

Fit for purpose: getting the best supervision for your practice



In the first of a special three-part series exploring the role and purpose of supervision for coach-therapists, **Sarah Corrie** and **Jo Birch** offer guidance on choosing the best supervisor for your particular brand of practice.

Supervision is widely regarded as playing a vital role in the quality control of many professional services. Some have gone so far as to propose that supervision is a 'signature pedagogy' of the therapeutic and mental health professions.¹ In this series of three articles we seek 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 perhaps review, our 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 first article, we offer some guidelines on how to organise supervision for your brand of coaching in order to best accommodate your skill profile and professional development needs.

The case for supervision

Supervision has been defined as '... a formal, independent process of reflection and review which enables practitioners to increase individual self-awareness, develop their competence and critique their work'.² It has been identified as serving a number of functions that range from developing the practitioner to protecting the public from poor practice.³

However, while it is elevated to the heart of effective and ethical practice by many, actual knowledge of what constitutes 'optimum' supervision remains limited. Although there is a well-established body of knowledge concerning the needs of those *receiving* supervision, far less attention has been given to the necessary skills and credentials of those *providing* it.³ This places those seeking the services of a supervisor at a distinct disadvantage and may be a particular dilemma for dual-trained practitioners who are



forging new ground in their efforts to apply psychological knowledge and principles to the coaching engagement. Critical and as yet unanswered questions include, who is best placed to supervise the work of this distinct group of coaching practitioners, and which supervisory formats, styles and interventions might be best for a profession still forging its identity and place in the wider market?

Functions of the supervisor

Choosing a supervisor is no small task. How, for example, do you know if a prospective supervisor is the right one for you? Which criteria should you use to make an informed judgment? Also, different types of supervision may be more suited to your needs at specific stages of your career. For example, you may be:

- new to the world of coaching and seeking a supervisor who can guide you through the fundamentals of working in a new area
- an experienced coach who has consolidated your brand but who is seeking to extend your services to a new domain
- an experienced coach who wishes to develop your practice through challenging your established approach in order to refine your offer of service.



You will also need to give some thought to which type of supervision environment will best meet your needs. Supervision can be provided in a variety of formats: face-to-face or virtual; group or individual; peer or supervisor-facilitated; in-house or provided externally. Each of these can support practice in different ways and may be more or less appealing as a function of what you seek to achieve.

In the literature on supervision academics have differentiated normative, formative and restorative functions.⁴ We have found this to be a useful framework for organising our thinking and for planning conversations with prospective supervisors about our learning needs. These different functions, and their relevance to helping you select a supervisor, are outlined below.

The *normative function* focuses on the managerial and evaluative aspects of supervision such as quality assurance, ethical practice and public protection. When seeking to appoint a supervisor, we would do well to consider who is best placed to monitor the complex competences and standards required of dual-trained practitioners, and who can help us monitor our own standards. Who might be sufficiently experienced, and in which fields, to help us in the ethical conversations arising from our organisational work? What kind of supervisor can hold the challenges involved in working across the mature professions of psychology and counselling together with the emerging field of coaching? Who can help us achieve clear and transparent contracting?

The *formative function* focuses on the 'educational' aspects of supervision, such as developing knowledge, skills, attitudes and abilities. Practitioners will be concerned with developing specific competences in therapy and coaching, as well as appreciating the limits of their competence and when it is necessary to refer elsewhere. In order to identify the most appropriate supervisor, dual-trained practitioners first need to consider their current priorities for learning. What methods can assist in a self-assessment of skills and knowledge? For example, can you base this on client feedback gathered over a period of time? Or would it be preferable to look across your outcomes and see where you are most and least effective in facilitating change?

Do you need feedback based on direct, live observations of your work? Who can help identify blind spots in your practice? Once learning priorities are identified we can discern which are best achieved through supervision and which may be better addressed elsewhere.

Finally, the *restorative function* is concerned with the relational 'climate' created in supervision that enables the practitioner to feel respected, valued and safe to explore their work. Supervisors will understand how to create and maintain this unique professional environment, enabling practitioners to fully express concerns, doubts and fears while also sharing the joy and celebration of strengths and successes.

In the restorative function supervisors will focus on the holistic wellbeing of the practitioner, their capacity for self-management and self-care and contextual factors that may enable or constrain learning and development. Dual-trained practitioners may be forging new ground, testing or creating new models of integrated practice. As they carve out these new areas of work, they may move between the known and unknown. Practitioners may therefore look for supervisors who understand and can contain the discomfort and confusion present in the early stages in the 'conscious competence' learning cycle and offer the depth of reflection and stretch required by mature practitioners.

