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Coaching Perspectives

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Michel Moral and others
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shadows, impact and rewards**

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“PROMOTING EXCELLENCE & ETHICS IN COACHING”



SUPERVISORS ATTEND TO COACHES, SO THEY CAN ATTEND TO LEADERS

Erik de Haan, the Director of Ashridge Centre for Coaching, outlines how supervision can be a useful method of quality assurance for coaches, especially in organisations.

THE LEADERSHIP SHADOW: THE VULNERABILITY OF BEING A LEADER

In today's fast-paced, interconnected, and mercilessly competitive business world, senior executives have to push themselves and others hard. In order to succeed, leaders have to live the paradox of closely attending to and following others as much as they lead. They have to listen well to others, understand their concerns, give them personal support, and at the same time motivate them for results or take decisions on their behalf.

It is precisely those leaders who can adapt to these conditions and who can develop a tough and relentless focus on competitive advantage who are most at risk of adopting unhelpful and ultimately unproductive patterns of demand, stubbornness, or frenetic activity. Instead of being open to possibility and ambiguity, willing to engage in creative conversations with themselves and others, these executives may instead become obstinate, resentful, inarticulate, or intense.

Most often these are qualities executives have relied on to get

them to the top and to achieve outstanding results, qualities that overshoot under stress and challenge, into unhelpful drives that lead to business and personal catastrophes. Hitherto high-performing executives suddenly find themselves facing the prospect of relationship breakdowns, strategic failures or the risks of derailment.

QUALITY ASSURANCE FOR LEADERS – HOW COACHES AND ORGANISATION DEVELOPMENT CONSULTANTS CAN HELP

The shadow side plays a role in every form of leadership. Stepping forward to make a leadership gesture always creates a rift within oneself: a rift between one's sunny, active, constructive, or aggressive side that holds the ambition to contribute, create and prove something; and one's doubting, pessimistic, needy and vulnerable, or careful and concerned sides, which craves for connection with oneself and others. This *shadow side* is therefore part and parcel of leadership¹. In order to make the bid for power or put forward one's drive

to achieve, other aspects have to be left behind, pushed back and discarded, somewhere in the dark of our experience, including our experience of self.

If leaders have a strong-willed, confrontational spouse, as well as assertive colleagues who remind them of their human fragility and fallibility, the leadership shadow can be processed so that it does not cause too many problems. Unfortunately, many of our captains of industry and political leaders are not in such a well-balanced position. They are dedicated and even devoted to the job, they put in an exorbitant amount of time and effort, and they are rarely criticised or challenged by those near to them. Under such conditions, how will leaders remain fresh, balanced and inspired, to keep reflecting openly and self-critically alongside their own firmly held convictions?

I believe that this kind of challenging, outspoken and fresh scrutiny can be provided to leaders by organisation-development consultants and executive coaches (if they are worth the considerable fees they are paid!)². This can help remind them of their personal leadership shadows and of the fact that they do have (hidden) doubts, needs and vulnerabilities. They may not say so in public, but at some level they themselves know how intrinsically fragile their leadership is³.

These coaches and consultants are able to spot or guess the shadow sides that leaders have forgotten or may prefer not to consider. It is the coach's task to bring back awareness of vulnerability or neediness, corruptibility or hubris, depending on the personal contents of the leader's shadow. Coaching restores balance and looks after a leader's 'fitness to practise' precisely by generating insight and inspiration around the leader's most sensitive and vulnerable areas.

A form of leadership is now required in turn from the coach or consultant: namely to speak their honest, fearless truth to power⁴ and to reflect freely and independently alongside the leader and leadership questions of the day. The question presents itself: how do coaches remain fit for practice and make sure that they approach their clients with the requisite level of freshness and robustness? The answer to that question is: supervision.

QUALITY ASSURANCE FOR COACHES – SUPERVISORS LOOK AFTER THOSE WHO ARE LOOKING AFTER LEADERS

Most large corporations now make use of internal and external coaches, who are expected to have been trained and accredited by a recognized institution. However, the achievement of a coaching qualification cannot by itself be taken as evidence of professionalism and competence. Coaching is an extremely demanding and isolated activity, full of struggles: to find one's voice to speak truth sensitively to power with one's doubts⁵, with ethical dilemmas or invitations to collude with dysfunctional leadership behaviour⁶. For this reason, we expect coaches and consultants to be in regular supervision. Supervision is no longer a 'nice to

have'; it is an essential prerequisite for maintaining quality, competence and professionalism for the executive coach⁷ and organisational consultant⁸.

