

A model of co-facilitation for supporting group coaching-supervision

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Abstract

This article presents a model of how two coaching supervisors work together when delivering co-facilitated group coaching supervision. The model consists of three layers. The first layer concerns how they manage the task of group supervision. The second layer articulates the tensions that exist in the relationship between the two supervisors and how they use this creatively to the benefit of their groups. The final and third layer attempts to articulate the energies that are created amongst the group. This model is not presented as a prescription of how to work – rather it is a deconstruction of how these supervisors work. Whilst borne out of coaching supervision work the model could also be applied in other contexts – for example facilitation and training. The authors welcome input from other practitioners to both test and build their current thinking.

Key Words: coaching supervision, group supervision, co-facilitation

Introduction

The need for coaching supervision has grown in recent years as the number of coaches entering the market has steadily increased. However, the training and supply of qualified coaching supervisors has lagged behind. To make coaching supervision more accessible and affordable group supervision is becoming increasingly popular. We started working as co-facilitators for coaching supervision groups in 2010 and much has changed since our first conversations about how those groups might work. In the main this has been due to our responsiveness to the needs of the coaches we work with.

We first started to articulate our approach after presenting at the EMCC Conference in Paris in 2011. We documented our journey as co-facilitators (Whitaker & Lucas, 2012) and then presented this at the Oxford Brookes International Supervision Conference in 2012. We commented at the time how there was an ‘edginess’ to working together as peers – there was a dynamic of wanting to do your best not just for yourself, but for the other person too. A duality seemed to exist. On the one hand, there was something supportive about knowing that the other person was there to help you out if needed. Yet on the other hand, there was also a pressure to ‘perform’ in order to maintain a sense of credibility and to ‘keep your end of the bargain’. We noticed our common desire of being an equal partner in the collaboration and yet we also recognised that our different personalities and styles meant we brought different ingredients to the mix. Indeed, as Pfeiffer and Jones (1975) say: “One of the most convincing reasons for working with a colleague as a co-facilitator is to complement each other's styles”.

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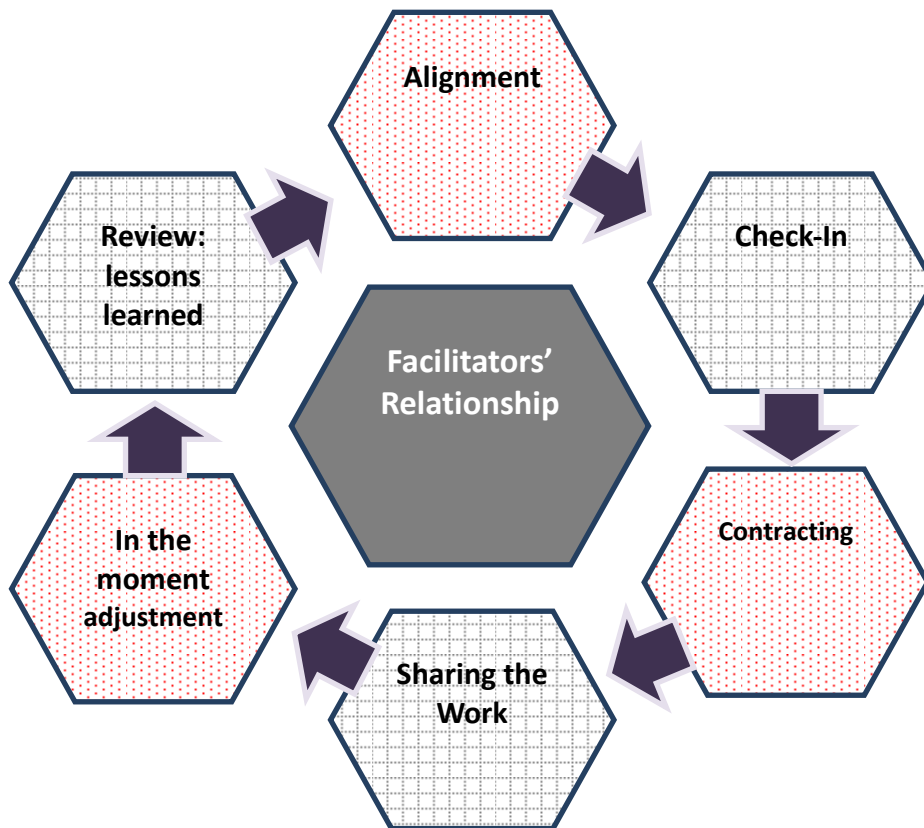
Since that time we have been noticing more of what happens between us as we work. There have been times when working together has been a seamless experience – there have been others when it has definitely been ‘clunky’. Overall, there has been more good than bad and so our partnership continues to evolve. As Hawkins (2011) suggests if you decide to change the partnership at the first signs of difficulty in the relationship you miss out on the learning that arises from exploring how to work through these difficulties and transform the relationship. We have certainly found this to be true and this article represents our current understanding of what happens as we work together for the benefit of our clients. We present our thinking in the form of a model. It is however important to say that this represents a post-rationalisation of what we do. It is not intended to be a standard operating procedure – rather it is a deconstruction of what happens presented in an orderly way. The model will continue to evolve and we always ask people who have experienced our work to provide feedback regarding whether or not it reflects what we actually do.

