

# JOHN HERON'S SIX CATEGORY INTERVENTION ANALYSIS

John Heron's Intervention Model offers six categories of Intervention that can be applied in any feedback or enabling process. These apply equally to interventions in one to one and group situations. John Heron offers his approach as a conceptual framework for understanding interpersonal relationships and as a means of analysing a range of possible interactions between two people in work or personal situations.

Read through the list below and familiarise yourself with each category. Knowing the range of interventions can be helpful in identifying and being aware of the different interventions you might use as a leader, manager or coach, particularly recognising the interventions you are comfortable with and those you choose to avoid.

## Forms of Intervention

### Authoritative Interventions

- 1. Prescriptive Intervention:** the leader explicitly seeks to direct the behaviour of the person, i.e. gives advice by guiding his or her behaviour.
- 2. Informative Intervention:** the leader seeks to impart knowledge, information and meaning to the person, by giving instruction.
- 3. Confronting Intervention:** the leader seeks to raise the person's awareness about some limiting attitude or behaviour of which they are relatively unaware, by challenging the person by direct feedback, but whilst not making a personal attack upon him/her.
- Facilitative Interventions:** The leader seeks to enable people to become more autonomous and take more responsibility for themselves.

### Facilitative Interventions

- 4. Cathartic Intervention:** the leader/coach seeks to enable the person to let go of powerful emotions; primarily anxiety, grief and anger by helping to release emotional pain and tension.
- 5. Catalytic Intervention:** the leader/coach seeks to enable the person to learn, develop and problem-solve by encouraging self-reflection, self-direction and self-discovery.
- 6. Supporting Intervention:** the leader/coach seeks to affirm the worth and value of the person's qualities, attitudes, beliefs and actions by approving the person.

## Heron's Six Categories of Intervention

Facilitative	Authoritative
<p><b>Cathartic:</b> If a team member has hit a wall with their work, this approach is used to help allow them to express their thoughts and feelings and to tackle those themselves. Look to understand their situation from their perspective.</p>	<p><b>Prescriptive:</b> The simplest of all the techniques – this involves telling the individual directly what is required and how to achieve it. Generally utilised with inexperienced individuals or under time constraints.</p>
<p><b>Catalytic:</b> This is likely the most commonly-used approach. It involves providing support during individual self-discovery for the team member. Decisions and paths should be supported but control remains with the individual.</p>	<p><b>Informative:</b> This approach involves passing on information or experience about a given task or challenge, without directly controlling the individual. Generally utilised with productive but inexperienced individuals.</p>
<p><b>Supportive:</b> This approach focuses on building the confidence of the individual. The leader should highlight their achievements and value to the company, and encourage them to find confidence in their personal abilities.</p>	<p><b>Confronting:</b> The most assertive of all the approaches considered. This should still be used in a positive manner, however, they will directly address issues and ask the individual to consider whether their method is correct.</p>

### Reflection:

Which are your 'go to'?  
Which is your stretch?

*John Heron was a pioneer in the creation of a participatory research method in the social sciences, called co-operative inquiry. This was based on his work in 1968–69 on the phenomenology of social encounter, and which has been applied by practitioners in many fields of professional and personal development.*

**The six Intervention models are only of real value when they are embedded in genuine care and concern for the person the leader is working with, rather than the two options some leaders might use when faced with the need to confront:**

- 'Pussyfooting' - being so nice that the issue is avoided
- 'Clobbering' being so punitive that the response is aggressive and wounding.

**Heron suggests that leaders who are coaches can work from a third option of skilled, supportive and enabling confrontation and suggests that the coach uses this checklist to see whether confrontation is the right intervention:**

- Has there been sufficient listening and understanding to support the confrontation?
- Will the coaching relationship support some confrontation at this point?

**Heron offers these ideas on confrontation:**

- Interrupting and identifying the agenda, e.g. *'Might you be upsetting your colleague when you ignore his contributions?'*
- Open questions and silence, e.g. *'What thoughts are occurring to you?'*
- Information to your coachee that they may be unaware of, e.g. *'I'm getting the impression Mary that you are not sure of the policy on this issue that was launched earlier on in the year?'*
- Clarifying the facts if your coachee is mistaken about a fact, e.g. *'You said that there was no funding available but I am aware that there is. Do you want to check this out with staff development?'*
- Disagreeing, e.g. *'I recognise that we have different opinions here Sonia.'*
- Moving the conversation from 'What' and 'Why' to 'How' and 'When.'
- Attending, e.g., allowing space for silence after the person has spoken as they consider their own words in silence.
- Moral dilemma, e.g. *'You seem to have mixed feelings about going for this job and leaving the team without a manager given the difficult time they've just been through?'*

So, Heron's model has two basic styles: 'authoritative' and 'facilitative'. If a helping intervention is 'authoritative', it means that the person helping is giving information, challenging the other person or suggesting what the other person should do. If a helping intervention is 'facilitative', it means that the person helping is drawing out ideas, solutions, self-confidence, and so on, from the other person, helping them to reach their own solutions or decisions.