Tips and recommendations

We might initially think that, when seeking a new supervisor, the questions will focus on the supervisor, their way of working, their credentials or their experience. However, by spending time in reflection, understanding your own needs and wants, and understanding what is important to you in the uniqueness of your own development and practice, questions directed towards the prospective supervisor become clear and easy to formulate.

In seeking to appoint a supervisor who can help you refine and enhance your work, we offer below a series of questions as a 'check list' aligned to the normative, formative and restorative functions that draws on two perspectives: questions we can usefully pose ourselves, and questions we can usefully pose prospective supervisors.

Pre-work to clarify your normative needs

- What are the frameworks and standards with which I need to comply (these may straddle those of more than one professional body)? How important is it to me that the supervisor is familiar with those frameworks and standards?
- How am I currently approaching ethical dilemmas? In developing my own ethical maturity what do I need from a supervisor? What kind of approach, dialogue or support will stretch my own thinking and also keep my clients safe?
- What supervisor training and experience would I consider necessary in order to have confidence in them as a credible witness (in assessing and monitoring my competence and standards)? What questions could I ask that would enable me to assess whether they are keeping up with current developments? What do I need to know about their areas of interest and expertise?
- To what extent are my current contracts fit for purpose across my work areas? How, if at all, would I like to explore and improve my contracting? What are the options, benefits and consequences of choosing one supervisor for all of my work – or multiple supervisors?

Having considered these areas, consider the questions you may wish to ask a prospective supervisor. You may want to:

- gain an understanding of their background, training, credentials, experience, areas of expertise and current interests
- discuss their understanding of how supervision contributes to learning and development, as well as their supervisory style and approach
- clarify how they keep up with developments in the field, how they decide which theories/models to integrate into their practice and what helps them decide
- explore how they approach ethical issues.

Pre-work to clarify your formative needs

- Where am I in my career right now? Where would I like to be in five years?
- What areas am I really interested in? What knowledge, competences and skills do I need in order to work in these areas?
- How am I inclined to assess my needs – more towards developing the therapeutic focus; more

towards a coaching focus, or support to integrate?

- What competences and skills might I currently be lacking?

Having considered these areas, consider the questions you may wish to ask a prospective supervisor. You may want to:

- clarify the forms of therapy and/or coaching they practise
- clarify how they see the role of supervision in facilitating learning and development
- discuss how they approach the task of facilitating another's competence development
- explore how they work with supervisees to illuminate blind spots in a practitioner's work, and what capacity they have to stretch the practitioner's field of vision.

Pre-work to clarify your restorative needs

- What's the most important thing I want a prospective supervisor to know about me, and why?
- What do I hope to keep hidden from any new supervisor? What would make it safe for me to reveal this?
- What is my preferred learning style and therefore what do I want to ask of my supervisor?
- How do I respond to challenges in my work? What tends to destabilise me and what qualities would I need in a supervisor to help me contain this?

Having considered these areas, consider the questions you may wish to ask a prospective supervisor. You may want to:

- share what helps you maintain an open and curious stance during supervision
- ask how they understand a supervisee's contribution to a successful supervisory relationship and process
- explore what factors or events could affect the quality of supervision provided.

Some additional thoughts

If you are clear about what you seek, it will be easier to have a productive discussion about whether an individual is more or less able to meet those needs. It is also important to observe



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how a prospective supervisor responds to your questions. Are they open to a process of dialogue and negotiation and therefore likely to be able to adapt their approach according to your needs?

Once areas for growth and development are illuminated and prioritised practitioners can consider which learning areas might best be met through supervision and which might be met elsewhere. Supervision is often one element of a broad range of support mechanisms that we can build around ourselves and our practice that includes training, mentoring, CPD and also social and leisure activities that help us to unwind.^{5,6} We recognise that not everyone would regard supervision as essential to the development and maintenance of effective and ethical practice. Nonetheless, we believe that the existing literature is sufficiently robust to support the case for supervision as a vital method of quality control.

This article has aimed to provide some pointers for how to select a supervisor, using Proctor's identified functions as an organising framework.⁴ Of course, no supervisor can be all things to all practitioners and on occasions a supervisor may, for entirely appropriate reasons, decline to work with you even if you see them as ideally suited to the role. However, by ensuring that you are clear about what you need, you will be well placed to have productive conversations, make better choices and negotiate better terms for supporting the development of your career.

In the next article we consider how, having successfully engaged a supervisor and established a basis for working together, you can go about gaining the most from supervision.

References

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