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Collaboration in Practice with Co-Facilitated Group Coaching Supervision: What Could You Learn from Hearing Our Story?

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Abstract

This case study outlines how two coach supervisors collaborated to develop an approach to group supervision. It tracks their emergent and developmental journey and demonstrates how their learning evolved and how this helped them develop their unique style of coaching supervision. They believe their approach offers particular additional value to supervisees as they use the two supervisors to ensure that both the supervision content and the group processes are fully attended to.

Keywords

group supervision, coaching and mentoring supervision, collaboration, co-facilitation

If you were offered the opportunity to take part in a group supervision experience managed by two supervisors – what would you think? Would you expect it to be double the price? Would you suspect that neither felt confident to run the group independently? Would you be worried that the two supervisors would dominate the group? Or would you recognise the exponential complexity that arrives when you put two emergent systems together, group dynamics and coaching supervision, and be glad that two people were managing it?

What do we mean by Coaching Supervision ?

Let's start by considering what we are talking about here. The literature offers a number of definitions; (we choose some here emphasizing in italics the elements which feel particularly pertinent)

- "the formal process of professional support, which ensures ***continuing development of the coach*** and effectiveness of his/her coaching practice ***through interactive reflection, interpretative evaluation and the sharing of experience.***" (Bachkirova et al., 2005)
- "The process by which a coach, with the help of a supervisor, ***can attend to understanding better both the client and their wider system and***

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themselves a part of the client-coach system, and by doing so, transform their work and develop their craft.” (Hawkins & Smith, 2006).

- “Supervision is a working alliance between two professionals, where coaches offer an account of their work, reflect on it, receive feedback and receive guidance if appropriate. The object of this alliance is to enable the coach to gain in ethical competency, confidence and creativity **so as to give the best possible service to clients.**” (Carroll, 1996 adapted from Proctor)

A recognised benefit of Coaching Supervision is supporting the coach to develop their skills but “developmental” is only one of three functions that we aim to provide in our supervision. According to Proctor (1988) who calls the developmental function “formative”, supervision also encompasses “restorative” (which is all about equipping the coach to be in “good shape” for their clients), as well as “normative” functions (which is where managing ethical dilemmas comes in).

If supervision is a collaborative venture you might wonder why it needs to be done by a trained coaching supervisor – won’t a peer do? However, Coaching Supervision is more than just “coaching the coach”. It takes a different set of skills, which actually puts the ultimate client as the focal point of the work – not the coach themselves. We work with the 7-eyed model developed by Hawkins & Smith (2006), which demonstrates the complexity of the systems at work in supervision. For those of you new to this model, take a look at the diagram which was adapted from Hawkins & Smith (2006).

From this you will see that we are concerned with more than what the coach did with their client, which is covered by “eye two”. The diagram also highlights that coaching doesn’t operate cleanly. “Eye one” (the client) and “eye four” (the coach) illustrates that when we enter the room, we come with all our history and experiences to date. Inevitably only a small amount of this will be truly known and shared between us, we will naturally make many assumptions about our client and they will be doing just the same about us.

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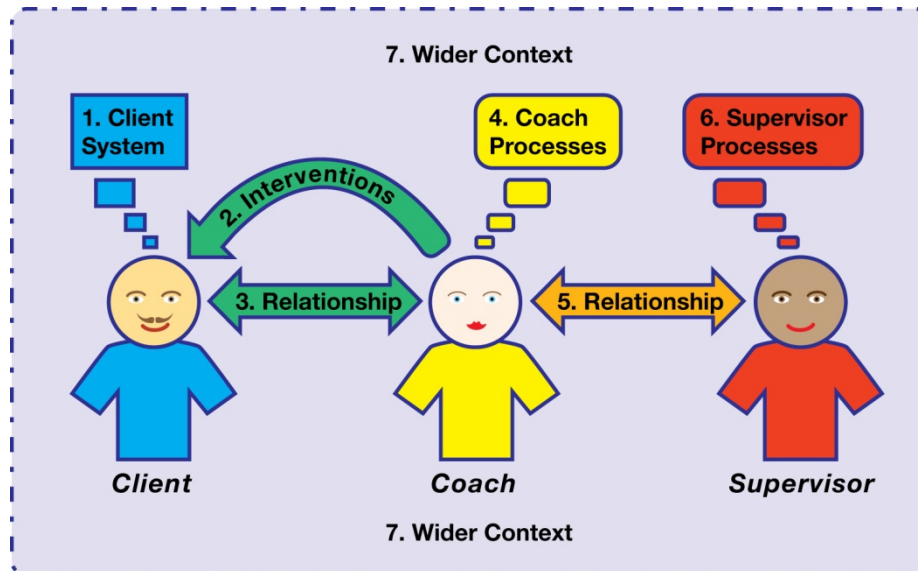


Figure 1. 7-eyed Model of Supervision (adapted from Hawkins & Smith, 2006)

As we begin to work together, our relationship will progress and this is represented in “eye three”. Of course there are many factors that impact upon the success of the coaching relationship outside of the interpersonal dynamic between the two people. “Eye seven” reminds us about the wider context. For example this could be an authoritarian organisational culture shaping the client’s view about responsibility.

