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Aim and scope

The International Journal of Mentoring and Coaching aims to bring together practitioners and researchers in coaching and mentoring to stimulate the exchange of ideas, opinions and thoughts. The Journal publishes empirical, theoretical and review articles of high quality that are relevant to real-world situations faced by professionals in these fields.

Submissions from all around the world are invited. All contributions are submitted to rigorous peer review. Publishing guidelines are provided at the end of the journal.

Reviewed Section. Research

Exploring the Double-Value of Supervision. The Opportunity for organisational Learning through Group Coaching Supervision

Michelle Lucas, Greenfields Consulting Limited, UK

Abstract:

The original research set out to explore the potential for group coaching supervision to add value to both internal coaches and the organisation they work for. In this article the focus is on the organisational themes generated through group coaching supervision. The research demonstrated that themes generated in this way corroborated existing “hunches” of organisational stakeholders, provided a greater level of detail than previously articulated in the organisation and identified a number of novel themes. Implications for practice and recommendations for further research are included.

Keywords

Internal coach, supervision, organisational learning

Introduction

Typically the reported benefits of supervision relate to the development, support and governance of the coach rather than what value has been added for an organisation. The research provided a case study opportunity to test the value of supervision to both the internal coaches and their organisation, hence the title “The exploration of “double value” of group coaching supervision”. The study set out to explore three questions:

1. What impact does group supervision have on internal coach development? (see Lucas, 2012)
2. Can group supervision provide a vehicle for eliciting organisational themes which are not yet articulated within the organisation?
3. If and when original organisational themes are captured, are they of use to the client organisation?

The second question is the subject of this article, focusing on the themes derived through group coaching supervision in the Case Study organisation.

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The origin of the research began when reflecting on my work with clients from a single organisation. I noticed common themes in the issues they brought to coaching. Similarly, as a group supervisor of internal coaches, I have noticed how supervision cases appear symptomatic of wider organisational themes. Talking to other coaches and coach supervisors, it seems mine is not an isolated experience.

It is therefore my belief that group supervision could be a vehicle for capturing organisational themes which could be packaged up on a non-attributable basis and played back to the organisation. Potentially, this could hold real value for an organisation if the themes identified have not been surfaced through other means. Further these themes could lead to organisational learning as they could help provide an understanding of what might be serving to enable or constrain the organisation's progress.

In reviewing the literature, whilst many authors infer the ability for supervision to generate organisational themes, none of them provide a methodology for doing so. Further, none of them have evidenced that such themes hold information which was previously unknown within the organisation. Finally, where it is inferred that organisational themes have been identified, I have found no accounts which assess the value attributed to this by the organisation. Consequently, I saw the opportunity for a Case Study to test the value of supervision not just for the internal coaches themselves but for their organisation.

Literature Review

Literature that attests to the organisational benefit of coaching supervision is rare, although a number of authors make reference to it in conceptual terms. For example, in 2006 the CIPD commissioned some research by Hawkins and Schwenk. In their report they identified a "wheel of best practice for Coaching Supervision". Whilst one of the 8 segments articulated was "generates organisational learning" there is no detail around how such learning may be generated, captured, used or evaluated.

Arney (2006) provides her observations of group supervision for internal coaches. She notes the potential for group supervision to provide access to themes which could be informative for the business:

*"Group Supervision also gives coaches the chance to share insights gained during one to one session with clients, **common themes often emerge during these sessions, for eg about responses to change initiatives or business strategies and these can be used to inform thinking about organisational development.**" (emphasis added)*

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Again, however, there is no further information to illuminate how such themes were captured and provided to the organisation and/or what happened as a result of noticing these themes.

More recently Birch and de Haan (2010) considered what happens in the supervision of organisational consultants and identified that “the supervisors will inevitably encounter recurring issues and themes that can be fed back on a non-attributable basis.” Whilst this piece gets closer to suggesting how the process might work, the mechanism by which themes gets managed is not documented.

Typically, these accounts in the literature appear to stem from general observations of their supervision work. However, Champion’s (2011) focus on Deloitte offers an insight into a single organisational client. She makes reference to three types of “Organisational impacts”.

