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Coaching supervision – where next?

A positive development of the past year has been the commitment of the major professional bodies in coaching to developing consensus about the role and quality of supervision for coaches. There are some difficult issues. For example:

- Is peer supervision (a very popular and cheap option) adequate?
- How frequently should coaches undergo supervision? (The needs of a full time professional coach will be very different from those of a line manager, for whom coaching is just part of their day-to-day job.)
- How long should a supervision relationship continue, before it is time to move on?
- How do we measure the quality/ effectiveness of supervision?
- What are the responsibilities of supervisors (for example, to the coach's client and client organisation)

Having well-considered guidelines on these issues will be helpful to coaches. It should also help buyers of coaching, for whom the quality of supervision may be one more indicator of the quality of coaching expected. In other words, the coach and their supervisor are likely to be seen increasingly as a package, in making decisions about which coaches to hire.

Meanwhile, conscientious coaches are rightfully asking the question: *How do I find the right supervisor for me?*

An immediate consideration here is that until recently there have been few targeted courses for *coaching* supervisors. Peter Hawkins at Bath Consultancy has gained a deserved reputation for developing coach supervisors and Oxford Brookes University now offers an intensive course for highly experienced coaches, leading to a post graduate certificate in coaching supervision. Given that anyone with a few weeks of coaching behind them can set themselves up as a supervisor, it makes sense to look for a combination of extensive coaching experience over many years, and a credible, academically-verified accreditation.

Qualified supervisors from other disciplines, such as counselling or psychotherapy, also have a role to play, if they also have wide coaching experience. Indeed, some coaches, whose practice takes them frequently into the boundary areas between coaching and counselling, have two (or more) supervisors – one for the coaching skills per se and one for wider cognitive insights. A pragmatic approach may be to try several different supervisors and see who stimulates the greatest insights.



CA has created a database of accredited coach supervisors, which coaches can access on request.

Another key question is: *How much should supervision cost me?* There's a strong temptation for coaches to try to do it on the cheap – the motivation here seems to be to tick the box rather than to generate substantial learning. Supervisors on the Oxford Brookes course were broadly agreed that the appropriate rate per session was their standard coaching fee plus 10 – 20%. Given that the supervisor's coaching fee may be higher than the supervisee's (although the opposite could also be the case), one-to-one supervision can appear an expensive investment for the coach. This perception comes in part from the historical lack of enthusiasm by most of the professional bodies in coaching for insisting their members have an appropriate level of supervision. So supervision has also been seen as the equivalent of insurance – a necessary but annoying expense, to be acquired as cheaply as possible, as long as it provides the cover required. A radical shift in attitudes is now taking place, with supervision evolving into a fundamental part of the coach's practice and development in the role; but there is still often a residual and unrealistic perception that it should be a low cost service.

A practical alternative to one-to-one supervision is group supervision. The downsides of group supervision¹ include:

- Having less time to concentrate on your specific client cases and issues
- Potential issues around confidentiality (at least until you gain confidence in the other members of the group)
- Less flexibility in timing the supervision sessions

The benefits include:

- Insights into other coaches' issues and experience
- Insights from other coaches into your cases and issues
- A collective support network (which may lead to collaboration on client work, for example)
- Opportunities to practice new techniques on colleagues

Combining face to face group supervision with one-to-one on-line supervision can enhance the value you gain from the process. Useful questions to consider before deciding whether to opt for group or one-to-one supervision include:

¹ Clutterbuck Associates will from September 2008 offer monthly and bi-monthly group supervision sessions (six to eight coaches per set) in the Thames Valley and London, and elsewhere by request. Some sets will be supervised by David Clutterbuck. For more information, contact jo@clutterbuckassociates.co.uk 01628 661667.



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- How do I feel about disclosing client cases to other coaches?
- How relevant are my issues going to be to the group as a whole? (Are my problems unique or do I just think they are?)
- What could I contribute to help others in a supervision group?

Whatever form of supervision they choose, it's important for every professional coach to undertake some mature reflection about the role of supervision in their practice and what they need to do to get the best from a process as powerful as or more powerful than coaching itself.