

A place of safety: getting the most out of supervision

In the second article of our three-part series exploring the role and purpose of supervision for coach-therapists, **Jo Birch** and **Sarah Corrie** offer guidance on how to get the most from this unique and complex relationship.

This series of three articles seeks to explore the contribution of supervision to our work as dual-trained practitioners. We propose that working as dual-trained practitioners provides an opportunity to reflect on and review our current supervision arrangements – very likely initially drawn from our primary ‘therapist’ practice – to ensure that any continuing or new provision is fit for purpose. In this second article we offer some guidelines on how to get the most from supervision for your brand of coaching in order to best accommodate your skill profile and professional development needs.

Valuing supervision

We know from the evidence around us – from shared learning journeys with peers, from working with other coaches in teams and from group supervision – that how we apply the tools and techniques of coaching is personal to each of us. We frame and position the activity of coaching in our own unique way, bringing ourselves into the relationship from the very beginning. We draw heavily on our relational capabilities in the work we do and the service we provide represents a deeply personal endeavour.

To support the work we do, supervision needs to be able to accommodate those unique elements of our service offer while at the same time ensuring a focus on any agreed learning agenda and attending to issues relating to quality assurance.

In blending the core qualities and essence of supervision with elements of coaching, counselling and sometimes line management, supervision is a unique and at times complex space – a safe cavern from which to explore, yet also an environment in which we can be vulnerable as we open ourselves to being challenged.

In considering how to get the most from this unique learning environment, we have found it helpful to focus our thinking, preparation and reflection on four distinct but inter-related areas:

- 1 Contracting
- 2 Showing up authentically
- 3 Maintaining the relationship
- 4 Managing endings.

We look at each of these in turn.





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Contracting

Dual-trained practitioners formulate a two-party contract between themselves and their supervisor. In some cases this is a clear and simple process. However for many coaches multi-party contracting will be part of their everyday work. As we navigate contracting for our supervision, we have the opportunity to consider multiple perspectives, dual relationships and the impact of multiple stakeholders. The regularity with which coaches are involved in multi-party contracting - with learning and development or human resources (HR) leads, line managers and contract managers from within the organisation and within the coach's own team - can mask the complexity within which coaches are operating.

More organisations are recognising the importance and benefits of supervision. In some organisations in-house arrangements are being considered and implemented. These may have a cost benefit, provide a degree of quality control and have the potential to harness themes and overarching issues, thus enabling a review and realignment of coaching programmes. However, in-house coaching supervision can also add to the complexity when contracting around coaching supervision.

The basic areas for contract discussions include:
a) Practical issues. These are likely to cover aspects such as contact details, times, venues, length and regularity of meetings, dates of review meetings, payments, cancellations, confidentiality and limits.

Contracting also involves clarifying expectations relating to how work material is presented (for example, will the supervisee be expected to bring along recordings of sessions for feedback, or is a 'case description' sufficient?) and how evaluation will take place.

It may also be useful to include supervisee learning objectives and preferred learning style.

b) Psychological contracting. This aspect of contracting concerns the relationship to be created between coach and supervisor. Some of this will be explicit and written (such as the responsibilities and contributions of each

party); other elements will emerge during the initial dialogue between coach and supervisor.

An explicit conversation about how ethical issues may be handled could also be helpful, rather than waiting until a dilemma presents itself. Some of this will be covered in the practical issues (contact between sessions, identifying supervisees and supervisor's ethical frameworks). However a conversation about how you can work together to address such concerns is an important aspect of psychological contracting.

c) Dual relationships and multi-party contracting. Within initial contracting it may be helpful to uncover the potential for the supervisory relationship to reflect and be affected by other relationships in the coaching field. This may include being transparent about any in-house reporting requirements placed on the supervisor.

Showing up authentically

It seems of the utmost importance that, as we embark on a supervisory relationship, we find a way to show up as 'ourselves' as fully as possible in order to explore not solely 'the work of coaching' but also 'my work as the coach that I am'. Getting the most out of supervision requires us to be mindful of those factors that enhance the likelihood of our showing up most transparently as the person we are, and also of the things that might get in the way.

Pre-supervision reflection may include:

- Who am I when I show up most fully as myself?
- What are my joys and disappointments?
- What do I hope I will not have to reveal?
- What helps me to show up most fully as myself?
- What gets in the way?
- What might I ask of myself in preparing for the session?
- What might I ask of my supervisor when I arrive?

d) Mind-mapping. This is a way of laying out visually the work of the supervisee. If a mind map is created from memory it may uncover

information that can be added to the dialogue:

- What do I see when I look at this map?
- Who did I remember? Who did I miss?
- How do I feel about my relationships with each individual?
- How do I feel about the emergent picture - my work as a whole?
- What other activities have I included that are relevant (consultancy, training etc)? What additional personal circumstances might be included that have the potential to impact on my work (eg worry over health, celebrating success, booking a holiday, the car breaking down) and how could I represent these?

e) Arriving. We have so many opportunities for non-judgmental curiosity about ourselves and our professional relationships:

- How can I bring myself into the relational space with my supervisor?
- What needs to be let go?
- What do I need to do to clear the urgency in my mind and allow myself to unfold?
- What might get in the way today?
- What success have I had recently?
- What do I need in order to hold both my pre-supervision preparation and the emergence of issues in the moment?
- How can I support myself?
- What can I ask of my supervisor?