- Coaching capability and capacity
- The development of coaching within the organisation
- Organisational commitment to coaching

Champion also commented that “supervision provided additional systemic insights contributing to organisational learning on cultural systems and to further opportunities for development”. She concludes that “there exists further future opportunity to formalise the capture of recurring issues and organisational themes”. This piece is helpful to underline the opportunity for coaching supervision to have an impact to an organisation beyond the development of its coaches. However, her reference to the usefulness of organisational themes remains conceptual rather than evidenced.

In summary therefore, there is very little research which provides tangible evidence to test whether organisational themes can be accessed through supervision and secondly, whether those themes represent novel information for the organisation. The aim of this work is to begin to provide evidence which could support or contradict what appears to be conceptually true.

Methodology

The Case Study Organisation:

As a result of a long-standing relationship, I gained permission to work with an intact team of internal coaches engaged in a major strategic change programme called “LEAP!”. The client organisation is a long-established footwear retailer which has

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embarked on many “change programmes” in its history. The organisation recognised that in the past, change management had been executed in a directive and formula-led way. Invariably sustaining these changes had required close management as the approach failed to achieve engagement of employees. In response to this, the LEAP! Change programme intended to work at a behavioural level. Rather than generate a new “operating manual” a team of internal change agents were selected to work intensively with Store personnel using a coaching approach encouraging them to develop new behaviours with customers.

The Group Supervision Activity

The study included a series of five group coaching supervision workshops which were facilitated by the author of this article. Initially, there were seven participants. This included, the LEAP! Change Programme Co-ordinator (CPC), three Area Sales Managers (ASM) and three Senior Change Leads (SCL). By the end of the programme only 4 participants remained, the 3 ASMs had dis-engaged from the research. One ASM dropped out after the first workshop due to additional workload. The second ASM disengaged after workshop 3 when he was promoted to a different Region not involved with LEAP! The third ASM resigned from the business due to family health problems also after workshop 3.

Each workshop lasted half a day. Typically this time allowed for 4 of the 7 participants to bring a case for review. Neither the coaches nor the organisation had any experience of coaching supervision. The researcher saw this as helpful, as effectively it provided a “greenfield site” for the case study. However, this lack of knowledge regarding “how supervision worked” meant that much of Workshop 1 was predominantly a contracting session. The last workshop was a review session. Workshops 2, 3 and 4 were therefore the core of the group supervision experience.

Research Methods

The case study uses a mixed methods approach. This allowed the inclusion of a range of perspectives at different points in time. In keeping with the phenomenological nature of the enquiry all the methods were qualitative in their approach.

“Before and After” Semi-structured interviews with stakeholders

The primary method for testing the originality of any organisational themes generated from the Group Coaching Supervision was through a “before and after” semi-structured interview with a small number of stakeholders responsible for the delivery of the LEAP! initiative.

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A copy of the “before” interview questions are provided as Appendix A. This “before” interview was conducted before the first contracting workshop. It took about 45 minutes, and was recorded for later analysis. This provided the original benchmark about “what was known” in the organisation. The three stakeholders interviewed were

- The Change Programme Co-ordinator (who was also involved in the workshops)
- The Retail Operations Director (who was functionally responsible for the success of the Change Programme)
- The HR Director (who had an interest in all employee and organisation development matters)

Content theme analysis – interviews:

Once all 3 interviews had been conducted, I took the following approach to analysis:

- Reflected on the interviews and identified potential themes
- Listed the comments that would support these themes
- Reviewed my written interview notes to build upon my initial document
- Revisited the actual recordings to ensure the stakeholder comments were accurately captured as a quotation.

Note: All of this reflection was concluded prior to workshop 2.

The intention was to present the results to all three stakeholders at the end of the programme, and use this report as material for the “after” interview. However, the Retail Operations Director was no longer in the business by the time the report was produced. The “after” interview with the Group HRD was done face to face and by phone with the CPC. Appendix B provides a list of the interview questions which helped structure the discussion.