This article therefore presents the model that we have articulated and which captures our current understanding of our way of working. Although we developed the model through our co-facilitation as group supervisors we have also used it to facilitate team events and we believe the principles of the model can be applied in many situations.

Describing our model of co-facilitation

Currently, the model has three layers. The first layer concerns how we manage the task in hand. The second layer outlines the tensions that we manage and which help form the strength of our relationship as co-facilitators. The third layer is about the energetic forces that we co-create when the rest of the model is working well. The three layers are shown in the Figure 1:

Figure 1: Level 1 - Managing the task



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Working clockwise the stages at level 1 are as follows:

Stage 1: Alignment. The first stage starts before we actually engage with the client on the task itself. The “alignment” stage may only be a short time, but it is where we start creating the co-facilitation partnership. Appendix 1 gives some example questions that we might use. Typically when we work together we use a shorthand version. We simply ask each other “what’s the magic that we want to create today in this event?” At a practical level we discuss how we would like to see the group work, how we would like them to see us and how we would like to ‘be’ together as co-facilitators during the session. The reason for doing the alignment is to begin to move ourselves away from our own personal agendas and towards connecting with how the people in the group will be, even before we have met them. It is our ‘mood music’ which helps create an atmosphere into which the group can enter. None of this would be known to the group – we are not transparent about the ‘magic’ that we hope to create at this stage

Stage 2: Check-in. The “check-in” phase is one of the first things that we do with the group. It is designed to help people make the transition from whatever has gone before so that they can be fully present with the group and be ready to do the work. There are many different ways of achieving this – however, often the simplest is just to ask the group what they need to do to be ready to work. We find that this can help set the tone amongst the group members; it is where the ‘person’ shows up not just the professional coach. We have also found that we can influence the tone by acting as a role model and offering our own check-ins that show our vulnerabilities and frustrations so that the group knows they do not have to be on their best behaviour or be perfect with us. In one of our groups, influenced by one of the delegates, this stage is also used to report back on what they had done as a result of the previous group supervision.

Stage 3: Contracting. Stage three is a more formal contracting phase. Because our supervision groups operate flexibly we almost always have a mix of new and repeat clients present in any one group. To save time therefore we issue the most recent contract with the joining instructions and then on the day invite people to amend and adjust the contract to fit with their particular needs and concerns. When our work is via webinar rather than face-to-face the starting contract is slightly different, but regardless of the medium used, our starting point is to use the three Ps that Hay (2007) suggests (i.e. Procedural, Professional and Psychological levels of contracting). In addition, when we are working with internal coaches we add a fourth P: ‘Political’. This is where we invite participants to surface any of the systemic or cultural dynamics that might impact on the sense of equity in the group. This is particularly important in hierarchical or grade deferent organisations – where status relating to the ‘day job’ may impact on the supervision group dynamics. Importantly, because of the flexible nature of our groups a session will start in the forming phase of group life and so there is likely to be some politeness amongst them. Therefore we invite the group to be prepared to re-contract and to make additional observations or comments as the work progresses. Often it is not until participants experience a hesitation or tension that something that should have been contracted for surfaces.

Stage 4: Sharing the work. One of our key “rules” is that as co-facilitators we are seen by the group as having equal status with each other. Both of us have experienced co-facilitation relationships where we have felt like the ‘magician’s assistant’ and so we set out to ensure that the work is evenly split. We pass the baton between sub-tasks (which also helps to keep the energy flowing) and check for input from the other facilitator when one of us is leading a section. This role models both good preparation and flexibility in the moment.

