

Supervisors speak: what do we do, how do we do it – and why?

In this conversation piece, supervisors **Michelle Lucas** and **Amanda Larcombe** discuss the role and purpose of coaching supervision.

Inspired by Edna Murdoch's belief that 'who you are is how you supervise',¹ this piece takes the form of a conversation between two supervisors. Despite our very different backgrounds, we discovered the scope of the supervision support we offer clients is remarkably similar. Of particular interest to us was how we brought together learning from many different perspectives to deliver a broad range of support in a flexible manner. Here, we share our awareness of how different influences have served to shape our supervision practice. Importantly, we examine why we label what we do as 'supervision', as opposed to the plethora of other labels that might also be applied.

ML If I go back to the theory of how the 'purpose' of supervision is defined, I come across three 'pillars' that describe the role of supervision. There is the formative, which tends to be about the supervisee's development: what went well and what didn't. There is the normative: what is in keeping with the code of ethics, what we believe to be best practice. And, finally, there is the restorative: how we can help our supervisees achieve and maintain good energy from working with their clients. The question for me is, how much broader is the supervisor role? What do we do in practice and what could be labelled as a different kind of interaction?

What do you actually do in your coaching supervision practice and does this fit with what the theory suggests is done?

AL My immediate response is that I do 'whatever enables and supports my supervisee to be the most effective, ethical and professional practitioner they can be'. This would then be qualified by 'in line with their own personal, business and career aspirations' and with direct reference to 'the ethical framework for practice' associated with whichever coaching body they are aligned to.

As I write this I'm noticing that this could be described as 'supervisee-centred', and a 'supervisee-led' approach, both of which are strongly associated with my counselling training and the philosophy that underpins

my practice (Humanistic/Gestalt). In reality, this does mean that I do attend to all three of the pillars you refer to, but I don't restrict myself to them. 'What actually happens' is much broader and is, among other things, influenced by the individual coaching supervisee him or herself: for example, their style of learning, where they are in their career, their coaching model, their style of relating.

What I am aware of is that I do this by virtue of the practitioner learning that preceded my supervisory training, which then reminds me that, in addition to extensive training and experience as a counsellor/psychotherapist, I have also been trained as a supervisor and that it was this training that allowed me to crystallise the boundaries of responsibility. I pay particular attention to what distinguishes the role of supervisor, which is the role of 'gatekeeper' (our responsibility to the public and to our professional bodies to uphold the highest possible standards of coaching practice). This then leads me to conclude that 'what I actually do in supervision' is influenced more by the philosophical underpinnings of my coaching practice, which come directly from my therapeutic training and practitioner journey, and my own ethical framework for practice (the Association for Professional Executive Coaching and Supervision/Association for Coaching) than they do from any one 'theory'. I almost have a sense that the theory helps me explain what I do, rather than informs what I do. This doesn't mean that I ignore or don't seek to embrace new theories and perspectives: on the contrary. But the theories to which I am drawn and that I integrate in my supervisory practice come through the filter of my philosophy.

ML I have found that many coaches (especially independents) carry around an anxiety about 'getting more clients', and this can influence how they work with their clients – anything from the performance anxiety of whether they did a 'good job' through to being tempted to suggest an extended programme to help their own cash flow or agreeing to work with a client who is not in their 'target group'. This seems to be especially true for those starting out who worry that they are

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not earning enough or who are only doing coaching as an associate and find this both limits their earnings and the diversity of their client base. In the same way that there is a continuum between coaching and mentoring generally, I have asked myself whether I am doing 'restorative' supervision work or am I actually being a 'marketing mentor' for my supervisee? You'll notice that, whatever the answer to that question, I do it anyway.

Do you address these marketing, more business-oriented topics with your supervision clients?

