

Coaching Supervision – What is it?

Reflection is a crucial element in human learning. Michael Carroll

I have been involved in training coach supervisors internationally, for many years. In this article I will outline the key functions and benefits of coaching supervision, highlight some of the main features of supervision training, and indicate how to choose a coach supervisor. While coaching supervision uses some models from related disciplines, it is important to distinguish *coaching* supervision from educational, clinical and managerial supervision. Coaching supervision is a distinct practice and has developed in consultation with many coaches; it continues to embrace new learning and methodology, and to be in dialogue with coaches, coach trainers and employers of coaches.

What coaching supervision does.

'When a supervisee comes to supervision, both people will be changed by the relationship and the conversation that happens between them.....(supervision) is a place for everyone in the system to be thought about or held in mind. It is a place to have deep conversations; it is a place to think creatively with a joined heart/mind perspective.' Joan Wilmot (1)

When I hire a coach supervisor, I want someone who will walk with me, and create a reflective space in which I can become curious about all aspects of my work. One way of describing what coaching supervision does is to think of it as a process of **Reflection, Insight and Support**. Supervision enhances 'seeing' - the seeing into one's practice, the illumination of subtle processes in coaching conversations and of blind spots in oneself and in one's thinking. Supervision is then something that I, the coach, take away with me – an enhanced view, a *super-vision of my practice*.' **'Reflection and Insight'** point to the range of learning which emerges as a result of sustained, supervisory focus on a piece of coaching or on a particular aspect of the coach's current style. The **'Support'** of coaching supervision is often overlooked; coaches in supervision regularly comment on the level of relief they experience because they have a safe, reflective space in which to explore their work.

Coaching supervision develops coaches' awareness of 'the lens through which we look' – so that interventions benefit from paying attention to all that may be going on inside us, as we work with our coachees. As a result, we learn more about the impact that individual coachees have on us and we can respond to them more intelligently. Supervision also brings into focus the effects of dynamics in the space between our coachees and ourselves and the key elements in the wider system of the coaching conversation; so we can begin to look beyond content to context - relational, organisational, economic contexts; these subtly and powerfully influence every coaching conversation. These new insights and skills bring elegance and impact to our work. B Critchley reminds us: 'Change happens in the crucible of relationship'. (2) This level of relational awareness and understanding supports the coach to move from transactional, functional coaching to deep and transformative conversations that acknowledge the impact of the living, relational, systemic field of coaching.

Benefits of coaching supervision

'Supervision is a place where a living profession breathes and learns.....supervision can be a very important part of taking care of oneself, staying open to new learning' Hawkins and Shohet (3)

Through skilled dialogue, creative interventions and collaborative learning, coaches in supervision have a space in which to reflect on and deepen all areas of their practice. At the recent international coaching supervision conference at Oxford Brookes University, there were papers and presentations on: decision making, domains of knowledge in coaching, the relational field of supervision, protocols for group supervision, creative supervision, self deception, potency and vulnerability, use of self in coaching, systemic constellations, Clean Language approach to coaching supervision, deference and personal power in coaching supervision - a rich feast which highlights some of the benefits of having a coach supervisor.

In supervision sessions, for example, I may enable a coach to think through tough ethical dilemmas, boundary management, contractual issues or how to work better with 'difficult' coachees or resolve a 'critical incident' with a coachee. In other sessions, I might be attending to the coach's personal development so as to deepen their work and extend their range – eg supporting them to be less entangled with coachees' 'games' or to deal quickly and effectively with the impact of challenging behaviour. In all of this, supervision will be enabling the coach to become more self-aware ('the lens through which they look') and to learn how to use that awareness in service of their work. Key to this process, is supporting coaches to value and use their own Internal Supervisor – the 'one' who gets immediate cognitive, somatic and intuitive data and who, in my experience, is not noticed enough and is often unused. In supervision sessions I will offer creative experiments to enhance learning – eg using role-play, cards or Gestalt exercises to illuminate significant unconscious processes or systemic factors. Or perhaps we might look at new perspectives, interventions and skills.

Key Elements in Coach Supervision training.

In order that trainee supervisors become comfortable in the supervisor's seat, supervision training needs to take its time! A weekend course is insufficient; learning how to work a supervision model is also insufficient. Many of the current supervision trainings are up to a year in duration. Supervisors in training need time to shift from the pace and energy of coaching conversations to the more spacious, reflective and exploratory style of supervision. And coaching itself deserves to be supported by well-trained practitioners.

Coach Supervision programmes vary somewhat, but many contain core elements such as training and practice in classic and contemporary supervision models and tools eg Full Spectrum Model, 7-eyed Model (Hawkins/Shohet) , Advanced Dialogue Skills, Adult Learning, Group Supervision, Systems Thinking, Unconscious factors in relationships, Ethics and Standards, Creative supervision, Use of Self in coaching, Building Internal Supervisor, Change models, Neuroscience, Building Resilience, Coaching Psychology, Feedback skills, Multi-party Contracting.

Capacities of a coach supervisor

Delegates on coach supervision programmes, are experienced coaches who are immersed in the profession and up-to-date with current thinking. They will demonstrate maturity and courage and have the capacity to be in conversation in a reflective way, comfortable with being 'subject to the process of relating, rather than be in control of it.' B Critchley. The qualities of humility and humour also come to mind. Coach supervisors work with and in, complex conversations all the time, and they need to be open to learning how to negotiate subtle influences in dialogue, both conscious and unconscious. In short, they need to have excellent relational skills. In 'Supervision as Transformation' Carroll says: 'In the learning environment called supervision, it's the supervisor who accommodates, who moves, who adapts to the learning needs of the supervisees.... ' Having a flexible attitude and a curious mind are highly rated supervision characteristics.

How to Choose a Coach Supervisor.

It is very important that we feel comfortable with our supervisor - comfortable and safe enough to have a conversation in which all areas of our work can be explored and in which we can develop, personally and professionally. Supervision will inevitably touch on the vulnerabilities of the supervisee and so supervisors are trained to challenge without threatening development or learning. As a rough guide, I would suggest that a coach supervisor needs to:

- Have a recognised qualification in coaching supervision
 - Be in touch with developments the field of coaching
 - Have knowledge of corporate life and organizational systems.
 - Have significant level of psychological understanding
 - Have sensitivity to the learner's situation.
 - Have ability to work with different coaching styles.
 - Have minimum of 3 years practice as coach or coach mentor
 - Demonstrate highest ethical and professional standards
- Demonstrate that their work has been professionally supervised over a number of years.

Supervision is an opportunity to bring someone back to their own mind, to show them how good they can be. Nancy Kline (4)

1. Joan Wilmot: Supervision as Transformation.
2. Prof Bill Critchley: Relation Coaching. EMCC Journal
3. Hawkins and Shohet: Supervision in the Helping Professions
4. Nancy Kline: Time to Think