Stage 5: In the moment adjustment. As co-facilitators of group supervision, whilst we can plan a broad structure we cannot predict the nature of the cases that our participants will bring. Some may be quite specific and the coach may already have done some reflection – other cases could be quite broad and very raw. Similarly, some cases have little emotional impact whilst others may bring up unfinished business either for the presenting coach or for the other participants. We have found that we need to have flexibility around timing and structure in order to give an appropriate amount of air-time to each coach's issue. Naturally with two facilitators comes two viewpoints on any discussion and we make the most of this by checking how each of us has interpreted events. This is typically done quite obviously between us although there are times when we have to rely on some more subtle non-verbal and psychic connections.

Stage 6: Review lessons learned. The final stage is about reviewing our own work in the session. This starts by taking feedback from the group at the end of the session and discovering what particularly worked or didn't work from the point of view of the participants. This then provides material for discussion. Helpfully, we often share a train journey back from our London groups. We review the group's feedback and compare notes on what we thought went well, what we would do differently, what we noticed about the group dynamics upon reflection and whether or not we acted upon it in the moment. After a presentation of our work at a conference, there was a suggestion from the audience that we could have our reflection facilitated by another supervisor from our cadre. We liked this idea and so we are now planning to make this a more formalised step in our work together.

Interestingly, both of our personalities and styles are quite different. This is a real advantage for our clients as our mantra for our groups is not to infer that 'supervisor knows best' or that there is a right way and a wrong way – our intention is to raise awareness of what influences our choices. The collaboration of co-facilitating a group avoids putting one person in the role of expert which is particularly useful to dilute the role power conferred with the title of supervisor. However because we have different perspectives there is always the potential for tension – we cannot always anticipate or predict how the other person will see things. Our ability to manage this tension rests on the quality of our relationship and therefore this is symbolised as being at the core of the 'task' level. This becomes level 2 of the model and is explored next.

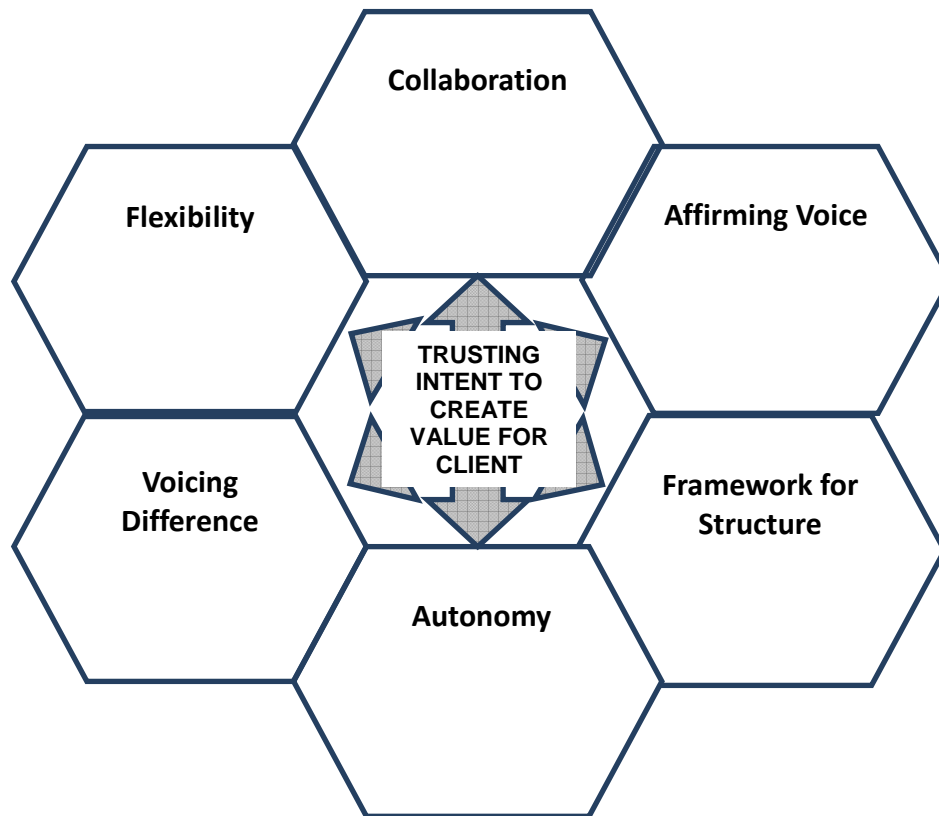
Level 2: Opposing forces

When we first started writing about our co-facilitation relationship we talked about "working on the edge". Since then we have considered what it is that happens which creates this edginess. The second layer of our model articulates this and looks at three sets of opposing forces (see Figure 2) which generate the creative tension that we constantly juggle.

