

Coaching supervision

Peter Bluckert

This module explains what supervision is about, what its key functions are, how it works and whose interests it serves.

What supervision is about

Supervision is not a new concept. It has been practised in social work, psychotherapy and counselling, and clinical psychology for decades. Its role in apprenticeship and sound management goes back even further.

Professional supervision, as opposed to management supervision, is nevertheless new to the coaching and mentoring field. If you trace the references to supervision in coaching books, you will find barely anything before the millennium. None of the standard texts up to that point even discusses it. That situation is now changing and there is a growing number of professional coaches and mentors who regard supervision as essential to good practice.

So what does coaching supervision look like? Firstly, it offers time and space to reflect on one's work with a senior colleague, in a led

group or with a number of peers. The purpose of that reflection is to make greater sense of difficult and complex work situations and to gain more clarity for going forward. Secondly, it gives an opportunity to receive support – both practical, in the form of ideas and suggestions; and emotional, in the sense of sharing issues and, when appropriate, reassurance. Thirdly, supervision can be an opportunity for ongoing learning and professional development.

Supervision for different stages

Those who have written on the subject,² and those who have been in supervision during their careers, tend to agree that supervision means different things at different stages of our development as practitioners.

The newcomer to coaching, who may still be in training, will have different needs from the executive coach who has been operating in this business for 10 or 20 years.

The 'trainee' will perhaps require clearer guidance and closer attention to those anxieties often experienced in the early days. The seasoned coach/mentor will probably want a more equal, consultative relationship. The amount of supervision required will also vary.

Key learning points

- ◆ Supervision is now seen as integral to good practice as a coach/mentor.
- ◆ Supervision has existed for a long time in other helping professions such as psychotherapy, counselling, social work and clinical psychology.
- ◆ Its key functions are educational, managerial and supportive.
- ◆ It is strongly advocated by all the leading professional associations and bodies.
- ◆ No national guidelines yet exist for regularity though some coaching firms have their own recommended ratios of supervision per practice hours.
- ◆ There is a need to encourage greater numbers of senior practitioners to offer their services as supervisors.

Whose interests does supervision serve?

Supervision serves the interests of both the coach/mentor and their client. The management function of the supervisor is about ensuring that the coach/mentor is working responsibly and to the best of their ability. This also ensures a third-party check on quality and ethics.

Ultimately, the supervision process exists for the client's benefit and to protect their interests. However, good supervision is also about the interests and well-being of the coach/mentor. As stated earlier, this is the educational (learning) and support aspect of supervision. The skilled supervisor therefore must keep their eye on two agendas. If the supervisor simply looks after the coach/mentor or adopts a trainer role and fails to address faulty practice issues, then trouble may well lie ahead. Conversely, the supervisor who maintains a focus on practice issues without attending to the support and learning needs of their supervisee is not grasping key aspects of the role.

Acting as a supervisor is a demanding and sometimes complex job. This is why it is imperative that the supervisor is an experienced practitioner in their own right, understands the nature of supervision and has had first-hand experience of being supervised.

Concluding thoughts

Professional supervision is now seen by many as integral to good practice as a coach/mentor. It may soon become one of the main methods of regulating the emerging profession. This

module has set out the case for supervision and outlined its main functions as educative (learning), managerial (quality and standards) and supportive (practical and emotional). This subject will receive much more attention in the coming years and we may anticipate new supervision models and guidelines for practice geared specifically to the coach/mentoring field.

'Coaches are expected to have regular consultative support for their work'

Notes

- 1 The British Association of Counselling and Psychotherapy states that 'counselling supervision is a formal and mutually agreed arrangement for counsellors to discuss their work regularly with someone who is normally an experienced and competent counsellor and familiar with the process of counselling supervision' (BACP Code of Ethics and Practice for Supervisors of Counsellors).
- 2 An account of the history of and research into supervision is given by Holloway (1992). A comprehensive American account of supervision theory and practice can be found in Hess (1980), Bradley (1989) and Bernard and Goodyear (1992). Page and Wosket (1994) discuss in detail the development issues in relation to supervision.
- 3 Kadushin's model of supervision draws on earlier commentators such as Dawson (1926) and applies it to social work.
- 4 Proctor's article in 1987 follows the Kadushin scheme, but uses different terms – formative (education), normative (managerial/administrative) and restorative (support).
- 5 Hawkins and Shohet describe seven focus points of supervision in their influential book *Supervising in the Helping Professions* (2001).

