

Coaching at Work

“I wish I’d...”

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I WISH I'D...

Nottingham Business School's Elaine Robinson and her supervisor Erik de Haan from Ashridge Centre for Coaching share insights from one of their sessions



What's hard about supervision is that it makes us think

about the myriad things we didn't say, and weren't even aware of. Individual coach supervision often feels like thinking of a helpful response when the moment has passed. Nevertheless, this also shows how supervision makes an executive coach acquire fresh perspectives, and how some of these may be useful for future coaching and other clients.

The session

I've been coaching Justin, a director in a manufacturing company. This was his final session and his main agenda had been to progress his career. A few days after that I had my fourth supervision session with Erik. I prepared three items:

1 I was struck and delighted by the changes Justin said he'd made during the coaching period. It made me think the coaching had been worthwhile for him. For example, he was now delegating more, he had arranged one-to-ones with his team and he had approached his boss about promotion; all new behaviours directly attributable to our sessions.

2 I felt disappointment, however, that despite the positive things Justin said about how much he'd achieved, he hadn't written down positive evaluative comments on the feedback form I sent him. I felt

this desire was partly about receiving positive validation about my coaching, even though I know this shouldn't be a prime concern of a coach.

3 Finally, I was surprised by the fact that he'd brought a presentation which he went through with me. I found this unusual and wondered if Justin wanted to impress me.

I was pleased I'd prepared these points. Coaching sessions often seem to go so well that I wonder whether I'll ever have any 'issues' to discuss with my supervisor. How wrong could I be?

Don't go there

I explain to Erik that there are still places I don't go to with my clients, most probably because I'm fearful of being unkind. For example, I'd seen Justin give another presentation. My main reflection was that "he looks too casual, doesn't cut a figure of seniority, he needs to get off the windowsill and take his hands out of his pocket".

Yet when he asked me what I thought, I had to stop myself saying "Fine, you were great." What I said (in typical coaching style) was: "How did you think it went?"

In retrospect that seems a bit of a coaching cop-out. I also said it had

been a good team effort, which was true, but I still didn't get to the heart of what would have been authentic feedback.

A repeated pattern with my supervisor is my discovery that he rarely uses any of the tools and props that I use. This was also the case with Erik's own evaluation form which he shares with me. He says this is probably because clients don't bother to send it back anyway – and he wouldn't want to leave them with that slight sense of guilt of not having completed the form.

I agree his form is more likely to generate commentary and insight for the client and feedback for the coach. Erik's background, style and experience mean he is more likely to discard a theory, model or form than use it. My form invites a 'tick box' approach; I see Erik's as more of a blank page.

I comment that our form relates partly to our processes but Erik makes the point that asking these questions of the client at the end of the session could signal that I am not sure about the quality of my offering. Plus, it makes me self-conscious. I've never thought of that. We observe that being self-conscious about what others think of me has been a theme that emerges in my supervisory sessions.

“ We need supervision, not just to be a better coach, but also to stay in touch with our present emotion ”



Erik asks: “How much feedback do you want in the interest of your coaching practice, and how much does client feedback then influence you? Who are you doing this for? (Your client, your future business, your own confidence?)”

He asks whether I think Justin may be trying to obtain some fresh thinking that he could use. Or could it be in a sense to present to the teacher or even to show off?

“If so, what would you want your response to be? What is the gesture of your client? And could there be

Erik notices my vulnerability but guides me: “Showing a presentation is not straightforward. Would it be possible to talk about the request, rather than just attending to it?”

Smarten up

Had I expressed myself directly to Justin about his presentation, I would have said something like “you need to smarten up your act”.

Erik suggests, quite reasonably, that although there may be risk in saying such a thing and some

When I suggest I could go back to Justin or send him a message with some of the things I’ve learned, Erik says I am experiencing something the French call *l’esprit de l’escalier*. It’s the classic feeling of diplomats and civil servants who come out of one of the *hôtels particuliers* after a tense, senior meeting and then – typically on the stairs on their way out – suddenly realise what they ‘should’ have answered. It was first used by Diderot and captures well the experience of thinking of a clever comeback when it is too late.

The phenomenon is usually accompanied by a feeling of regret at not having thought of it when it was most needed.

Erik shares how he’s noticed some patterns, such as the interest of Justin and me in feedback, confirmation and reassurance. He sees this as potentially rich. I just have to ask myself why validation or evaluation by others is important to me.

Erik wonders if the issues of the client were resonating with me and asks me to think about whether me and my client had any themes or patterns in common.

For example, what feeds Justin’s drive to go to the next level in his

“What’s hard is that supervision makes us think about the myriad things we didn’t say, and weren’t even aware of”

hidden treasures in the gesture for you to work on?

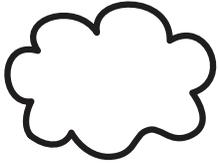
“Do you experience this as hoping to improve the presentation or in some way as asking for ‘strokes’ in a similar way you were with your feedback form?”

“How about this session, between you and me? You seem to present your vulnerabilities quite easily and I wonder whether that is also a gesture of inviting in fresh thinking?”

skill required in saying it in a non-judgemental way, this may also be offering up a treasure; something he wouldn’t have heard otherwise or from anyone else. Others may have the same thought about Justin’s presentation.

I wish I’d said that to him; it doesn’t seem so outrageous after all.

Erik wonders if my avoidance of direct feedback to Justin was partly out of compassion for him or even for myself.



role? I mention the relationship between Justin and his brother as a possible explanation. I'd previously mentioned that Justin comes from a high-flying professional family of lawyers. Erik thinks Justin seemed paralysed by some of the suggestions of his boss. Is there a parallel between his situation and my own? I've not consciously thought of this. Still more *regret de l'escalier* on my part.

I noticed that this resonated with me in the way Erik had suggested, such as a degree of envy of Justin's glamorous world. I recognised Justin's ambition to achieve the next level, and I realise I could only be fully on Justin's side when I am aware of these patterns within myself.

I think how I could have said to Justin: "You're in sales, why don't you sell yourself?" Or would that be too harsh a challenge?

Erik says all these regrets, doubts and fears need to be managed. This is why we need supervision, not just to be a better coach, but also to stay in touch with our present emotion and intuition.

I decide to take the bull by the horns. I really like using such metaphors in my coaching supervision with Erik because he

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responds with great interest to English language idiosyncrasies. I ask Erik: "When you give me feedback are you being direct or are you being how I was with Justin and couching things in a certain way so as not to be unkind?"

Erik thinks this a great question – I notice this pleases me. He says he always tries to be frank but then sometimes feels a regret, for example, for once having used the term narcissistic with me. Actually, I didn't mind, so it was a treasure for me rather than a risk.

Erik also demonstrates a key distinction between being a coach and a supervisor: if he was still my coach he would probably not answer that but would more likely explore what lies behind it. In supervision he speaks more freely about the profession, and about the choices he makes as a coach or supervisor. It makes me think

the supervisee is considered able to 'take it' more than a client.

For me it is both exposing and tantalising to be supervised. I share some of my greatest doubts or concerns regarding my work, and I often hear "these are understandable concerns", so I don't always feel invigorated by how my vulnerabilities are taken up. Very often I feel I should have said different things to my client, my *esprit de l'escalier* plays up and leaves me frustrated. However, I do benefit from supervision.

I think afresh, deepen my understanding, and acquire both new metaphors for my work and alternatives for my practice, even if they come too late for a particular session. ■

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