idea of identity/membership is strongly tied to a conception of motivation”. This concept of the community of practice is also relevant when considering the specific role the supervisors ultimately played in the supervision process.

What emerged for the supervisors was a dual role, of supervision process owner and facilitator, and, challenger of the coaches to recognise the issues they were facing and to open up their practice to supervision. In this way the supervisors were able to harness the knowledge of the group, and to align their role with the needs and expectations of their coaches, rather than seeking to impose a supervision model upon them. As one of the supervisors commented when asked why the coaches were so motivated to attend supervision

Because they want it!..... because I think that you can clearly see that there’s something in it for them. So, was there readiness to be a supervisee? I think there was a readiness. (Participant E)

Stoltenberg and Delworth (1987), Hawkins and Smith (2006), Mahony (2009) and Grant (2012) have all suggested that in order to supervise a coach’s practice the supervisor needs to have a higher level of practice expertise. But, the supervisors in this study could not be defined as ‘expert’. They acknowledged this themselves in expressing their concern over capability. However the impact of this ‘concern’ was itself positive, resulting in them driving out clarity and alignment around the supervision framework and ways-of-working to be employed. They appeared to utilise their ‘day-job’ skills as managers to find solutions to mitigate their concerns. It also appeared to result in the emergence of a team identity among the supervisors, which helped them to “*stay with it*” (*Researcher*).

That the perspectives of internal practitioners might differ from those of external practitioners was demonstrated during the supervisor training. The trainee supervisors ‘fell out’ with their external facilitators (both of whom were professional coaches and supervisors) because it became apparent that the two groups had very different opinions of what the training priorities should be. In this study it seems that their perception of what ‘being’ a supervisor meant was different, however it was not clear whether this was due to factors relating to the specific case, or whether it reflected two different environmental contexts, those of external coaches versus internal coaches.

The key functions of supervision identified in the literature are practice development and quality assurance, and personal support for the coach. The ‘needs’ of the coaches observed in this study broadly support those identified, however some subtle variations did emerge. Development of practice was the major requirement articulated, but there were two distinct elements. Alongside the use of supervision to identify solutions to issues that had arisen with coachees, the coaches also sought access to on going training and to learn from other coaches’ experiences. The quality assurance function predominantly took the form of validation of practice – “*am I doing the right things?*” This appeared to support the view expressed by Hindmarch (2008) that coaches use supervision to manage self-doubt generated by capability anxiety. But in one group at least, that of *Participant B*, the coaches demonstrated group regulation of the quality of their practice, challenging one of their number when they believed his actions were not in line with the scheme’s procedures.

The third function of supervision, that is support, is not universally recognised in the literature. Lawrence and Whyte (2013, 2014) state that professional coaches seldom use supervision for support. However, whilst ‘support’ was not a ‘need’ articulated by the coaches in the study it became clear that, for them, coming together as a supervision group was an important support mechanism, generating what was described as a “*sense of community*”. This difference in finding may well reflect the differences in the groups assessed. For example, the coaches in this study were all European, whereas those in Lawrence and Whyte’s (2013, 2014) study were Australian. It could be hypothesised that professional coaches might be reluctant to acknowledge their need for support, whereas for the internal coaches coming together with their fellow coaches was clearly motivational, helping them to carry on despite of the pressure of balancing their coaching practice with the ‘day job’. Another reason for the different findings may be the contrasting methodologies employed. Key to identifying the need for support in the current study was the ethnographic approach adopted, which enabled me to look ‘beneath the surface’. This asks a question of whether the survey approach adopted by Lawrence and Whyte (2014) was appropriate to assess the role of supervision in supporting coaches. Questionnaires assess those facts that the participants are aware of and prepared to acknowledge, and this study demonstrated that for the coaches involved some of their needs and emotions were outside their conscious awareness, only becoming apparent through extended observation. Further research is required to establish whether the differences noted here are specific to the studies quoted, or reflect the differing needs of internal versus external coaches.

There are a number of limitations to this study that need to be acknowledged. The research scope was restricted to a single case; the members of one coaching scheme within a single organisation, making generalisation to the internal coach population problematic. The voices heard, recorded and analysed, were those of the coach-supervisors. The coaches within the supervision groups were only given voice through their supervisor. The aim of this research was to listen to the voices of the coaching community, and the research methodology chosen, ethnography, enabled a rich picture to emerge. But it was not possible within the limits of this study to establish causal linkages by testing the themes that emerged. I agree with St John-Brookes (2010) statement that, “internal coaches generally operate within pretty

complex environments” (p. 49), and believe that more research is required into the role that internal coaches play within organisations, and what their specific ‘needs’ are as a result.

Conclusion

That coaches should engage in supervision is increasingly viewed as a requirement practice, however, to date, there is still too little evidence of the benefits (Hawkins & Schwenk, 2006; Lane, 2010 and 2011; Bachkirova *et al*, 2011); the literature on coach supervision being largely advocacy based rather than enquiry (CIPD Research Report 2012). Though the number of coaches using supervision appears to be increasing (Hawkins and Turner 2016), it has still not been universally adopted. Further, the current understanding of coach supervision is largely based on the experience of professional coaches, and, whilst this study makes a contribution to the understanding of supervision in relation to internal coaches, more research is required specific to this community.

Based upon attendance level and degree of engagement reported it is clear that the coaches in this study derived benefit from the supervision provision that the internal supervisors were able to provide; this in spite of their lack of experience and expertise as coach supervisors. It is also apparent that the functions of supervision identified in the literature were relevant to the coaches in this study. However, it does not necessarily follow that the supervision provision was successful solely because it delivered the prescribed functions - development, quality assurance and support – as the low level of support for the earlier supervision provision suggests that this alone might be insufficient. It seems clear that, in this case, a significant factor in the success of the supervision provided was that the approach developed enabled communities to form. Within these communities, or supervision groups, the conditions were created that enabled coaches to open up their practices and in doing so learn from each other, hold each other to account, and support each other: or, put another way, to sustain themselves. Lave and Wenger’s (1991) conception of a *community of practice* seems particularly apposite, viewed in this context.

More research is required to specifically look at the internal coach: how is an employee able to ‘be’ an internal coach, and, what is the impact of ‘being’ an internal coach on the employee-organisation relationship? At the end of the study I reflected that internal coaches need help to “*find the strength and determination to pursue a lonely job, largely unrecognised, whilst maintaining a full-time ‘day job’ within [their] organisation*”. However, I believe that bringing groups of internal coaches together with the aim of facilitating the improvement of their practice can also generate the means of that group sustaining themselves as internal coaches. Though further research is required this study suggests that internal coaching scheme designers and managers should consider the need to foster a “*sense of community*” amongst their coaches, and reflect on the nature and role of the supervision provision they provide to help engender this feeling.

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Mark Robson is the Purchasing Director for a European manufacturing company. He is a coach in the company's internal coaching scheme, and, provides supervision support to a number of the other coaches in the scheme. He is also a part-time PhD student at York St John University. His research interest is in how employees 'are' internal coaches within their organisational context, what impact 'being' an internal coach has on the employee-organisation relationship, and, how coach-employees could improve their practice as both coach and employee.