AL Absolutely! The reality for any coaching supervisee with whom I've worked is that they are doing it to earn a penny: whether it is their living or an addition to their living. They have invested in training (money and time) and they are seeking a return on that investment. I recognise the tension you refer to as being carried by supervisees, particularly those who may not have the advantage of either being in or having already had a career, and therefore having an established network of contacts, associates and resources to draw on. Linked with this reality are the elements of

‘anxiety’ and ‘fear’ around the ‘What if I don’t have any clients?’ and the ‘How will I pay my mortgage?’ Obviously these are not the only fear-inducing questions, but they are the most common, in my experience. So, returning to my observations on ‘What do I actually include in supervision’, these elements fall easily under the ‘Whatever enables and supports my supervisee to be the most effective, ethical and professional practitioner they can be’. Anxiety and fear have the potential to disable and sabotage. As such they can seriously impair a coaching supervisee’s judgment – should I take on this contract or not, for example – and, most importantly, their ability to be with and relate to their coaching clients. So, if I were to align this with the theory you refer to, this activity would potentially come under all three:

- ‘formative’, in relation to their own self-awareness, their awareness of the impact of ‘fear’ and how this might relate to their coaching work, indeed their own coachees; along with how might they optimise their practice (tools/frameworks/strategies) going forward
- ‘normative’, in relation to shining a light on how their behavioural, cognitive, emotional expressions of ‘fear’ might influence their ethical/professional awareness eg around conflicts of interest; competency and capacity, and
- ‘restorative’, in relation to the possible need for attention to self-care: how long has anxiety and fear been around for them? What impact is it having on their competency/capacity?

As I write these bullet points I feel like I’m justifying the inclusion of this activity when, in reality, I know I do it intuitively from the point of view that it is in the interests of my supervisees and, by default, their coaching clients. It feels the most logical thing in the world to be doing.

This sense of ‘Well, why wouldn’t I be doing this?’ may be also because I’ve been working this way, with these guiding philosophies, for a very long time. Therefore, they feel like they reflect a way of being that has developed out of the integration of theory and practice over time.

ML For me, there’s a number of reasons why I offer the more business-oriented support. There is some self-interest here. Most coaches understand the value of supervision, but not all of them engage with it. The fact that it’s an additional cost is a genuine obstacle – especially to those still establishing their business. So my thinking is, if I can help a coach build their business, they will be more able and willing to pay for more supervision. This is an uncomfortable statement in many ways: is it a conflict of interest or collusion? Perhaps. Nonetheless, it is my reality.

The second thing that comes to mind is ‘Because I can’. With a corporate background and an MBA, I understand how markets work and how businesses evolve. I feel I have many skills that I could bring to a supervisee, in the same way that I might do an ‘educational piece’ with a coaching client who hasn’t had leadership training. I feel that it can be appropriate to share my own experience of how I have built my coaching business. While there is no substitute for everyone making their own mistakes, highlighting some of the ‘bear traps’ that I’ve fallen into may help raise the coaching supervisees’ awareness of what to look out for. Clearly this experience needs to be invited by the client. I tend to signpost that, in sharing this aspect of my experience, I am stepping outside of my ‘classic’ supervision role.

Third, if I said ‘no’, where would they take their questions? They could take them to their network of coaching colleagues, and often they will already be doing this. They could also engage a marketing consultant. Aside from the cost, I have found that most marketers don’t understand the nature of the coaching market and/or are unrealistic about what a small business can afford to spend without tangible evidence of returns. It seems that supervisees value hearing directly from someone who has been there and is still doing it.

Finally and honestly, I enjoy it! It’s fascinating to watch how their clarity about their business proposition evolves. It’s heart warming when you help them develop a strategy for getting more clients and then it starts to happen.

What drives you to include this commercial aspect in your supervision?

AL All of the above. And more. First, my philosophy. Because I work systemically, I work with and see my coaching supervisees as ‘systems’ – individually, in relation to their own relationships/family/home, in relation to their coaching clients, in relation to me in supervision, in relation to their coachee’s organisation and so forth. As such, they exist as a whole organisation: their own CEO, HR, Finance, Sales and Marketing and Operations Director. Reality dictates that, if they are to realise an income, they need to be all of these, even when they may have experience of only one, or possibly none of them! Therefore, working in the service of my supervisees (and their coaching clients), with a responsibility to enable them to be all that they can, I feel that this is an essential part of our supervisory work.

