

Quality control for coaching

Supervision improves the coaching experience for both coach and coachee, say **Erik de Haan** and **David Birch**

Access to executive coaching is no longer viewed as a privilege restricted to an organisation's elite: over the last decade it has become widely used as a 'just-in-time' development intervention in a wide range of managerial and technical settings.

For the in-house L&D specialist, this widened access brings with it the challenge of ensuring that the coaching is 'fit for purpose' – not an easy task given the confidential nature of the vast majority of coaching relationships.

In this article, we explore the purpose and benefit of coaching supervision and its importance in ensuring the quality and professionalism of executive coaching in organisations.

Executive coaching: the emergence of a new profession

Only a few years ago, it was easy to set yourself up as an executive coach, with credentials based on recommendations and past experience. Qualifications were unheard of and very few organisations thought to ask about prior training or arrangements for CPD.

All that is changing: most large corporations now make use of internal and external coaches, who are expected to have been trained and accredited by a recognised institution. In many ways, this increased demand for professionally-qualified coaches parallels the expectation that business leaders have themselves been professionally developed.

However, the achievement of a coaching qualification cannot be taken as evidence of professionalism and competence by itself. Coaching is an extremely demanding and isolated activity, full of struggles with ethical dilemmas or invitations to collude with dysfunctional

organisational behaviour. For this reason, we expect participants on our qualification programmes to be in regular supervision and, after qualifying, we require our own Ashridge coaches to provide evidence of ongoing supervision if they wish to maintain their professional accreditation.

Supervision is no longer a 'nice to have'; it is an essential prerequisite to maintaining the quality, competence and professionalism of an executive coach.

What is coaching supervision?

Coaching supervision takes place either in groups or on a one-to-one basis. Its purpose is to help the coach bring the best of himself to his work with clients; in practical terms this means ensuring that he is sufficiently well-resourced to help his clients take responsibility for their behaviour and their choices at work.

Although supervision is a developmental process, its fundamental aim is to monitor and improve the quality of the coach's work with his clients. By attending to their own emotional and intellectual resourcefulness, coaches will be in a stronger position to help their clients. →

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So what does this mean in practice? The first, and most essential, feature of coaching supervision is the regular provision of a confidential space where the coach is helped to reflect on his professional practice. Coaches are often very busy, combining their coaching with other professional roles that, in turn, have to be balanced with demands and responsibilities outside of work.

Even though taking time out from a hectic schedule is always challenging, the benefits for the coach and his clients are potentially huge.

Case example

An experienced executive coach was working with a client who was about to become a father and was under intense pressure both at home and in his leadership role. The coach had been working with the client for some time and they had built up a strong trust. During the early sessions, the client hardly expressed any emotion but was now sharing immense anxiety, profound anger and a sense of helplessness. The coach felt overwhelmed by his client's strong feelings and was concerned that working with this level of emotion was beyond his competence. At the same time, he realised that the client was relying on their trusted relationship as one of very few places to bring his despair. During supervision, the coach started processing his own emotional response to his client and discovered to his surprise that he was feeling protective towards him. With this insight and the encouragement of his supervisor, he felt strong enough to offer his client a clear boundary that would enable him to explore his emotions in a more detached way. The supervisor and coach agreed that if he felt he or his client was not coping, he would contact the

supervisor directly in between sessions.

Our approach to coaching supervision

At Ashridge, we see coaching supervision as an essential quality assurance process for coaches, designed to ensure that the client benefits from a coach who is 'fit for purpose', equipped with the insight and personal resourcefulness to be able to help.

The frequency and duration of supervision varies according to the coach's workload but, as a rule of thumb, we recommend that even experienced coaches have a minimum of five supervision sessions a year.

As the supervisory relationship develops over time, the focus of the supervision is likely to evolve as both parties deepen their awareness of the coach's strengths and blind spots.

Slowly but surely the coach builds an inner capacity to observe himself in action, what Patrick Casement¹ calls an "internal supervisor". Over time he learns how to detach himself from the intensity of the moment so he can monitor what is happening between himself and his client. As he does so, he automatically increases his repertoire of responses, allowing him to choose one that is likely to be of most use to his client.

As coaches learn to trust their supervisor, they are more inclined to work with 'live' ethical dilemmas or issues that are troubling them in some way. They may be concerned that they have confronted a client too strongly. Perhaps they feel that they have been too familiar or disclosing with the client. They



may have reasons to be worried about a client's alcohol consumption or mental health.

Whatever the dilemma or issue, a confidential supervision session provides the essential breathing space to think through the options and decide what to do.

Our approach is mainly relational and client-centred², which means we as supervisors try to pay constant attention to the supervisory relationship as it develops. Phenomena in this relationship, which may be transferable in nature, will help illuminate what is happening in the coaching relationship. For example, if a coach is getting stuck with a particular client, are similar patterns being played out between the coach and supervisor? Might there be some form of 'parallel process', ie can the coach learn by reflecting on his own needs and feelings in the supervision session itself?

