

What's so super about super-vision?

The coaching industry has grown significantly over the past decade, with people from various occupational backgrounds entering the profession. There has also been a shift towards substantiated research of return on investment, establishing high standards of competence, and ethical professionalism in an industry despite few barriers to entry and, arguably, little regulation.

Most coaches undertake training and other professional development opportunities as a distinction from untrained and inexperienced individuals who call themselves coaches. The number of coaches joining professional bodies and seeking credentialing with these bodies has grown, however, after the initial enthusiasm for training, many coaches are not taking their continued professional development seriously, with reports indicating that only 50% of coaches undertake coaching super-vision post-qualification (Whybrow and Palmer, 2006).

In other profession such as counselling, super-vision is viewed as essential to maintain, sustain, and evolve good practice, and failure to do so has significant professional consequences. The coaching field, in contrast, has inconsistent requirements from the main coaching professional bodies (EMCC, AC, ICF). Reports show that, as a method of self-reflection for coaches, super-vision came in fifth place behind private reflection, reading, research and peer networking (EMCC, 2017). Although these activities are beneficial, they do little in terms of regulating the profession and safeguarding standards; coaching super-vision can support this.

This is not just an industry issue as organisations need to understand the costs of failing to provide adequate super-vision for their internal coaches. Without expert super-vision, coaches run the risk of burnout, making ethical inadvertent mistakes or even causing more harm than good, which could bring themselves and the organisations they work for into disrepute or legal action.

Why is coaching super-vision vital?

It is becoming more common for internal coaches to have supervision either from an internal super-visor, or by an external super-visor and this is often paid for by the company. External coaches also partake in super-vision, however, depending upon geographical location, the format and amount varies. That said there are coaches who are not aware what super-vision is or how it differs from mentor coaching for competency development. Some argue that coaching super-vision costs should be included in actual coaching costs and that is should be part of credentialing for all professional coaching bodies. Research shows that around one third of over 2000 coaches in a study by Passmore et al (2017), expect coaching super-vision for free implying that it is probably taken peer-to-peer. Another thing to consider is the training and experience of the super-visor, if one-on-one, group or team super-vision is preferable, and ways accountability for embedding learning from conversations with the super-visor, group or team as a professional sounding board takes place.

Coaching super-vision is a powerful way to take coaching to a deeper level. Having trained at post-graduate level with Henley Business School in Coaching Super-vision, I also provide super-vision to internally trained colleagues who use coaching for performance management conversations, with their teams and with clients.

Coaching super-vision is essential for coaches who value high standards and professional excellence in their work. It provides a reflective space in which subtle patterns and processes are illuminated, from which learning and new possibilities emerge. Coaching super-vision supports your personal and professional wellbeing within your coaching practice. This, in turn, means your clients can receive the best possible coaching experience. The coach super-vision process enables you to exercise conscious reflective practice, stimulating your learning and development and helping you to be more confident and to exercise greater coach mastery. The amount of super-vision a coach requires varies and professional bodies will stipulate differing amounts of time.

While mentoring focuses on core coaching competencies in action, supervision is about exploring the bigger picture and looking below the surface to identify patterns of meaning, out of which clearer and more informed options emerge for you as a coach. Together the co-created experience ethically examines the conscious and unconscious levels at play in the field at cognitive, psychological and somatic levels.

Research continues in terms of structure, format, content and time around super-vision. Wilkins et al., (2018) found that group super-vision may be more beneficial than one-on-one, and more frequent and longer sessions may be more advantageous than shorter, less frequent sessions (Wilkins et al., 2018).

A typical supervision session involves exploring your experience and approach to one of your cases through, for example, seven eyes (Seven-eyed Model by Hawkins and Shohet), being:

- The client situation/system
- Your interventions
- The relationship between you and your client
- Your own experience
- The parallel process
- My self-reflections
- The wider context

Transactional Analysis

Super-vision may include a look at transactional analysis (TA), what roles each party is playing, for example, the child, the adult or the parents, making you (and your coachee) more conscious of the impact of playing these roles, and shifts in the supervision session and in your coaching practice.

A particular theme of the TA approach is about facilitating others to think for themselves and to 'make their own meaning' – in other words, to construct their own map of the world.

Hence, the importance of separating the 'why' from the 'what' of supervision. Too much focus on the functions of the super-visor may create an impression that a super-visor's role is similar to that implied within industry, when supervisor refers to the first line of management and is tasked with making sure the worker is doing the job properly. One rationale for enrolling a super-visor is a desire to work with another person who can notice what we are unaware of, so that we become more self-aware, so that the supervision process is developing our own super-vision, or meta-perspective. In fact, it could be argued that a more appropriate name for super-vision is meta-visions as the super-vision of the supervisor is needed as an enabling, rather than having an outcome objective.