On-line questionnaires completed by participants

The secondary method for identifying the existing understanding of organisational themes came from the participant perspective and was conducted via an on-line survey. It was completed in advance of the first contracting workshop and again after the fifth and final workshop. The on-line survey contained eleven questions, nine of which were for the purpose of exploring research Question No. 1. Two questions pertained to Question 2. The first asked for their views on what was currently present in

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the organisation which would “help” and second question asked what might “hinder” the successful implementation of LEAP! in the business. Answers were requested as free-form text responses, to ensure the researcher was not pre-judging their contributions.

Content theme analysis – on-line questionnaires

The process was completed as follows:

1. The comments from the on-line survey were printed off
2. Each comment was cut into a separate strip so that the comments could be clustered into themes
3. Clusters were established by looking for similarity of meaning amongst the anecdotal comments.
4. The title for each cluster was derived as a short hand based on my understanding of the core “message” of these similar comments.

This was revisited a number of times to ensure that “with a fresh pair of eyes” comments were clustered in a consistently meaningful way

Capturing themes emerging from the supervision work itself

As the researcher and supervisor, I used my own methodology which attempted to capture “cleanly” any latent organisational themes within the supervision content. Depending on the numbers present in the workshop this methodology was used in one of two “variants”. Both approaches provided context but were non-directive. As the Supervisor, I asked the coaches to comment on the question “what have you noticed?”. The context for this question was positioned transparently i.e. Please consider the wider organisation rather than participant development. A brief explanation of the two techniques is provided in Table 1 below:

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Table 1

Outline of two variants (techniques) of methodology to capture organisational themes from supervision work

Technique 1: “Fishbowl” approach.	Technique 2: Allocating specific reflection time.
This technique is useful when working in a larger group. The group is split into two with some being placed in an “inner circle” to actively engage in the supervision discussion. The others are placed in an “outer circle” and act as observers. The observers are briefed to consider the organisational context, not to be distracted by the story itself, and to comment upon what they notice.	This technique is useful when there are 4 or less people in the group and is designed to emulate the “fishbowl” technique. Once the group has completed a number of rounds of supervision work, they are invited to take a break. Upon return they are asked to shift their physical position so that they effectively move to the “outer position” of the fishbowl. This shift seems to naturally provoke a more objective and reflective stance. All of the participants then work as “observers”. They are briefed to reflect on the supervision work experienced before the break. They are directed to consider the organisational context, not to be distracted by the stories they heard, and to comment upon what they notice now.

As the supervisor I wrote down the emergent themes articulated by participants and circulated them after the workshop to ensure accuracy, and to seek any amendments. On each occasion no amendments were suggested.

Content Theme Analysis – from supervision workshops;

No analysis was done on the themes whilst the group supervision workshops were being delivered. This helped me, as the researcher, approach each workshop with discrete “attention” without carrying assumptions about what themes might emerge.

Analysis of the themes that had been “approved” by the participants was therefore carried out “en masse”, once all the workshops were completed. The process of analysis followed the same process as outlined for the on-line surveys (see above).

Findings

This paper considers those findings that relate to the second research Question : “Can group supervision provide a vehicle for eliciting organisational themes which are not yet articulated within the organisation?”

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The Themes identified through Group Supervision

In total there were 62 comments about organisational themes identified during the group supervision sessions which were organised into 11 clusters, Table 2 below identifies the cluster titles (in order of how often they occurred) and provides a representative comment to aid understanding.

Table 2.

Clusters of organisational themes presented in order of how often they occurred

Cluster	Representative comment
1. Lack of clarity & accountability	Inconsistency about what is wanted by the Regional Sales Manager population
2. Skills Gap	Where are the mentors to help people “match and mirror”
3. Fear of Conflict	Often a fear of upsetting others – causing us to back away from forcing through change
4. Task not Behaviour Focus	Tend to focus on the “what” not the “how”
5. Might = Right	Despite talk of new behavioural approach, there are some key people at Senior Level who are “blunt” and authoritarian
6. Arm’s Length Management	There’s a disconnect between HQ and Retail
7. Company History & Culture	Long time to change the direction of the super-tanker that is “Company Name”
8. Pressure on results	A pressure for delivery over an investment of time in people
9. Fear of Change	ASM’s have a fear of change – “if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it”
10. “Prima Donna” behaviour	Pride (competitiveness??) amongst the ASM population – do decisions help the ASM more than they help the business ? e. g. Reluctance to share ideas
11. Cultural Lag Factors; e. g. “Passive resistance”	Experience resistance from RSM’s; Senior Teams – not expecting to have to change their ways

Assessing the Originality of the Themes:

To determine which of the organisational themes had genuinely been prompted by the supervision workshops I have compared them with the themes generated through the “before” on-line survey with the internal coaches and the initial stakeholder interviews.