The first tension contrasts being collaborative (being supportive, working with equality) with a wish to exert our own autonomy. Some of this is about a desire to demonstrate our individual value to the group (so has a competitive quality to it). We have found it can be helpful to be provocative on occasion and deliberately demonstrate independent thought. Together this allows us to role model that: "one way participants learn in groups is by studying facilitators as behavioural models" (Pfeiffer and Jones, 1975).

The second tension is about offering both an affirming voice and voicing difference. At its simplest level when we are reviewing cases our different perspectives will mean we can offer a balance of celebrating existing strengths and questioning areas for improvement. We also do this between ourselves when sharing different experiences with the group. This is really helpful to demonstrate the need for the participants to make their own mind up and not to rely solely on the perspective of 'the supervisor'. Here, we role model co-operation and diversity of views. Our belief is that a healthy group will evidence both support and challenge in appropriate measures.

Figure 2: Opposing Forces



The final tension concerns the balance between needing to design some structure so that we have a general sense of how the sessions will go, to agree who will do what with a need to flex this depending on what emerges on the day. We have developed our ability to be flexible in the moment, to experiment and therefore create a learning environment. As supervisors we start by providing a framework to create the space in which the group works which then allows the dialogue itself to generate a sense of direction and purpose. In keeping with the sense of equality that comes through co-facilitation, we use our framework to ensure time boundaries are respected and that contributions are balanced across the group.

All of this creative tension could be unsettling; however, two things seem to ground us. Firstly, we have a shared training experience and so we know that fundamentally our beliefs about coaching and supervision are grounded in the same philosophical base. Secondly, we whole-heartedly believe that whatever the other person does with the group it will be done with good intent as we share the desire to create value for the client. Therefore, when the other person says or does something that we did not predict – it provokes curiosity rather than anxiety as we already trust that they headed off in that direction for good reason!