The remaining two eyes are where supervision really starts to add value. “Eye six” reminds us that like the coach and the client, the supervisor doesn’t come in “clean”. Clearly the supervisor needs considerable experience to manage this to ensure it does not get in the way of the work. And yet, when we consider the “normative” role of a supervisor it highlights that we need to know how to bring our past and present experience to bear for the coach. Knowing where our “stuff” comes from and when we can use it in service of the ultimate client is one of most sensitive judgements a supervisor must make.

Perhaps the most fascinating eye, is “eye five”, the parallel process, where by using our insight and our “here and now” experience, we tap into clues about what might have been going on in the coaching session. With so much going on at any one time,

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you can perhaps see why we believe it is a space that needs to be entered into carefully and which can benefit from professional facilitation.

What is different about individual and group supervision?

Coaches have a choice of different types of supervision. In our experience, one-to-one supervision with a professional and paid supervisor is the most common. However, in addition many coaches engage in unpaid peer one-to-one supervision. Group supervision, run by professional supervisors is less typical – with many only experiencing group supervision during training or through reflective practice support groups. The exception is internal coaches, because organisations tend to bring them together to be supervised, making both financial and knowledge management sense. It is our view that peer supervision is a valid ingredient of reflective practice, however, professionally facilitated supervision is the only way to safeguard against collusion in the peer relationship.

Individual and group supervision can complement each other; typically individual supervision breeds depth and group supervision breeds breadth. In addition, one constant finding amongst our groups is the sense of community that working with like-minded peers brings. A common reaction once a case has been aired is “it’s not just me then!”. As coaches we can sometime suffer a professional loneliness, no one is in the room when you work so how do we reassure ourselves of what we “should” or “shouldn’t” have done? Independent coaches and internal coaches who are geographically spread, therefore have to be active in finding support. We have witnessed that group supervision quickly creates a sense of belonging with our fellow coaches. This is definitely “restorative” in nature, but more than that it creates a sense of connection rarely found elsewhere.

One potential downside of group supervision is having a shorter amount of time to focus on each individual case and we were concerned about that initially. However, our participants tell us that they derive great value from listening and contributing to other coach’s work.

Finally, the key difference between individual and group supervision is the number of variables that have to be managed. On top of the complexity of the supervision process described above, there are group dynamics to consider as well. Handled well, surfacing group dynamics can add to the learning, handled poorly and you run the risk that the group is no longer a safe place in which to work.

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So what is our journey?

Here is our story, “warts and all”, because we know greater reflection will come in writing about it. We hope it will prompt you to reflect on how you are “learning by doing” and that it offers “pause for thought” about your own supervision experiences.

It would be elegant if we could claim that we fully understood the advantage of having two supervisors manage a group coaching supervision session before we embarked on our journey. The truth, in sympathy with many of our coaching experiences, was that we simply followed our hunch that two supervisors collaborating with a group in supervision would be a good thing to try and we have been learning about that hunch ever since.

Where did we start?

Our aim was to have a group of 8 -12 coaches come together on a bi-monthly basis to review their practice. The session was to be divided between a “case review” section and a broader continuing professional development (CPD) discussion. With two supervisors it would allow the supervisees to be split into two groups of up to 6 to provide a sense of intimacy for case reviews. We could then come together to maximise the sharing of knowledge for the CPD discussion as a whole group.

Problem or an opportunity?

Our first challenge was to grow the group to an optimal size so that we could guarantee it would run every two months and still allow people flexibility when faced with competing work commitments. In our first 6 months we established a group in Oxford and another in London and achieved a fairly steady attendance of 4 to 6 coaches. With lower numbers than we anticipated both of us were doing the case reviews with the whole group. With that “extra pair of hands” available – we wondered how best to make use of them.

Realising that we were leading by example ...

Our first approach was simply to take turns in facilitating the case reviews – with the “spare” supervisor sitting within the circle and offering additional observations. Whilst each supervisor has been trained by the same organisation, we have different styles, due to our differing backgrounds and personalities. What we have in common is a real respect for each other’s ideas and an openness to explore them, in the moment, and in front of our supervisees. Unwittingly this seemed to lead to our first “Unique Selling

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Point” (USP) – that of modelling collaboration in real time. This echoes the work of Lencioni (2002) who would suggest that leaders need to take the first risk, and that modelling vulnerability helps create a sense of trust in the team. The knock on impact for our groups, which are rarely static, was that they felt safe very quickly. Participants start to voice not just niceties to their peers but what is genuinely going on for them in the moment.

Benefiting from reciprocal feedback...

Listening to the other supervisor facilitate the group when taking a “seat” as a supervisee (although we never worked on our own cases) gave us a fantastic opportunity to provide each other with developmental feedback. Sharing a train journey back from a session was an opportunity to do a reflective review whilst things were still fresh in our mind. Interestingly, there can be no denying the feedback from a colleague where we know their primary interest is the continued success of a joint venture. Sometimes we were defensive and needed more time to digest. However, our paths crossed frequently and so we found ourselves revisiting our thoughts and experiences until we could make sense of them. This is consistent with Pfeiffer and Jones (2009) comments about the opportunity for professional growth amongst co-facilitators.