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The Coach Perspective

Firstly I looked at the themes identified by the coaches in the pre-workshop questionnaire. This analysis identified that 4 themes were “already known” but 7 themes were new. Further 2 of the themes identified before the workshops were not found in the Group Supervision themes. See Table 3 below

Table 3.

Comparison of themes identified before and during the Group Supervision Workshops:

Themes identified by Coaches WHILST engaging in workshops	Themes identified by Coaches BEFORE engaging in workshops
1. Lack of clarity & accountability	
2. Skills Gap	YES
3. Fear of Conflict	
4. Task not Behaviour Focus	YES
5. Might = Right	
6. Arm’s Length Management	YES
7. Company History & Culture	YES
8. Pressure on results	
9. Fear of Change	
10. “Prima Donna” behaviour	
11. Cultural Lag Factors e. g. “Passive resistance”	
12. Not identified through supervision	Communication
13. Not identified through supervision	New Team

The Stakeholder Perspective

Similarly, it was important to establish what was “already known” by the stakeholders. Table 4 below summarises the 8 themes generated by the three organisational stakeholders through the semi-structured interview process.

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Table 4.

Clusters of “hunches” as articulated by Organisational Stakeholders

Stakeholder “Hunch”	Representative Comment
Arm’s Length Management	“the culture of change over the last 10 year has been “thrown over the fence” ... “I say, you do””
Company History & Culture	“Our environment is not “adult-adult” – its nurturing parent” Its not a challenging environment, we don’t like to see people upset we don’t let people struggle – which means we don’t give them the opportunity to reflect on mistakes”
Lack of Accountability	“there is a lack of consequences – if LEAP fails, then for me it would be “career ending” as it underpins the 5 yr plan !! but the LEAP team itself and the Store Managers will be protected
Lack of focus	“There is a history of initiatives within the business, one overtakes the last, some concern that this may follow the path of those that have gone before !”
Lack of Sustainability Know how	A lot of attention is being given to stores prior to and during roll out – there is a hesitation if this is enough to ensure sustainability once that extra resource is withdrawn
Passive Resistance	“there is a sense of passive resistance – we are masters of wanting change but not achieving it I’ve not experienced any emotional or intellectual resistance to change ... everyone is very happy to change as long as it doesn’t actually change anything – that’s the paradox”
Skills Gap	“if you think about “will vs skill” – not usually a will issue, we have people that are committed and want to do the job, but there has been a massive lack of investment in skills – this is being re-vitalised with new HRD”
Task not Behaviour focus	“we’re really good at “normalization” which is great for a task focused change so say if I want to launch the sale a week early then we’d be pretty good at that ! but much less successful with behavioural change, send an “A4 memo” saying “please change the way you to talk to customers” (I’m parodying of course) and expect to get sustained change”

Table 5 below sets out a comparison of the 11 clusters generated by coaches in the Group Supervision workshops with the 8 which had been articulated in the Stakeholder interviews. From this it can be seen that 6 of the original 8 stakeholder “hunches” were corroborated, 2 were not. Thus the remaining five were new themes identified only from the supervision workshops.

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Table 5.