Second, because I can and ‘I am’. My many years’ extensive experience of business and organisations means that it’s in my blood. It is part of who I am and all that I bring to my supervisory practice. As long as it is offered with the clear intention of enhancing the work of my supervisee and, thereby, their work with their coaching clients, and it is sought by my supervisee, then it is most definitely ‘OK’ in my book to both offer it and engage in it. My ethical principles also influence this aspect.

ML I remember when I first started out as a supervisor, I simply wasn’t sure if I was allowed to do this kind of work. Would it be seen as improper in the world of supervision? I got past this and gave myself permission, as long as it was only part of the mix and as long as we were always clear that this was a shift in my supervisor role. I called it being a ‘mentor-supervisor’, because I was certainly sharing more of my own experience and at times being more directive than I would countenance if I were supporting the same coach to reflect on their client work. The other struggle I had was about my fees: I charge coaches a 20 per cent uplift on their own coaching rate for my supervision work. I justify that because of my additional training and experience. I wasn’t sure that I had the track record to charge this rate for supporting them with their marketing

conundrums: I have no formal marketing background and, to be honest, I never feel complacent about the stability of my own business. So there was an underlying concern about whether I was giving value or, indeed, was I ethically exploiting my position? I dealt with this by being really transparent about my concerns and also realising that I needed to trust my supervisees’ ability to make the decision that worked for them.

So what is the problem with including this element in supervision?

AL My immediate response to that is, who has or might have a problem with it? I don’t have a problem with it, and even less now that I’ve been reminded of De Haan’s work on relational supervision in coaching.² It does then raise another question for me, however: is there such a thing as ‘right and wrong’ in the context of what can and can’t be included in the process of supervision? My immediate response to that in relation to ‘modality’ (the model you may be trained in or choose to use as a supervisor) is that the choice is yours: it is likely to be rooted in your coaching modality and, as such, to be a reflection of you. For me, that can’t be deemed right or wrong. However, I come back to professional and ethical principles when I acknowledge that, for me, there are potentially ways of being and activities that I would see as being ‘wrong’ by being either unethical or unprofessional, or both:

- anything that would compromise/undermine the quality, trust in the supervisor/supervisee relationship. For example, anything that might impede the supervisee’s freedom to explore or challenge their work fully or a supervisor entering into additional business activities with their supervisee
- anything that would or could compromise/undermine the supervisee’s relationship with their client (individual or organisational)
- anything that might adversely impact on the supervisee’s client/s (individual or organisational).

All of which is likely to be addressed in the professional/ethical standards set out by the relevant professional bodies in coaching.

ML Is there any other aspect of supervision work that you do that doesn’t fit into the three purposes identified in the theory?

AL Probably, yes. However, what I am increasingly aware of as we talk about this subject is that my frame of reference of my supervision is not a theory; it is a philosophy. My philosophy, which is a reflection of my own values and beliefs and how these relate to the counselling philosophies that inform all of my practice, naturally aligns me with certain theories: eg Rogerian theory on the significance of relationship in enabling; Gestalt theory on the need to work with the ‘whole’, and, in turn, the relevant supervision theories. This clarity about my philosophical underpinnings leaves me free to integrate and draw on the work and learning of many different approaches that emerge as the worlds of supervision, coaching, counselling, psychology and learning develop through research and practice. In essence I feel it is my philosophy that gives my supervisory practice its identity and cohesion, not any one specific theory of supervision... and I inform my philosophy! My supervision practice is indeed a reflection of who I am.

We are curious to hear from other supervisors with similar or different backgrounds. What are the origins of your supervision work? What do you do? Why do you do it? If you don’t provide the aspects of service discussed here in your supervision, what stops you? Does this raise any ethical or boundary issues for you? How do you manage them if so?

References

- 1 Murdoch E, Arnold J. Full spectrum supervision: who you are is how you supervise. St Albans: Panoma Press; 2013.
- 2 De Haan E. Supervision in action: a relational approach to coaching and consulting supervision. Maidenhead: McGraw Hill; 2012.

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