Some important texts

- Bernard, JM and Goodyear, RK. *Fundamentals of Clinical Supervision*. Boston, Allyn & Bacon, 1992.
- Bradley, LJ. *Counselor Supervision* (2nd ed.), Accelerated Development, 1989.
- Carroll, M and Holloway, E. *Counselling Supervision in Context*, Sage Publications Ltd, 1999.
- Feltham, C and Dryden, W. *Developing Counsellor Supervision*, Sage Publications Ltd, 1994.
- Hawkins, P and Shohet, R. *Supervision in the Helping Professions*, Open University Press, 2001.
- Hess, A K (ed.), *Psychotherapy Supervision*, Wiley, 1980.
- Holloway, EL. 'Supervision: a way of teaching and learning', in S.D Brown & R.W. Lent (eds.), *Handbook of Counselling Psychology* (2nd ed.), Wiley, 1992
- Kadushin, A. *Supervision in Social Work* (3rd ed.), Columbia University Press, 1992
- Page, S and Wosket, V. *Supervising the Counsellor*, Brunner-Routledge, 1994.
- Proctor, B. 'Supervision: A co-operative exercise in accountability' in M. Marken and M. Payne (eds.) *Enabling and Ensuring. Supervision in practice*, Leicester: National Youth Bureau, 1987.
- Wosket, V. *The Therapeutic Use of Self*, Routledge, 1999.

Peter Bluckert is managing director of Peter Bluckert Coaching and chairman of the Standards and Ethics Group of the European Mentoring and Coaching Council. Peter Bluckert Coaching is one of Europe's leaders in the provision of executive coaching, coach training, team coaching and coaching supervision.

- Telephone: +44 (0)1274 566060
- E-mail: pete@pbcoaching.com
- Website: www.pbcoaching.com



is integral to good practice

The key functions of supervision

One of the most influential writers on supervision has been Kadushin (1992),³ who defined three main functions.

- **Educational** – the educational development of the practitioner and the fulfilment of potential. In educational supervision the primary issue for Kadushin is worker ignorance and/or ineptitude regarding the knowledge, attitude and skills required to do their job. The goal is to dispel ignorance and upgrade skill by encouraging reflection on, and exploration of, the work.
- **Administrative/managerial** – the promotion and maintenance of good standards of work and adherence to policies and good practice. This is the quality-assurance dimension to supervision. This aspect of the supervisor's role will be clear when a line-management relationship exists, but it is also part of the role of the supervisor who is dealing with an external, independent coach/mentor. The interpretation here is that the supervisor inducts the coach into the norms, values and best practices of being a

coach/mentor. It is the 'community of practice' dimension, ensuring that standards are maintained.

- **Supportive** – the practical and psychological support to carry through the responsibilities of the role. In supportive supervision the primary issue is worker morale and job satisfaction. The stresses and pressures of the coaching role can affect work performance and take their toll psychologically and physically. In extreme and prolonged situations these may ultimately lead to burnout. The supervisor's role is to help the worker manage that stress more effectively and provide reassurance and emotional support.

Proctor (1987)⁴ has a similar view of the key functions of supervision although her terminology is different. She refers to the normative, formative and restorative aspects of supervision.

- **Normative** – The supervisor accepts (or, more accurately, shares with the supervisee) responsibility for ensuring that the supervisee's work is professional and ethical, operating within whatever codes, laws and organisational norms apply.

- **Formative** – The supervisor acts to provide feedback or direction that will enable the supervisee to develop the skills, theoretical knowledge, personal attributes and so on that will mean the supervisee becomes an increasingly competent practitioner.
- **Restorative** – The supervisor is there to listen, support and confront the supervisee when the inevitable personal issues, doubts and insecurities arise.

How supervision works

The process usually involves a presentation of a specific case or a set of issues that are of concern to the coach/mentor across a range of work assignments. The reflective space enables the coach/mentor to acquire a deeper understanding of what is taking place in the client system, in the relationship between the coach and client, and in the coach themselves.