Identification of which Themes from the Supervision Workshops corroborated the Stakeholder "Hunches" and which were original

ALL THEMES IDENTIFIED	STAKEHOLDERS	COACHES before SUPERVISION	COACHES DURING SUPERVISION ONLY
Green text = Original themes: Orange Text = Corroborated Stakeholders only Grey text = Corroborated Existing Views: Red text = Not Corroborated			
STAKEHOLDER THEMES CORROBORATED BY GROUP SUPERVISION			
Lack of Accountability	YES	NO	YES
Passive Resistance	YES	NO	YES
Company History & Culture	YES	YES	YES
Task not Behaviour focus	YES	YES	YES
Arm's Length Management	YES	YES	YES
Skills Gap	YES	YES	YES
STAKEHOLDER & COACH THEMES NOT CORROBORATED BY GROUP SUPERVISION			
Lack of Sustainability Know how	YES	YES	NO
Lack of focus	YES	YES	NO
Communication	NO	YES	NO
LEAP! As a New team	NO	YES	NO
ORIGINAL THEMES ONLY IDENTIFIED THROUGH GROUP SUPERVISION			
Fear of conflict	NO	NO	YES
Might = Right	NO	NO	YES
Pressure on results	NO	NO	YES
Fear of Change	NO	NO	YES
"Prima Donna" behaviours	NO	NO	YES

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Congruence between Cases brought to Supervision and Themes identified

Finally, I was curious to know whether the coaches were simply “using” the request to notice themes to raise awareness of matters they thought to be important but had no other channel in which to raise them. Therefore I considered “in hindsight” how often these 11 themes were found within the cases brought to supervision. Of the 13 client issues/cases which the coaches brought to supervision five of them demonstrated elements of “passive resistance” and four of them demonstrated “might = right”. All of the other themes were also present but with less density. This suggests that:

- both existing and emergent themes were evidenced in the supervision cases,
- the coaches were not simply using their roles as research participants to “showcase” their concerns, as the themes were an integral part of the cases they brought to supervision

Discussion

As the supervisor of the work, I was pleasantly surprised at the ease with which these relatively “novice” coaches could take a reflective stance and articulate themes from their peer’s work. Similarly as the researcher it was affirming that there was evidence for my belief that group supervision could provide a vehicle for capturing organisational information.

Having benchmarked what was known before the supervision occurred, helped clarify the originality of the themes generated. This suggests some truth to the comment that supervision helps coaches to “see more than they can currently see in their work” (Bachkirova, 2008).

Whilst the novel themes are most compelling to the researcher, it is also informative that reflection through supervision provided a vehicle for aggregating what was already known. In this case study the coaches were geographically remote and worked autonomously. When the team did come together the focus was predominantly about Store delivery of the change programme metrics. The group supervision workshops highlight how with a different approach, it would be possible to move discussion towards a deeper consideration of how the wider system could be influencing the pace of change. Potentially this could provide a more informed context against which future interventions in the Stores are shaped. In addition, this could extend the role of the Change Programme Manager such that they channelled systemic information to those organisational stakeholders who are in a position to influence cultural change.

As illustrated in Table 5 – there were 4 themes that were identified in the “before” survey completed by the coaches and which were not articulated through the

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supervision process. It is possible that this is simply a “timing” issue. Over the course of the 3 core supervision workshops the coaches discussed 13 client cases. By comparison they would have been working with 75+ branches at any one point in time. Had there been more supervision work and more cases covered, it is possible that these additional themes might also have been corroborated. Conversely it could be that the un-corroborated themes were the result of conjecture or isolated instances which then generated “group think”. Going forward this lack of corroboration could be used constructively regarding the coaches ongoing work with Store personnel. For example it could :

- serve as a challenge to the existing mind-set
- provide greater objectivity on their interactions with the Store personnel
- raise their levels of curiosity in looking for “root cause” rather than working with assumptions
- remove a distorted lens when considering what might be contributing to the pace of change experienced

It is notable that the theme of “lack of focus” highlighted in the initial stakeholder interviews was not corroborated from the Group Supervision dialogue. However, perhaps more powerfully the “drop out rate” of the ASM’s from the supervision workshops provides a real example of this theme “in action”. Despite careful contracting to gain their commitment to complete the research – workload pressures resulted in two of the ASM’s “opting out”. Similarly, the mismatch between their espoused commitment and their actual behaviour , could be indicative of the “passive-resistance” theme. This could also therefore provide evidence for the other apparently unsubstantiated “hunch”.

