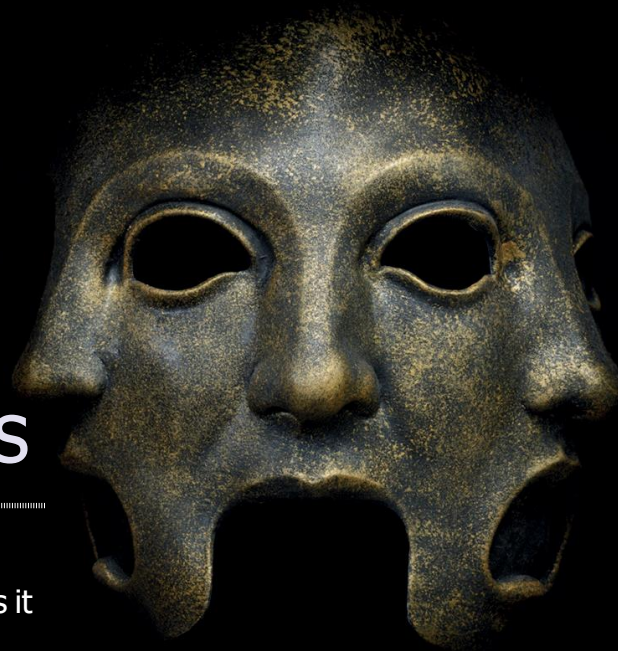


# Supervision – shadowy spaces and Greek tragedies

Erik de Haan ponders why he finds supervision so gratifying, and what makes it different from other forms of helping.



Supervision is widely adopted in counselling, psychotherapy and other mental-health disciplines, as well as many other professions engaged in working with people. Supervision takes place either in small groups or on a one-to-one basis. Its purpose is to help practitioners bring the best of themselves to their work with clients; in practical terms this means ensuring that they are sufficiently well-resourced to help their clients take responsibility for their behaviour and their choices. Although supervision is a developmental process, its fundamental aim is to monitor and improve the quality of work with clients (De Haan & Birch, 2010).

I am often asked what makes the role of a supervisor different from other roles in the helping professions, such as consultant, counsellor, coach. Here, I want to summarise the two principal differences between supervision and other helping professions, as I have understood them over the years. I will also address the question of the satisfaction we supervisors can get out of the work of supervision.

## Fundamental characteristics

There are two fundamental characteristics that are unique to all supervision, and that are absent or at least not very prominent in other helping professions. In the first place, there is the responsibility of the supervisor to ‘sign off’ on the work of the supervisee, i.e., to somehow approve and support the choices and approaches of supervisee(s). Even if some supervisors

do not explicitly make a sign-off, or the ‘normative’ aspects of supervision (Procter, 1988), part of their contract, they will still have that role in the minds of their supervisees. If there is critique or conflict in the supervisee’s practice, practitioners will understandably invoke their supervision record in their defence.

In the second place, there is something unique about supervision which I sometimes call the ‘shadowy’ nature of supervision. Supervision is a place where the supervisee’s helping relationships are reflected upon in another helping relationship. It is one helping professional looking into the work of another helping professional. This opens the possibility of echoes between the two relationships, in the form of symmetries and anti-symmetries, which have been called ‘parallel processes’ (Searles, 1955). This makes the supervisor into a ‘shadow consultant’ (Schroder, 1974) and calls for the ability to do expert relational interventions, i.e., drawing attention to the here-and-now of this relationship and to the dynamics in the supervision room.

I believe that this habit of looking into the shadows and reflections of a supervisee’s practice as witnessed in the here-and-now makes the work of a supervisor particularly gratifying and worthwhile. Another fun aspect of supervision is that the supervisee knows about the challenges in the helping professions and is therefore an experienced and forgiving client for the supervisor. Together, they can share some of the burden of being in the helping professions, and they can look shoulder-to-shoulder at the trials and tribulations of the work.

This is not to say that the being supervised (De

Haan & Regouin, 2023) is always great fun. Rather, it can often be challenging and disappointing. I know from my own hundreds of hours of being a supervisee. It can be exposing to present your own doubts, insecurities, and mistakes. And it can be disillusioning to get helpful ideas only after the possibility of implementing them. Very often supervision is retrospective, and we therefore find out what would have helped us, but only too late. Being supervised feels a lot like keeping fit on a regular basis: a hard slog, yet 'no pain no gain', as they say.

The 'shadowy' nature leads to supervision reaching more depth than many other helping professions, something that is helped by the often many-years-long engagement with the same supervisor. Supervision is a space for raising openly quite challenging and risky hypotheses, and for naming possible countertransference of the supervisee.