Maintaining the relationship

Supervision takes place within a relationship that provides rich and fertile ground for exploration, self-understanding and professional growth. The relative balance of the educational, managerial and supportive aspects of supervision will take different forms at different times during the coach's journey. This could be influenced by the developmental or professional requirements of the supervisee, the nature of the work being presented, the explicit skills and style of the supervisor and the learning focus of the supervisee.

Inevitably there will be moments when the interpersonal climate of supervision is experienced as more effective than others. In a working environment that derives from a relationship between two fallible human

beings, there are bound to be tricky moments as a result of misunderstanding, projection or parallel process. If moments of interpersonal rupture can be understood as opportunities and explored with genuine curiosity, noticing any desire to avoid or defend, they offer a way of deepening self-understanding. This in turn can enrich our relationships in supervision, in coaching and in our wider personal and professional contexts.

Equally supervision can become too comfortable. It is important to be attuned to how similarities might limit our thinking (through collusion, for example) and what will make it possible to name our differences where this is in service of the supervisee's work. By maintaining this awareness, supervision can offer a safe environment through which it is possible to explore assumptions and stereotypes.

It is therefore important to consider how supervision might enable the building of mutual trust to bring into focus the here-and-now relationships that are going well and those that are not going well. Questions that may usefully be asked include:

- How might we contract to enable us to use our relationship as a critical feature in enhancing our understanding of other relationships?
- How will we each offer clear, observational feedback from a place of curiosity rather than judgment?
- What support might I need to do this?
- How will my practice and supervision be evaluated?
- How can we remain curious and work effectively with any differences emerging between us including any ruptures?
- If we get on well, how might we ensure that we don't become too comfortable in our working relationship? How will we keep that critical edge?

Managing endings

All working relationships ultimately come to an end and supervision is no different. In comparison with the psychotherapy literature, less attention has been given to the topic of endings in the context of supervision and even less in the literature on coaching supervision.



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Nonetheless endings are a vital component of supervision, enabling us to honour the journey that has taken place, punctuate key points of learning and pave the way for planning how to address future learning and development needs. Endings are also a place where disappointments can be acknowledged. Perhaps supervision did not address the needs of the supervisee in the way that was originally planned, or certain cherished aspirations were thwarted. Having an opportunity to reflect on all that has, and has not, occurred in supervision provides an important vehicle for closure.

In considering endings in supervision, it is important to reflect on both *when* to end with a current supervisor and *how* to end. Regardless of whether the contract is open ended or has a specific time frame agreed from the outset, it is good practice to review periodically how supervision is working for both parties and make any necessary adjustments. This includes sensing and assessing whether the time has come to change supervisor.

You may find it helpful to 'audit' key endings in your life and reflect on how endings have taken place in other important relationships. Do you relish or avoid them? Do you have a ritual to mark an ending or do you prefer to let it slip away quietly? Pack up and set off briskly into the next job or activity? Linger and stretch the end boundary? Do you fully acknowledge the contribution to each other's journey, noticing and respecting feelings while bringing the connection to a close? There's no judgment here - while we might aspire to the last option, we may still find ourselves unconsciously repeating old patterns. What does the prospect of ending stir up for you and how might you open a discussion with your supervisor? Ending with a supervisor might present the opportunity to extend the spirit of learning and development into the ending itself - an opportunity to notice and navigate this phase of relationships in a new way.

As you move towards the ending it may be helpful to review learning outcomes, perhaps using a written format to summarise your journey together and as an aid to dialogue. To what extent were the aims and objectives of the contract achieved? What developmental stages have been successfully negotiated or need acknowledging? What learning and development needs might now need addressing? Additional questions may include:

- What should be celebrated about the work achieved together?
- What will you miss? What will you not miss?
- What did/didn't you reveal?
- What was your pattern together?
- What needs to be taken forward? What will be the long-term legacy of this work?
- What do you want to thank your supervisor for?
- What might your supervisor want to thank you for?

A final note

In closing this article we wish to acknowledge the gift this writing has brought to each of us, as authors. We have explored and learned as we have focused on supervision in our respective contexts. There is currently scant literature on supervision for dual-trained practitioners and our experiences as authors, readers and practitioners in the field are shaping and adding to our knowledge as we stretch ourselves and learn what best fits our new practice.

It is our hope that, as a growing community, coaching practitioners will take this opportunity to acknowledge and value what we already have in our longstanding relationships with supervision in counselling, psychology and psychotherapy. We hope too that they will take this opportunity to discover what new gifts we may find if we open ourselves to new possibilities as we integrate these core disciplines with the emerging disciplines of coaching and coaching psychology.

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