Coaching supervision takes place both in groups and on a 1:1 basis. The purpose of supervision is to help the coach bring the best of themselves to their work with clients; in practical terms, this means ensuring that the coach is sufficiently well resourced to help their clients recognise their own leadership shadow and take responsibility for their leadership choices. Although supervision is a developmental process, in my view its fundamental purpose is for the coach to monitor and improve the quality of their work with their clients. By attending to their own emotional and intellectual resourcefulness, coaches will be in a stronger position to help their clients.

Interestingly, the type of quality assurance that supervisors provide for coaches is comparable with the quality assurance coaches provide for leaders. Just like coaches with their clients, supervisors are helping coaches to reflect more honestly and deeply, and to recognise, accept and get a handle on 'shadowy' aspects of their services, such as not speaking up to certain leaders, accepting inappropriate gifts from clients, or responding viscerally and unhelpfully to leadership shadows⁹. Supervision is often a last opportunity to become aware of deeply hidden and unhelpful dynamics in organisations. I have noticed on many occasions that a slightly stilted, awkward or telling moment in supervision has helped to indicate a pattern which was ultimately at the core of a leader's problematic behaviour, and which the coach had picked up at a semi-conscious level – something that didn't feel right. This helped the coach to go back to the client, respond and make a positive difference for the leader concerned.

Similar to leaders going into damaging overdrive and derailment, there can be parallel processes within the coaching and supervision too. The 'very real dangers of executive coaching'¹⁰ are often aggravated by a coach's lack of psychological understanding, so that coaches misjudge the situation, aggravate the status quo and abuse their own power. These can be picked up in supervision.

Other ethical challenges in the coaching and consulting professions come from:

- The many new coaches, often (internal) consultants, HR Directors and CEOs, who still enter the profession with only minimal training.
- Low bargaining power of clients who mostly negotiate only small contracts.
- A lack of regulation in the consulting and coaching professions.
- Feelings of shame, anxiety and protectiveness when there are difficulties or concerns.
- A certain 'numbness' or resistance to external quality assurance, particularly from more experienced coaches.

RECENT LARGE-SCALE RESEARCH INTO THE QUALITY OF SUPERVISION FOR COACHES

Even if the professions and responsibilities of leaders, coaches, consultants and supervisors are very different, there is something they all hold in common – namely the need to open up a safe and secure space where others can thrive, be open and give of their best. This ability to ‘hold’ or ‘contain’ a trusted and safe space is immensely important for leaders¹¹, but it is also essential for coaches as they challenge their clients, and also in particular for supervisors as they monitor quality and confront coaches on any boundary issues in their practice.

Ashridge Centre for Coaching recently undertook a large-scale empirical survey into the satisfaction, trust and vulnerability of organisational supervisees¹². 518 complete responses were received on the questionnaire, from experienced coaches and consultants from 32 countries. Statistical properties of the responses were computed to look at the influence of gender, age, experience, nationality, and amount and nature of supervision (i.e. group versus individual) on satisfaction and trust scores. Results were compared with results from other areas of supervision such as occupational therapy and counselling supervision.

We employed a cross-sectional design focused on relatively experienced coaches, directed at large numbers so as to measure differences within the population in a statistically significant manner. We inquired into satisfaction and trust in general terms, and we also asked more specifically about the ‘most worrying, concerning or shameful episode in the coach’s practice’ over the last few years, whether they had brought this episode to supervision and if so whether the ensuing supervision had been helpful.

The results show that these experienced coaches are considerably more safe, satisfied and trusting of their supervisor than was found in comparable research in counselling and psychotherapy. Significant differences were found in the appreciation of supervision by men and women, and also when supervisee age and relative exposure to supervision are taken into account. It appears from the perspective of this sample of relatively senior coaches that highly trusting and satisfactory relationships with supervisors are indeed emerging, although it should be remembered that coaches select their own supervisors and pay for supervision out of the proceeds of their own practice.

Supervision, like leadership and coaching, is a caring and nurturing *and yet* disruptive activity, where deep trust and safety need to be paired with challenge and scrutiny. To summarise and paraphrase Garry Embleton (2002): *Ethics are not problems to be solved. They are relational issues to be lived. Get in touch with your own pain and - whatever happens - do not inflict that pain onto others. This is the real task of supervision: to penetrate the celluloid respectability of coaching and explore the often brutal, destructive and mad forces operating within and among the leader, coach and supervisor.*¹³



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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