**We may:**

- 1 Offer advice
- 2 Give information
- 3 Raise or confront issues
- 4 Deal with the other person's feelings
- 5 Help them to work through the problem themselves
- 6 Offer support

Category	Why	Example	When to use
<b>Prescriptive</b>	Because in this instance, you are the expert!	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ You should...</li> <li>▪ You need to...</li> <li>▪ My recommendation would be that you...</li> <li>▪ I think you ought to...</li> <li>▪ Do this</li> <li>▪ We shall follow this process</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ On things that are firmly within your expertise. 'If you know where the fridge is, tell them!'</li> </ul>
<b>Informative</b>	Because you think you have information that could be useful to them	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Did you know that...?</li> <li>▪ There is a book about this</li> <li>▪ There is some research evidence</li> <li>▪ When I had this problem, here is what I did</li> <li>▪ I know someone who had a problem like yours, and here is what she did</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ To share your own experience</li> <li>▪ You have information that may be helpful</li> </ul>

Category	Why	Example	When to use
<b>Confronting</b>	Because you can see/hear/ sense something that they are unaware of/avoiding, that could help them	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ I observed you...</li> <li>▪ The way you are talking about this customer sounds angry</li> <li>▪ How does that fit with other feedback you've received? (Knowing that it doesn't!)</li> <li>▪ You say you are lacking in confidence, but from the first time I met you, you impressed me</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ To increase self-awareness</li> <li>▪ To increase insight into what they are doing which leads to undesired consequences</li> <li>▪ To challenge assumptions that might block thinking</li> <li>▪ To give positive feedback and enable them to interrogate it</li> </ul>
<b>Cathartic</b>	Because unexpressed emotion blocks thinking and problem-solving	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ How are you feeling?</li> <li>▪ How do you feel when...?</li> </ul> <p><i>(If you are ready for an emotion to be expressed, then one will often emerge)</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ You sense that important emotion is going unexpressed</li> <li>▪ To release tension</li> </ul>

Category	Why	Example	When to use
<b>Catalytic</b>	Because it is time for new thinking to happen	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ What advice would you offer yourself?</li> <li>▪ How will things be in 10 years' time?</li> <li>▪ Questions from a different perspective from the person's natural perspective</li> <li>▪ Can you think of a time when you didn't do that?</li> <li>▪ If you knew the answer, what would it be?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Whenever you and/or the coachee are stuck!</li> </ul>
<b>Supportive</b>	Because often what we need to move forward is a little more strength	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ How hard that is!</li> <li>▪ I imagine you are very worried</li> <li>▪ What can I do to support you?</li> <li>▪ Contact me if you need to</li> <li>▪ I am right behind you</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ To increase self-confidence, resourcefulness and resilience</li> <li>▪ To acknowledge that change is often hard</li> <li>▪ To be a human being with them</li> </ul>

Remember confrontation is not always negative so you can practice observing the strengths of your coaches, their areas of development and encouraging them to act.

**For instance:**

## Case Study 1

Imagine a SUPERvisee colluding with their client against the organisation funding the SUPERvision, whether this happens consciously or subconsciously. The two have become caught up in a shared belief about the organisation, leading them to act solely in the client's interest rather than the organisation's.

The SUPERvisee has adopted the client's views and perspectives regarding the organisation, despite the fact that their only source of information is the client.

A SUPERvisor who strictly adheres to the catalytic approach may sense something is amiss in the situation but might struggle to articulate it, relying on questions to guide the SUPERvisee towards recognising the problem.

If the issue remains unaddressed and the SUPERvisee is either unable or unwilling to see the ethical risks and complications within the SUPERvision context, ethical standards may go unchallenged.

Alternatively, a SUPERvisor might adopt a broader range of responses, potentially starting with a catalytic approach and then shifting to a more direct confrontation to highlight the ethical concerns. This could be especially valuable if the SUPERvisee acknowledges the issue but dismisses its significance.

The SUPERvisor could offer to share information that might change the SUPERvisee's perspective by describing aspects of the SUPERvisee's professional code of conduct, or an article on systemic collusion.

In the end, the SUPERvisor could adopt a prescriptive stance by clearly outlining the steps required to maintain an ethical SUPERvision partnership.

For many SUPERvisees, and even some SUPERvisors, this movement towards a more authoritative position may feel unfamiliar and even distancing. The skill lies in conducting this dialogue in a manner that is both collaborative, respectful, and rooted in equality.

