“Supervision, lives and audiotapes”

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What might be done to enhance learning, and add variety to and rejuvenate supervision sessions that feel like a duty rather than a joy? How can we get around the problems of limited and selective recall? Audiotapes may be the answer, say Liz Wiggins, Andrew Atter and Erik de Haan.
The information we tend to notice is that which affirms and supports our existing view of the world.

The use of audiotapes in reflective practice is well established in the field of action research. We believe they can be used in coach supervision to enhance learning as well as to liven up and add variety to sessions.

Our cognitive limitations have implications for our supervision practice. Research from cognitive psychology shows our memories are far from simple video cameras that record and recall ‘what really happened’. If we rely purely on sharing with our supervisor what we remember of a client session – the most common form of supervision – we may miss important data and insights, robbing ourselves of those informative ‘ouch’ moments that can enhance our capability and self-awareness.

As there are limits to what our brain can notice, we have to filter or edit what we consciously take in¹, thus failing to notice other elements. In one famous experiment, participants asked to count the players on either side in a basketball game, failed to notice the ‘gorilla’ walking across the court.

Research has also shown that the information we tend to notice is that which affirms and supports our existing view of the world – ‘the confirmation bias’. We may unconsciously edit out aspects of our client work that do not support our self-image and self-esteem.

Social psychologists have also demonstrated how much meaning is conveyed through very small gestures, voice tone and micro behavioural patterns that are generally peripheral or outside our consciousness. So, how do we learn to notice and reflect on such features of our behavioural repertoire?

**Learn from action research**

Action research is research with and for people, not on people. It privileges reflection on practice rather than academic theorising. It allows those involved to develop their “abilities to notice, reflect on and adjust [their] approach”². This emphasis on researching into and learning from experience seems particularly relevant to coaches, which is why we’ve adopted this type of research for the dissertation assignment on Ashridge Business School’s MSc in Executive Coaching.

Action research distinguishes between first- and second-person enquiry – reflecting on your own, and then with others, followed by further first-person enquiry in a cyclical pattern. During second-person enquiry, listening to the audiotape creates a shared experience that often leads to insights which may not have been noticed during first-person enquiry. Our experience of the benefits of audiotapes during action research prompted us to explore using them in supervision sessions.

**Variety and supervision**

The need to broaden the learning activities within the supervisory relationship has been identified in the literature: “…unless the supervisor is extremely intuitive, case study: a coach’s account

I had always thought of myself as a coach highly attuned to my clients. Yet, when I listened to the recorded session with ‘Dave’, with my supervisor present, I felt very uncomfortable. Was my voice really that flat? Were my questions that formulaic? It sounded like someone else.

As we listened, we noticed how my client’s low energy had affected me. He seemed distracted and chatty, in an avoidant kind of way. I remember feeling anxious at the beginning, but reassured myself that I was holding up a professional persona. I was not aware until hearing the audio that the low energy between Dave and me was inhibiting real progress.

I said, “Anyway, let’s move on so we don’t get bogged down... What would you like to work on today?”

It was clear from the audiotape that getting bogged down is exactly what was happening, although this is not how I remembered it.

After 20 minutes, I said, “I am not sure how I can help you. We seem to be stuck talking about the same things.”

This was catalytic. The client soon disclosed his underlying anxiety, and the shift in energy was apparent in the intensity in our voices and the interaction between us from then on. By using an audiotape, I was able to learn more about how to work with energy, simply by describing what was happening for us in the here and now.

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or good at guessing, this level will only become apparent if the supervision is based on audio or video recordings.

“Without recordings, the coach will be caught in the trap of not knowing what is being overlooked and may well continue to discount the same stimulus for some time to come”.3

**Using audiotapes**

Audiotapes can literally bring the coach-client situation into the room with the supervisor, and with less risk that our memory edits out particular features. They bring to the awareness of ourselves and our supervisor, individual patterns of inflection, ways of phrasing questions or signs of showing impatience – suddenly we become aware of ourselves in a very different way to our self-report.

Edgar Schein4 talks of the asymmetry of any helping relationship – the person asking for help implicitly has less power. This power balance shifts when coach and supervisor have a shared experience of listening to and making sense of the audiotape.

**Ethics and practicality**

- **Confidentiality is paramount**
  
  We can easily edit out specific details about the client from written notes to preserve anonymity, whereas as soon as we use audio the client’s voice is present and their first name is likely to be used.

- **Be choiceful and sensitive about who we tape**
  
  In certain industries, such as audit, investment banking or social services, where litigation and regulation feature prominently, clients may feel constrained by their work from being taped.

One of us works frequently in post-Communist countries where...
some clients have deep-rooted cultural fears of using any tools that evoke memories of surveillance.

- **Contracting** Make sure you contract clearly with the client you wish to tape, acquiring written consent beforehand. Emphasise that the audiotape is for the coach’s benefit and learning. That way, the supervisor’s attention will be focused on the coach as much as the client. This may help address any underlying anxieties the client has about needing to perform, be the ‘good client’ or appearing to be silly in front of an expert supervisor.

It is vital that the coach makes it explicit that the client can refuse to be taped – some will.

We’ve found that when the coach discloses a need and desire to learn, and asks the client for help in doing this, it can signal a deeper level of trust between coach and client. It equalises the relationship to one of mutual need.

**Practical issues**

To avoid fumbling with equipment, thrusting obtrusive microphones towards the client, using bulky, beeping machines, and being distracted and anxious about whether the machine is actual recording, use a phone with a recording function or a small digital voice recorder.

Such devices are unobtrusive. In fact, it is normal to have a smartphone or similar on the table in front of us.

Audio will make the location and privacy of the session even more important.

Once the audiotape has been made, offer a copy to the client. In our experience they rarely say yes. One client who did, wished she hadn’t as she sounded far less coherent than her self-image had led her to believe.

An audio recording is digital information that can be transmitted, mislaid and misdirected much more easily than conventional notes. The coach needs to ensure that any file is protected via secure passwords, and that all versions of the audio file are deleted after use, informing the client of this in advance.

**Work with the supervisor**

You need to contract with the supervisor, who must be comfortable, both professionally and commercially, using this approach – because audio is time-consuming.

Here are some options for making it work:

1. **The supervisor receives the audio files in advance and spends time listening to and reviewing them, as does the coach.** Both coach and supervisor select extracts for discussion. A variation is that the coach sends some reflective comments with the audio that the supervisor reads before or after they listen to the tape.

2. **The coach and supervisor listen to the audio file together.** This approach is more spontaneous and builds an approach of joint enquiry. It can also be interesting to experience the impact of the audio recording with what is going on in the coach-supervisor relationship.

   In one situation, the reference in the audio to the client using their hands in a wave-like motion prompted the supervisor into using hand gestures, in what appeared to be a form of transference.

   However, this approach is more time-consuming as it requires both coach and supervisor to listen to a substantial section of the recording, without knowing necessarily which passages are the most significant.

3. **The coach listens to the tape and then brings those passages that they feel are most significant to the supervision session or sends them in advance.**

    - *Liz Wiggins, Andrew Atter* and *Erik de Haan* are from the Ashridge Centre for Coaching

**References and further info**