The participants in the research (internal stakeholders and coaches) operated at different levels within the organisation. The analysis shows that they identified both common and different themes. This could serve to generate a broader understanding of the employee experience when working in different “spaces” within a single organisation. Such an organisational “map” could be particularly useful to those concerned with employee engagement or leadership development.

The emphasis of this paper was to consider how themes might be of use to the organisation. However, we should not ignore the value for the supervisor directly involved. Working in this way could provide greater insight regarding the cultural system in which the supervision practice takes place.

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This research is relatively small in scale and has yet to be corroborated in other organisations. However, it goes further than the existing, more conceptual, literature and starts to provide substance to the proposition that supervision can inform organisational learning.

Conclusions

The study demonstrates that group supervision can provide a means for capturing organisational themes. Further having benchmarked “what was known” before and after supervision there is evidence that organisational messages elicited in this way corroborate what is already known and can also provide original or more detailed information than was previously articulated.

Implications for Practice

Supervisors of internal coaches, who focus on the developmental benefits of supervision, have an opportunity to extend the scope of their supervision work. It is suggested that these supervisors are in a prime position to capture latent or “sub-conscious” information within the organisation which could provide additional value to the organisation.

The participants connected with the practice of group supervision easily. This suggests that organisations may wish to up-skill appropriately placed individuals to work as group supervisors in order to leverage the tacit knowledge of those working as “change agents”.

Limitations of the Research

When considering the robustness of determining how “original” the themes were, the research could be criticised for taking a narrow representation of the existing organisational knowledge. The three stakeholders interviewed may not adequately reflect what is known in the organisation. It may have been useful to interview Store personnel to capture knowledge of a wider population in the initial benchmarking exercise.

As this case study is small in scale – with only 7 participants and 5 supervision workshops, generalisations should be made with caution. However, given the tacit understanding amongst Coaches and Coach Supervisors that useful organisational information can be surfaced through Group Supervision, additional research to evidence this understanding is encouraged.

Implications for future Research

The author worked as both researcher and supervisor, at times it was difficult to navigate these dual roles. One might argue that “as supervisor” it was not possible to

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genuinely bracket their awareness of the emerging themes as the research progressed. Therefore future researchers considering a Case Study methodology might benefit from using an Action Research approach instead. This more emergent approach would recognise the difficulty of separating out “researcher” and “subject” and instead leverage the opportunity for all parties to become co-researchers into an emergent enquiry.

This paper has focused on the themes generated from supervision. A more detailed investigation on the techniques used to do this could be informative – especially if supervisors from different schools of thought shared approaches.

The review of these findings carries an assumption that because themes were original they would be deemed as “valuable” by the organisation. Exploration of this hypothesis is a separate matter and will be the subject of further enquiry by the researcher.

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Appendix A: Questions for Semi-Structured Interview with Organisational Stakeholders

1. What is the strategic purpose of the LEAP programme?
 - What are your best hopes for Company at the moment?
 - What are your worst fears for Company at the moment?
2. Why is it important to the organisation that the Change Leads and the Area Sales Managers take a coaching approach to the implementation of LEAP?
3. Thinking about the participants' development as coaches during this Coaching Supervision – how will you know if the investment of time has been worth it?
4. If the Group Coaching Supervision process is able to shed some light on the real dynamics of the organisation - what “hunches” do you have that we might be able to find evidence for?
5. Anything else that might be useful for me to know as I start the work ?

Appendix B: Questions for Stakeholders when Provided with Business Report

1. What has been changing since our first interview?
2. Having reviewed the report, is there anything that needs more explanation ?
3. What is your reaction to the report?
4. Has anything happened that would lend weight to the findings in the report?
5. What might these findings prompt you to consider now?

About the Author

Michelle Lucas brings a blend of psychology, organisation development and Board level business experience to inform her coaching and supervision practice. She has an MBA, PG Diplomas in Coaching & Mentoring Practice and in Coaching Supervision from Oxford Brookes and is a member of the EMCC. Michelle is an Accredited Coach with the AC and is the AC Lead on Coaching Supervision. She is also a Fellow of the CIPD and a member of the BPS.

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