Being fully client-centred in supervision means that we keep the clients-of-our-clients in our minds and that we even consider those 'end-users' of coaching, and their organisations, the primary clients of our supervision sessions. This means we explore with coaches their fitness for their practice on an ongoing basis, and also explore with them how they can further improve their presence with, and service to, their clients.

Case example

The coach was a British management consultant who had been working in Italy, where he was coaching a local manager. In group supervision, he described how he struggled to relate to the exuberance of his client and worked with another participant to explore how the Italian was challenging him. At the end of their conversation, the supervisor drew attention to a 'parallel process': the fact that the coach's behaviour had changed to become animated and lively. After feeling almost intimidated by his client, this coach had proceeded to behave in the very same manner with his fellow supervisee. This insight freed him sufficiently to genuinely inquire into what his client was communicating both verbally and non-verbally.

Supervision in organisations

Given the wide-ranging nature of coaching supervision, it is perhaps not surprising that L&D professionals are unsure what to stipulate or provide for their coaches, whether they are in-house or external.

In some respects it is easier when working with external coaches: all the procurer needs to do is ask for a supervisor's reference. Some organisations follow this through with a phone call to the supervisor, asking them specific questions about the coach's competence.

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Other organisations prefer to provide supervision in-house, for both internal and external coaches. Group supervision can be an attractive option in this situation. Bringing coaches together (either virtually or face-to-face) fosters a feeling of camaraderie and mutual support, where coaches learn together as a community of practice rather than existing in lonely isolation. There is also a potential organisational benefit, as the supervisor(s) will inevitably encounter recurring issues and themes that can be fed back on a non-attributable basis.

The biggest obstacle in organisations is the very legitimate concern about confidentiality, especially when the coaches may know who is coaching whom.

Although these issues can be partially dealt with through robust contracting, our experience is that group supervision tends to work better in larger organisations where there are fewer overlapping boundaries or relationships. We agree with Proctor³ that, in the right setting, the advantages of group supervision outweigh the drawbacks. For example, it allows practitioners who might have quite different approaches to mix and open up their work to one another. There is also greater scope for creativity and experimentation in a group; for example, group members might take it in turns to supervise one another and then offer feedback on both the content and process of the supervision. It increases accountability: in a group there is a much greater chance that someone will be brave enough to name 'the elephant in the room' that is culturally unmentionable because of shared assumptions and beliefs.

Case example

A team of coaches working with high potential leaders at a government department had been meeting virtually for group supervision. Over time it became apparent that the content of many of the coaching sessions was about the coaches' poor relationships



References

- 1 Casement P *Learning from our Mistakes* Routledge (2002)
- 2 De Haan E *Relational Coaching* Wiley (2008)
- 3 Proctor B *Group Supervision* Sage (2008; 2nd edition)
- 4 Hawkins P, Shohet R *Supervision in the Helping Professions* Open University Press (2006; 3rd edition)

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with the executive team, with many of them blaming senior management for being remote and uninterested. Some of the coaches themselves felt similarly and wanted the supervisor to feed the concerns back to the executive via the L&D manager. The supervisor helped the coaches recognise that they were colluding with their clients and that they may also be part of a 'parallel process'. He then helped them reappraise their role and the coaches' personal responsibility for their interaction with senior management.

Finding a good supervisor

What makes a good supervisor? Hawkins and Shohet⁴ point out that one of the biggest obstacles to effective supervision is the supervisee's fear that he will be judged or criticised by the supervisor. Taking this into account, good supervisors will be able to help supervisees feel at ease with the process and create a safe and containing atmosphere in which they feel valued and understood. Without this atmosphere, it is unlikely that the coach is going to be open to critical feedback or challenge.

Other qualities and attributes that we might hope to find in an 'ideal supervisor' are a passion for learning, flexibility, humour and an ability to see situations from multiple perspectives combined with a sensitivity to the wider organisational issues. For a group supervisor, we should add group process awareness and facilitation skills to our list.

Such people do exist, although our impression is that the demand for credible supervisors is beginning to outstrip supply.

Case example

Coach and supervisor have worked together for four years, mainly over the phone, during which period the coach has changed her emphasis from outplacement to executive coaching. She speaks about her 'favourite' client and relates how he is very quick-witted, almost falls over his own words and ideas, which occasionally break into a stammer. "It is as if he brings out the best in me. I feel I am more forthright and open. He listens attentively and builds on my words, and he changes his actions as a result. Do you have that sometimes, a client that reinvigorates you to such a degree?" The supervisor answers affirmatively and they explore what makes working with this client feel so successful. The supervisor also suggests that, occasionally when people talk that quickly and intensely, there may be a second purpose, quite contrary to bringing forth a multitude of ideas. That purpose may be to actively not think about certain other things and keep them out of awareness. A stammer may point to other, less welcome feelings and, as the client is trained in psychodynamic counselling, he reminds her of the idea of 'conversion hysteria'. The coach becomes thoughtful and suggests she will offer still more space to the client to see if more can be expressed next time. TJ