Another example of the depth of supervision, at least in my practice, is the use of dreamwork (Kets de Vries, 2014). In my experience it is much more acceptable and straightforward to work with dreams in supervision, compared to other organisational interventions such as executive coaching or organisational development. Most supervision sessions are taken up by conversations about current practice and longer-term professional objectives. Occasionally there are sessions which are 'just' supportive, and the supervisee does not need specific reflection related to

current client work. In those cases, we can choose to work on recent dreams, which is always enlightening and deepens the perspective on case work later on.

### Three spaces

Supervision has changed my views on organisational learning and change. I now conceptualise such learning as consisting of three spaces in which to learn.

The first space is the organisational space, where leaders work and learn from their own experience. Coaches, therapists, and consultants also often have such a Space-1: their community or practice with colleague professionals. At this level, learning is often subservient to producing, surviving or achieving basic goals. It can be unwise and disruptive to open up about vulnerabilities and challenges, as the space is mainly rivalrous, political and result-driven, and in many cases just not safe enough to learn.

The second space is somewhat off-line: the space of leadership development and coaching. This is where leaders find respite and a chance to go over their deliberations and decisions, with a bit more time and the help of a supportive outsider. Space-2 is where many in the helping professions are employed.

The third space is truly off-line, where all parties to the conversation are free from the organisational action and leadership, so that they are free to reflect on what is going on in the organisation. This is the space of

supervision, a place where we can heal the wounds of organisational life and prepare the consultant or coach to go back into organisations with more options and more insight. Space-3 is where free, creative learning is paramount and the need for quick decisions or implementation is much less of a distraction.

Harrison (1963) uses the castle-and-battleground metaphor, arguing that for profound, transformational learning we need a place of action and experimentation (the 'battleground'; Space-1) and we also need a safe, protected, warm space where we can reflect on our actions (the 'castle'; Space-2). Increasingly I have become convinced that we also need a third space, the space of the 'chorus' or witnesses of the castle-and-battleground (a space for supervision on developmental practices; Space-3).

### With awe and empathy

I'm fascinated by the role of classical tragedy in Athenian leadership, and as a great forerunner of supervision. Every leader and politician in that first democratic experiment used to visit the City Dionysia each year and saw all nine new tragedies that had been composed. Greek tragedy, according to Aristotle (Heath, 1996), provided 'awe and empathy' (or, in other words, fear and pity) to the Athenian population. It was, and can still be, a great offline space for learning, where Space-3 is formally presented by the chorus – an active speaker but always speaking as a 'witness', never participating in any of the action, and rarely consulting to or advising the protagonists. The pleasure of tragedy (Nuttall, 1996) is rather similar to the pleasure of supervision.

Greek tragedies covered diverse subject matter and a broad range of myths, old tales about Greek city states such as the Trojan war, and even contemporary topics such as the war with the Persians. Quite typically in tragedy we are dealing with the remnants of a highly dysfunctional family or the aftermath of a great war. In Aeschylus triptych of tragedies, the Oresteia, both these ingredients come together as we take a look at the House of Atreus where previous generations have committed horrors and atrocities, and the current chiefs have just soaked the world in blood with the Trojan war. The real subject matter is how the next generation, the generation of Iphigeneia, Orestes and Electra, cannot live with the fall-out and tries to move from revenge to healing.

The Oresteia is a long story that I will not attempt to summarise; however, the theme of three generations, which we also see in Antigone, seems important for organisational learning. In Greek tragedy we often have a toxic generation of elders, the generation of Atreus, that has committed unfathomable crimes. Then there is a generation of great leaders that try to overcome the horror by action, but cannot stop themselves from descending into crime themselves (Menelaus, Agamemnon, Oedipus, etc.). Finally, there are the children of these, those that cannot bear



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becoming leaders and are clearly victims of the war. They are often central characters of the tragedies, and the tragedies show how they can slowly overcome their grief, heal wounds, and somehow live with the disturbing memories of their childhood and past generations.

For me it is not just tragedy as a practice that symbolises learning spaces, but also these three generations: a Space-1 generation of horror and pain, a Space-2 generation of trying to understand and to define good leadership, and a Space-3 generation to atone for and cleanse the horrors of the past.

Many of the most important tragedy cycles, such as the Oresteia and Antigone, are full of Space-3 learning, but there are also great tragedies directed more at Space-2, such as e.g. Ajax, Medea, Hippolytus, or Philoctetes: 'what it is like to be exposed and immersed in a toxic organisation?' These tragedies can feel particularly raw and cruel. Even in the case of those 'Space-2 tragedies' we can always rely on the Greek chorus to make sure that there is a once-removed, Space-3 perspective on the issues well within the tragedy.

The combined responsibilities of supervisor and chorus – namely, to witness and sign off (in other words, to provide quality assurance), yet also to offer a collaborative space for reflection and an ability to notice and use the relationship dynamics – make for a challenging and quite particular role. As Nietzsche noted, the chorus frequently provides an unvarnished expression of truth. And so does professional supervision.