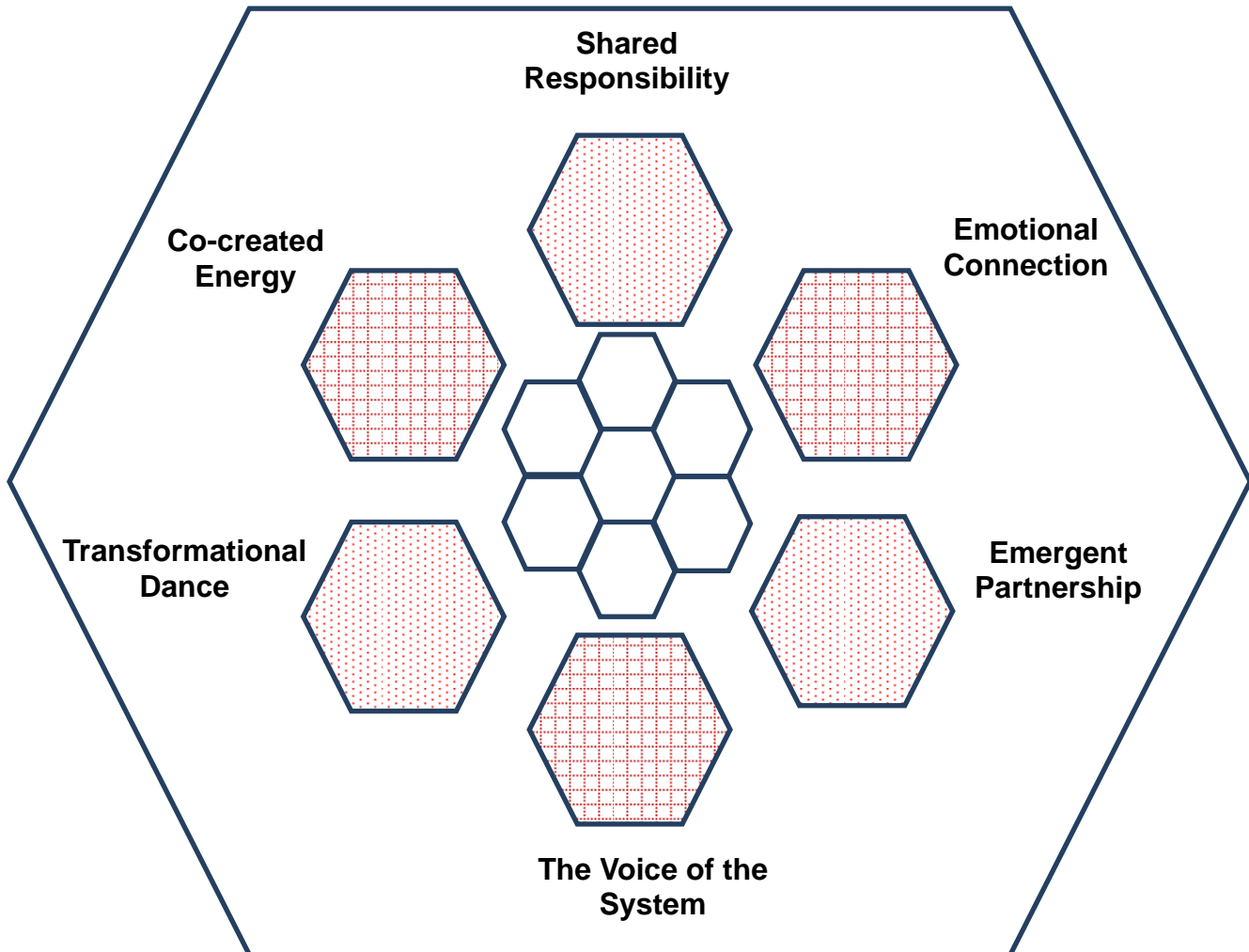
Level 3: Creating an additional entity

The third level of the model is intended to describe what happens when we bring all of the elements of the model together. We were influenced by a phrase attributed to Gestalt - “the whole is greater than the sum of its parts” because we feel that when all of these elements flow something else is created – it provides a space in which great learning can take place. Some authors describe this as

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a ‘third entity’ – however given we are working with groups, we believe there are already more than three entities involved! Therefore, we describe this as an additional entity - i.e. more than just the dynamics that are created by the two facilitators and the group.

Figure 3: Additional Entity



The first important feature of this additional entity is that it is *co-created* not just by the two facilitators but also from the energy of the individuals within the group. The mood within our groups is not one where responsibility is the domain of only the facilitators. We *share responsibility* with them. Sometimes in simple terms like decisions such as whether they want to work as one whole group for case reviews or as two smaller sub-groups and sometimes in more subtle ways as we also rely on them to self-manage. So, for example, whilst we take overall responsibility for time keeping we find that participants remain cognisant of how much ‘air time’ they might be taking up. One of the lovely pieces of feedback we have received is that our groups don’t feel ‘cliquey’ – we seem to be able to bring together relative strangers and work on some very deep issues relating to their practice. We believe this is because we role model collaboration and that this influences the dynamics so that sub groups don’t form. This feels like more than just professionals working together – the integration of both risk-taking and safety creates an emotional connection and people feel supported. What seems to result is an *emergent partnership* – which we navigate as a group, none of us being totally sure of where it will lead, but putting a level of trust in each other as we watch the work emerge.

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In much the same way as people working within a group will often voice things on behalf of the group, so too is the ‘voice of the system’ present within our groups. We have had participants disclose that in their preparation for the group they had imagined working in one particular way (for example, anticipating wanting to split into smaller sub-groups) but once they had arrived they felt differently and wanted to speak out on behalf of the group in a way which was contrary to what they had planned or expected.

Both of us love the notion of dance as a metaphor for coaching and coaching supervision work and so our description of the additional entity would not be complete without reference to this. When we bring all of these components together what seems to be created is a *transformational dance*. There will be times when we are in step; there are times when one is leading with the other following. There are times when we rely on technique and experience and inevitably there are moments of pure improvisation.

Could there be a fourth level of the model?