Drawing attention to discounting

The reason we need another person to help us develop our super-vision is due to a process which is labelled within TA theory as discounting. Defined as minimising or ignoring some aspect of the self, others or the situation, discounting is a normal, healthy process that becomes overdone. If we are to remain sane, we all need to discount some of the stimuli that will typically be bombarding us. For instance, as you are reading, you will have been discounting the fact that you need to breathe. You may discount background conversations when eating in a restaurant so that you can pay attention to the person you are in conversation with. Somehow, part of you is still registering what else is happening, because you will instantly react if your name is said somewhere else in the room.

The problem with discounting is that we tend to do it unconsciously in order to maintain a frame of reference, and our frame of reference inevitably contains limiting beliefs. When those limiting beliefs are somehow relevant to our work with the client, they may limit our effectiveness. I can use another TA concept, the drama triangle (Karpman, 1968) talks of the Villain, Victim and Rescuer tendencies. If we view the coachee as a Victim, and want to take care of them instead of challenging them to recognise their own part in any problematic relationships they share, we are effectively colluding.

It is easy for us to see when someone else is discounting. When a colleague describes what is happening for them, for example, being overworked, we will often have the experience of wondering why they cannot see that there is an obvious solution. We may want to 'fix' things, yet they have an apparently logical reason why each of those solutions will not work, despite choosing not to act and the overwork problem.

Helping a practitioner to recognise their own discounting is one of the major benefits of supervision. The 'why' of having a supervisor is to enable the supervisee to become increasingly competent at identifying and eliminating their own discounting processes. It is to enable them to develop their own super-vision of their practice in a way that increasingly leads to recognition of their own discounting.

Internal coaching

Super-vision, as part of the Continuous Professional Development (CPD) of any coach, is clearly very important. But for internal coaches, trained within or outside of an organisational context, it is of paramount importance. Regardless of whether the

organisation has one internal coach or a large internal coaching function, super-vision will be key to the future success of any coaching strategy. Organisations that don't do their due diligence are taking risks with their organisation and with the health and welfare of their employees.

Organisations that establish clear measures for their coaching programmes will have a much better understanding of the commercial impact of getting it right and the damage that can be done if they get it wrong. Investing in super-vision is a way for organisations to protect their investment and maximise their return on investment of coaching. By understanding the outcomes of both coaching and super-vision, organisations are much more likely to be able to establish and sustain coaching practices in the long-term.

Super-vision also ensures that standards are maintained, this can be particularly useful for internal coaches who are far more likely to be subjected to bias, pressure, intimidation, isolation, conflict, confidentiality issues, and power games; because their coachees are also their colleagues. Informal coaching relationships, that occur between a coach and their direct reports, also have a complex dynamic which super-vision can help to untangle. Organisations that provide super-vision programmes secure a degree of reassurance that their internal coaches will be able to overcome these challenges without detriment to the people involved or to the reputation of the organisation.

Due Diligence

The concept of a 'safe space' is traditionally associated with the field of psychology, and it is from here that the concept of coaching super-vision originated. Having the opportunity to debrief, off-load, and reflect in a safe space can be vitally important for the progress of a coaching programme and essential for the wellbeing of the coach.

Super-vision sessions give the coach the chance to vent their frustrations and to talk about problems, difficult relationships or awkward situations, in a confidential setting with a qualified super-visor. This can help the coach to deal with the potential stresses and pressures of the job and ensure that they can continue to coach in the most effective way possible.

Super-vision also enables the coach to draw upon their strengths and creativity, benchmarking their capacity, whilst drawing upon inner strength.

Coaches Capacity and Well Being

The practice of coaching is evolving all the time, so it is crucially important for coaches to continue their professional development post qualification. Reports show that many coaches participate in private research, reading, webinars, networking, and attending conferences, yet far fewer benefit from short courses, formal training and further education. Moreover, many coaches only partake in the required mentor coaching and/or supervision to sustain or renew their credential with the professional body for numerous reasons. There are, of course, exceptions where coaches, even external coaches, pay for substantial amounts of mentor coaching and supervision due to either love of learning and

desire stay ahead in their field. In terms of personal development, it seems that there is much more emphasis on theory than on practical application. There is less still on who the coach is 'being', their mental health, and their evolution.

Proctor's (1986) labelled normative, formative and restorative (or supportive) functions as ways of defining the nature of supervision.

Coaching super-vision bridges the gap between theory, research, (policy) and practice. A coach can bring to super-vision real and specific issues, or patterns across coachees' engagements, in order to further their own personal development. Additionally, if a coach reaches an impasse with their coachee, they can refer to their super-visor to learn new tools and techniques, or refresh existing skills, and practice them in a safe environment through, for example, role play. Super-vision is individualised and a pragmatic way of learning that can happen at the point of need. With this support, the coach can quickly unlock progress, engage and contribute in new ways, improving the coaching experience.