Recognising the impact of two co-existing and complex systems...

We started to notice the group dynamics that were playing out in the room as we worked and yet also noticed that we sometimes struggled to bring them into the session. With a desire to continuously improve our skills we have subsequently attended a 2-day experiential course on group dynamics run by the Gestalt Centre. We learned much about working together and look forward to honing these skills still further in future.

Sharing responsibility for managing the group dynamics ...

Later, when doing a demonstration for an existing CPD group – we paused the group after each case review to get feedback from the “audience”. What was fascinating about this was how different the observations from people outside of the group were. This prompted a further option for working with a real supervision group. With larger numbers, placing some participants outside of the group could help increase their awareness of the group dynamics. This could be a helpful step in enabling them to consider what is occurring in the group dynamics when they are within the circle.

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Being on the outside and looking in ...

More learning occurred as we prepared for a group session of 4 participants, when we came up with an alternative use of the 2nd supervisor. What if one of us sat outside of the circle and worked with Hawkins & Smith (2006) seven-eyed model and mapped all the contributions to the different eyes? We tried it, offering observations at the end regarding which of the 7 'eyes' had not been covered in the discussion. This was useful in two ways. First, it was much easier to track contributions when deliberately outside and "watching" the group. Secondly, there were occasions when the group was sucked into a particular perspective, possibly "group think" or a "parallel process". The supervisor outside the group was free to articulate an alternative perspective in a way that kept the sense of efficacy within the group intact.

What difference does it make having two supervisors?

As mentioned above, we model collaboration in real time. In being transparent with the group about what we are going to "try" today – it allows us to be seen to take the first risk. We think this sets the tone that our groups are not about staying in your comfort zone, rather it is about feeling safe enough to take a risk and to be open to what learning emerges.

That the two of us have different experiences and ideas really comes to life when supporting our groups on their coaching dilemmas. We see different issues and can share a variety of examples. Not only does this deepen the debate of what could be done, but it ensures we create a mindset where individual awareness is key and challenges any assumption that "supervisor knows best". For us this is a great illustration of how the "normative" function of supervision works when preferring a non-directive style.

And finally, when reviewing "how did we do" we find that each of us notices different things. The more we notice, the more we realise what there is to notice too! We believe that a Group Supervisor needs to have experience of managing groups as well as coaching supervision. So, if you are looking to ensure that both the whole of your case is explored and that the dynamics of the group you are working in positively support your learning – maybe that is a job, which is just a bit too big for one supervisor?

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So how can we summarise our own learning?

The key impact of working collaboratively has been the paradox of “support” and “edginess” that comes with working with a respected peer. As a result we have noticed the following:

- Working together has made us more courageous; we are more open to experiment in real time knowing that the other supervisor is keeping a “watchful eye” on the group’s well-being.
- There is a sense of wanting to do well “in front of” the other supervisor, which encourages us to consistently deliver our best work for our clients.
- In our joint reflective reviews we explore why we work the way we work, and where else in our practice this might “show up”. As a result feedback around our group supervision work has informed our wider coaching and supervision practice
- Recognising the complexity of managing group dynamics whilst also facilitating the supervision work led us to engage in further group dynamics training. This stretched our thinking and our awareness and has been invaluable in all we do
- We have developed a flexible mind-set and generated many new ideas for how we can work, creating a “product” that is hugely flexible. We now know how to cope with varying numbers, a range of participant experience and can welcome new and existing members, consistently creating a safe space for all to work.
- We have recognised that our ability to work together collaboratively without collusion rests on a respect for our differences and the fact that our core values are the same

How could our learning have wider application?

Much of our own learning in the coaching supervision context could also be applied to any other type of group work in the coaching and the training environment.

- The collaboration that is inherent in co-facilitation can create a positive environment for risk-taking and learning. We found it led to greater collaboration amongst participants too.
- Working with two facilitators brings more and different perspectives, increasing the richness of the experience available to the group
- When facilitators discuss group process in real time in front of the group, it helps ensure that the group’s needs and not the facilitator’s “whim” are the primary focus.

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- Co-facilitation dilutes the inherent “role power” of the leader, identified by Proctor (2002). Further, by working in the “here and now” the facilitators can model an appropriate use of support and challenge.
- The different styles, pace and tone of voice of the facilitators helps maintain energy and interest in the group. It also allows each facilitator some “ebb and flow” in the intensity of their role with the group.
- Practically and logistically the administrative burden is shared. It helps in everything from generating potential participants through to dealing with latecomers when the session has started.
- When facilitators engage in reflection shortly after the event, there can be huge learning for the event itself and for both of their wider practice.

Our Closing Thoughts ...

We hope our story has inspired you to consider what might be possible through collaboration. For us, we have not only delivered a great coaching supervision experience for our participants, it has stimulated our creativity and improved our wider practice. Above all, it has been great fun.

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