At the recent OASIS conference in Bristol in 2013, we were struck by Peter Hawkins’s keynote speech encouraging us to look at the wider world and consider ‘forward back’ and ‘outside in’ approaches and it could be that this leads us to articulate a fourth level in future iterations. We like the notion of appreciating what the ripple effect might be of our coaching and supervision work and so this will provide a useful focus for future reflection.

Conclusion

Smooth co-facilitation does not just happen. It requires careful planning, ongoing communication, co-operation, flexibility and trust between the co-facilitators. Ours is still a work in progress. The International Association of Facilitators (IAF) has developed a set of six core competencies for facilitation work (Schuman, 2012). In reviewing these competencies against our own model there are many parallels. The fifth competency reminds us that we need to “build and maintain our professional knowledge”. Almost inevitably this occurs at an implicit level in our supervision groups. With every group we run we are exposed to new ideas and different thinking which moves our own coaching and coaching supervision practice forward. Similarly, as stated at the outset, the desire to do well for the other means we strive to keep our learning fresh. We bring this into the group discussion and have noticed that this seems to normalise the continuous nature of learning and generates a sense of purpose for all. Our sessions also have a continuing professional development element and so we share responsibility with the group for expanding our combined knowledge base. On a practical level, delivering this work together has already highlighted our need to deepen our understanding of group dynamics and so we have attended training at the Gestalt School for this purpose. Indeed, this article is a case in point as writing is an endeavour that becomes easier when done collaboratively. As we are discovering, collaborative writing provides a vehicle not only for stretching our individual learning but requires a deepening of our understanding of each other and how this combines when we work together.

Whilst the model has been generated from our work as group coaching supervisors, we have both also used our model of co-facilitation to inform and structure our working with other people in different contexts. We therefore hope that this model articulates how we work in a way that is useful for other co-facilitators – whatever their field of work. We would welcome the opportunity to evolve this model further and so are keen to collaborate with other co-facilitators to share their experiences too.

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Appendix 1

Questions for building an alliance between co-facilitators

Adapted from training notes - Alchemy: The art and Magic of Creating from Relationship, March 2013 www.crrglobal.com

1. What is your highest aspiration for how we work together? What are the basics we need to work together? Which are we closest to? What do we need from each other to aim for your highest aspiration?
2. What will allow us to thrive?
3. What key concepts do we want to deliver?
4. Where are we aligned and where not? How can we create further alignment?
5. In our work together what magic or spell do we want to create? What atmosphere?
6. How will we make decisions, especially if we don't agree?
7. What do we need from each other if things don't go to plan?
8. Who will do what during the work together? What specifically do we need from each other?
9. Following this work, what feedback do we specifically want to get from the client and each other?
10. How will we celebrate success?

About the authors

Michelle's first interest was psychology and this quickly led to a career in HR, spanning over 20 years. It was this HR work that drew her to coaching, having spent much of her time supporting executives that were dealing with transition. In 2003 she set up "greenfields" her coaching business and finally cut the strings with her corporate career in 2006. Passionate about CPD she co-founded the AC's Co-Coaching Forum in Newbury where she lives. It was this group that led her to Supervision as those establishing their own coaching practice asked for support. Along the way she has achieved an MBA at Warwick University, is a Fellow of the CIPD, an Accredited Coach and Coach Supervisor with the AC, having trained at Oxford Brookes. She works as a Career Coach and Executive Coach and also supervises those that work in similar fields. For more information view her website www.greenfieldsconsultancy.co.uk

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Carol brings a wealth of business experience at board level in a range of industries. The development of people's potential has always been her passion, it prompted a career in HR and it was here that she experienced coaching. It inspired her to become a coach and as her practice developed she sought qualification through Oxford Brookes. As she neared completion of her Post Graduate training she was invited to supervise incoming students, this developed into a core interest and she was one of the first cohort of coaches to become qualified supervisors with Oxford Brookes. Her links with the University remain strong; she achieved an MBA with them and is an Associate Lecturer for the Business School and a Coach/ Supervisor for the MA Coaching and Mentoring Practice. A member of both the AC and EMCC, she is an Accredited Coach with Oxford Brookes and a Fellow of the CIPD. She has been running Whitaker Consulting offering coaching and supervision since 2004 for more information view her website www.whitaker-consulting.co.uk

Carol and Michelle have worked together since 2009 co-facilitating supervision groups – their venture is Collaborative Coaching Supervision www.collaborativecoachingsupervision.co.uk