This isn't about the SUPERvisor imposing rules, but rather ensuring clarity on what those rules are, checking if the SUPERvisee comprehends how they might be in breach, gauging their level of concern, and deciding on the most suitable course of action to address it.

*This could also be at play with an internal coach or a team member coaching a peer.*

## Case Study 2

The use of informative interventions within the formative function of SUPERvision is worth exploring. While SUPERvision isn't a teaching profession per se, this doesn't exclude the possibility that a teaching approach may sometimes prove beneficial.

The humanistic SUPERvisee rarely, if ever, includes a teaching component in their practice, so for SUPERvisees transitioning into the role of SUPERvisor, embracing this capacity can be challenging.

Remaining solely within the catalytic space may cause them to overlook valuable opportunities present within the informative space. Picture, for example, a SUPERvisor collaborating with a relatively inexperienced SUPERvisee. If they are working with a recorded session, the SUPERvisor has direct access to the audio from the SUPERvision process.

While listening, the SUPERvisor may identify moments when the SUPERvisee appears stuck. The SUPERvisee may acknowledge this, admitting uncertainty about the next steps. A catalytic response might indeed be fitting—posing questions about what the SUPERvisee could have done differently upon reflection, other options they might explore, or the origins of their sense of being stuck.

Yet, it may also be that the SUPERvisor possesses a model or approach that could offer assistance. Remaining rigidly within the catalytic realm, wary of seeming to impose knowledge, could hinder a productive sharing of insights. By taking an informative stance, the SUPERvisor could suggest something helpful, and if the SUPERvisee agrees, a meaningful and appropriate exchange of concepts may follow. This, paired with catalytic questioning, could provide a balanced, adult approach to authoritative interventions.

Considering Heron's 6 Categories as a developmental framework, it becomes evident that SUPERvision is intrinsically a reflective space for growth, and as a SUPERvisor, you are consistently reflecting on your practice.

Heron's 6 Categories offer a straightforward model for assessing your natural inclinations and tendencies as a SUPERvisor, highlighting potential blind spots. Stepping back to observe which intervention styles you employ during a SUPERvision session can illuminate patterns and enhance your awareness of alternative approaches.

If you notice a tendency to rely almost exclusively on the catalytic approach, you might explore how integrating another approach could bring about different outcomes. Conversely, if taking a more authoritative stance triggers post-session anxiety that you may have overstepped, reflect on the accuracy of that concern, how you might adjust, or whether outdated beliefs about the role of a SUPERvisee are surfacing.

Through both reflection-on-action (after the session) and reflection-in-action (during the session), Heron's 6 Categories enable SUPERvisors to broaden their range. This awareness helps identify habits, cultivate diverse options for engagement, navigate complex issues with greater ease, and ultimately become more capable and confident in their SUPERvision practice.

## Critique

Models and taxonomies like this can be very helpful: they offer a framework for analysing and discussing practice, particularly in identifying patterns of both use and omission. For instance, you may lean heavily towards a facilitative style, which is frequently appropriate. However, it can be useful to reflect on when a more authoritative approach might be necessary and ways to develop the skills and confidence to use it effectively.

There are, naturally, limitations. One challenge is that viewing an interaction solely as a series of interventions might lead us to overlook the bigger picture: for example, a session may be supportive due to the attention and intention of the SUPERvisor, conveyed in subtle ways—not simply through a series of 'supportive' interventions.

We may perceive an approach as challenging, though this is rarely due to explicitly 'challenging' interventions. More often, it stems from my use of silence, which encourages deeper or more reflective responses, for example. This nuance can be easily overlooked by focusing too narrowly on categorisation.

Moreover, the difficulty in categorising some interventions (and even differing in how we classify them) underlines the limitations of reducing the complexity of human interactions to simple classifications.

## Personal Reflection

Which interventions do you currently use as a leader?

Which do you feel most comfortable with?

Which do you find the most challenging?

Which interventions might want to work on to further develop yourself as a leader, coach, mentor, facilitator, SUPERvisor... to adapt to different people and situations?

**Keywords:** Heron; Six-Category Intervention Analysis; Interpersonal Relationships.

**References:** Heron, J. (2001). Helping the client: A creative practical guide. Sage.

# Thank You!

## CONTACT US

Email: [office@beckett-mcinroy.com](mailto:office@beckett-mcinroy.com)

Web: [www.beckett-mcinroy.com](http://www.beckett-mcinroy.com)



[beckettmcinroy](#)



[beckettmcinroy](#)



[beckettmcinroy](#)



[beckettmcinroy](#)



[beckettmcinroy](#)



[beckettmcinroy](#)



[beckettmcinroyconsultancy](#)