Integrity and Ethics

Being ethical means different things to different people. The quality of the super-vised's work and that they are practicing ethically (Hawkins & Smith, 2013) are seen as two paramount super-vision focuses. The line between right and wrong can move dependent upon people's beliefs, morality and understanding of the world. During super-vision, the coach can discuss information that is of concern without breaching the confidentiality of the coaching relationship. For example, the coach's values may not resonate with those of their coachee, or they may feel uncomfortable about behaviours or issues that arise during coaching.

A super-visor can help the coach to become clearer on how their own perceptions influence how they are approaching a situation and whether that approach is beneficial for themselves, their coachees, the organisations they work for or with, and whether it adheres to professional coaching standards. Here, the super-visor acts as an independent third party that can help the coach to maintain balance and objectivity in difficult engagements.

That said, Turner and Passmore (2018) researched how coaching super-visors handle ethical dilemmas in their practice. The study highlighted inconsistencies in practice which may have implications for the profession and its reputation, for example, one in five coach super-visors did not discuss how values play out in ethical decision-making and 7.92% did not consider a Code of Ethics as a factor to consider while 24.75% saw codes as a 'possible' factor in ethical decision-making.

Quality

Coaches may develop unproductive habits because of the nature of their work. Coaches are potentially susceptible to colluding with their coachees, and their annoyance with, for example, systemic issues. Identifying parallel processes and their potential impact in the coaching (or super-vision) relationship, can unearth unconscious awareness. Super-vision

can also help new coaches to address any bad habits before they have a chance to become ingrained in their coaching practice, whether they are actively coaching or not.

Super-vision plays an important role in helping people to explore how they operate as coaches. A super-visor can help the coach to notice de-railers and can offer a reflective space for planning, open discussion, feedback and learning. Even 'good' habits need to be challenged from time to time in order to determine whether they are really adding value.

Maintaining and exceeding standards

Coaching super-vision helps to raise standards across the coaching profession and improves the impact of coaching for individuals and organisations. For example, for organisations to develop a culture of coaching, they need consistently positive outcomes. Super-vision be it one-on-one, group, face-to-face, virtual or peer super-vision – is also a check-in to ensure that the organisation has the highest calibre of coaches.

Coaching is a skilled discipline that also needs contextualized and systemic knowledge and the right behaviours to develop coaching relationships. To do it well, coaches need more than just training and qualifications; they also need high levels of integrity, self-esteem, passion, creativity, developmental readiness and self-awareness. Furthermore, they need to be agile and responsive to unexpected and unique situations in our VUCA world.

Through interviews de Estevan-Ubeda (2018) explored the development journey of seven highly experienced coach supervisors, each of whom had been supervising a minimum of ten years. Many different ways coaching supervisors develop and learn were uncovered. One of the strongest forms of learning was developing from experience which subsumes learning from life, learning from supervising others, learning from being supervised, and reflection. An important contribution of this research was a discussion of supervisors being supervised. Very little research has been done in this field yet it could play an important role in the development of coach supervisors (ICF, 2018).

Transference and Countertransference

Transference may be explored in super-vision as often, there may be a parallel process (Searles, 1955; Hay, 2007) operating that can be explored within supervision.

'Transfer' means something gets shifted across, for example, a footballer joining a new team. From a TA perspective, transference is the term for what is happening when we shift across the characteristics of one person (our self or someone else) onto another. We may project our own good or bad points onto somebody else, or it may be the characteristics of someone else that we transfer, such as speaking to a 'boss' as if they are a parent.

Countertransference is the term used for the ways in which a practitioner responds to the transference of their client. However, this will sometimes instead be the practitioner's own transference. For example, feelings of wanting to take care of the supervisee may be a real desire, a here-and-now reaction, the result of the supervisor's own issues (transference) or a reaction to powerlessness being exhibited by the supervisee (countertransference).

Therapeutic Coaching

Coaching and super-vision should remain, as much as possible, in the here-and-now, inviting the coachee (and super-visor) back to that when the inevitable regressions occur. As coaching is a focus on deepening understanding and forwarding action, if regression persists, then a suggestion of therapy may well be needed. Coaching and super-vision are therapeutic in a different way, as, each time behaviour is changed successfully, cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957) ensures that our beliefs (or in TA terms our script) will also change.

The last word(s)

Coaching super-vision with qualified and experienced experts, is vitally important in helping coaches to get into this reflective space, so that they can overcome obstacles, learn then practice new skills. This will help ensure they will deliver the best possible coaching service for their coachees and other stakeholders.

Most great coaching super-visors have super-vision on their super-vision. This dedicated and thorough practice demonstrates their integrity and full buy-in to the supervision process themselves.

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