This learning serves the purpose of addressing all three functions described earlier. The coach/mentor develops deeper knowledge and wisdom about their work (educative), is steered towards good practice (administrative/managerial) and feels reassured and guided (supportive).

Other purposes of supervision have been outlined by Hawkins and Shohet (2001)⁵ as focusing on session content, strategies and interventions used by the coach and the nature of the supervisory relationship itself.

Format for supervision

In practical terms, supervision occurs in either one-to-one or group sessions. It is vital that

the supervisor is an experienced coach/mentor and has a good working knowledge of the supervision process, particularly when supervising trainee or novice coaches. Peer supervision is not advocated at this early stage of development. As the coach/mentor becomes more experienced, it may be appropriate to look at peer arrangements as an option.

Guidelines for supervision

Currently there are no nationally agreed guidelines as to the regularity of supervision. However, the practice of supervision is strongly advocated by all the leading professional associations for coaching and mentoring.

For example, the European Mentoring and Coaching Council (EMCC) states in its Code of Ethics:

A coach/mentor must maintain a relationship with a suitably qualified supervisor, who will regularly assess their competence and support their development.

The Association for Coaching (AC) states in its Code of Ethics:

Coaches are expected to have regular consultative support for their work.

Some coaching consultancies have prepared their own recommended formulas for the amount of supervision in relation to practice hours. These tend to vary from 1:8 to 1:15 hours' supervision to practice.

There is typically an implicit and sometimes an explicit understanding that coaches-in-training or in their early stages require the lower ratio.

Who can supervise?

This all implies, of course, that there are supervisors out there ready and available to supervise. Owing to the infancy of the coaching and mentoring field, this is not necessarily so. The current state of the field is bottom heavy in terms of experience, with many newcomers and relatively few 'old hands'. Some experienced coaches are offering their services as supervisors, but there is a need for more. Some coaches have addressed their supervision requirements by going to see counselling or therapy supervisors, who are far more numerous at the present time than coaching supervisors.

There are an increasing number of short and longer courses now available to train to be a coaching supervisor. This will result in a greater supply in the medium term.

The 'psychological debate'

One of the issues occupying the minds of many senior coach/mentors is how much psychological

training and background is needed to operate as a supervisor. Those coach/mentors who have come from a counselling or therapy background tend to see this as absolutely essential. Typically these coaches will see the psychological and emotional dimension to performance issues earlier, and with greater clarity, than their untrained (psychologically) counterparts will. They may work to a different boundary and depth with their clients and therefore regard supervision as a psychological process also. Certainly, some of the foci of supervision set out earlier in the Hawkins and Shohet model would indicate that a strong psychological competence is required of the supervisor.

However, there are many coach/mentors who neither have a counselling/therapy background nor hold it necessary to be supervised by someone who has. Their work may be more strategically rather than behaviourally focused and they may regard supervision more as a process of consultation.

CASE STUDY a personal experience of supervision

As a 20-year-old trainee social worker on his first placement I was soon in weekly supervision. At the time I understood it to be about getting it right for my clients. In truth it felt more geared to the client and a protection for the organisation.

Ten years on, my career change was to train for and then practise as a counsellor and this also entailed a commitment to supervision. In fact, for many years I was in weekly supervision. As well as operating my private counselling practice, I worked as an organisation development consultant and wondered where I could take my sticky consultancy questions to get some consultative support. In my search for supervision I tried all sorts of things – ranging from informal arrangements with senior, trusted colleagues through group supervision conducted in a workshop situation. I even went to the United States for one-to-one consultative time with one of the founding figures of the organisation development field.

When my work increasingly moved into executive coaching in the mid-1990s, I continued to look for supervision arrangements which might fit my needs, but they were not easy to find. I suspect that this is the case for many of my colleagues, particularly the more seasoned ones. That is why, 30 years on from my early experiences as a fledgling social worker, I am writing on this subject. I am also doing that because it strikes me, as a relatively old hand in a very young, emerging profession, that there is an urgent need to clarify just what supervision is about and how it can play an important part in improving coach/mentoring standards – a subject close to my, and many others', hearts.