The reflections of a **surprised supervisor**

When coach and coach supervisor **Michelle Lucas** conducted research on the value of internal coach supervision in organisations, she discovered key differences between independent and internal coaches. Here she shares her findings and the surprising results, which yield some important lessons.

In recent years organisations have used coaching for a broader population than just the 'executive' team and, as a result, many organisations have up-skilled people internally to form an 'internal cadre' of coaches. Compared with supervision in helping professions like therapy and social work, coaching supervision is a relatively new activity. Therefore, my interest is in finding out how to apply supervision, how to adapt and make it relevant to professional coaches in many varied environments.

This article is about my own learning from undertaking original research to explore the double value of supervision with internal coaches. Prior to the research my coaching supervision work had been with independent coaches. My interest was to find out whether supervision can build internal coach development as well as provide a channel through which organisational themes can be captured and played back to the organisation. The research intervention was a series of five half-day group coaching supervision workshops with a team of seven internal coaches who were engaged in a major change programme. The organisation is a well-established UK retail organisation.

The findings of this research will be published in full in due course. In brief, my findings were that supervision can and does achieve both these objectives.

I have structured this article into four sections in which I highlight the difference between my expectations and my experience of carrying out the research. I share with you the extent to which my expectations were fulfilled (or not), and the opportunities for learning and further exploration that emerged in either case.

1. Do different rules apply?

What I expected

When contracting with the group, I was expecting some discomfort around how the coach explains to the client that supervision is an exception to confidentiality. Typically, I have noticed a fear that this disclosure will make coaches appear less competent in the eyes of the client – not helped by the managerial overtones of the very label 'supervisor'.

What happened?

When I posed the question, 'So how will you get permission from your client to bring your case material to the group?', I was met with silence. It wasn't an uncomfortable silence; rather, a sense of 'does not compute' lingered in the air. The discussion that ensued led me to understand that their landscape was quite different to that of the independent coaches I had previously supervised.

At the heart of the difference is that employees (in this organisation) have an expectation that other people will talk about them without their knowledge. They may be discussed because of branch transfers, development opportunities, performance management or any number of other reasons 'for the good of the company'. A sense of their employees' 'privacy' simply doesn't exist among their senior management or functional experts. The internal coach's view of seeking client permission was that it would cause confusion on the part of the client. I felt a huge potential for incongruence – how could these supervisees be professional coaches if they could not be transparent about such a fundamental issue as how to handle confidentiality? At the same time I remembered my 20 years in Human Resources (HR), where employees were often discussed without their knowledge, usually informally but occasionally in formal discussions too.

In the event, the issue of contracting and confidentiality resurfaced in a practical example brought to the supervision session by one of the participants. It allowed the whole group to see much more clearly the inherent risk in raising issues in supervision without first gaining the explicit permission of those involved. The participant's dilemma helped everyone's 'lightbulb' to switch on – it seems there is no substitute for the pain of real experience.

What I learned

I have gained a huge sense of humility about the impact of an organisational culture on ethical issues. In HR there is consideration of 'best practice' vs 'best fit' and this is the tension that I experienced here. I could have taken a firm line and insisted on a best practice approach to managing confidentiality. However, my sense in the contracting session was to work with the current system, which operated according to a different value set. Although it caused me personal and professional discomfort, when I shifted position to consider the relationship between coach and client, I saw it differently. Reluctantly, I understood that my version of 'best practice' would probably serve to undermine their sense of rapport and would challenge the tacit sense of trust among the managers and staff within this particular organisation.

2. Is there an elephant in the room?

What I expected

One of the issues I considered was the appropriateness of involving the line manager of the internal coaches in the group supervision sessions. However, in the contracting session I discovered that some of the participants also held a 'matrix' responsibility for their peers. Therefore this raised the issue of the potential impact of formal and informal role power within the group.

What happened?

With due credit to the learning culture of the organisation and the maturity of the manager, when I raised the potential issue of her role power restricting the openness of the group, she immediately saw the tension. Despite having a keen personal interest in participating in the workshops, she paved the way for me to 'test' the issue with the group in her absence. The view of the group was that they would not feel restricted: they saw it as a developmental opportunity and they held a firm belief that allowing their line manager to see them thrive or struggle was an essential part of their learning journey. I recall feeling a degree of cynicism about this rather 'word perfect' rationalisation. I sought their permission to surface any indications that a power dynamic was in play. Not once during the workshops did I use that permission. My experience was of a group of peers working together. Maybe I missed it, but I didn't notice any kind of power dynamic influencing the quality of the discussion.

What I learned

That informal power exists alongside the formal organisation is no surprise, but this was a reminder to me to actively seek out an understanding of the relationships involved in coaching or supervision. Equally it's presumptuous to assume that, just because there is a power differential, the power will be exerted.

I was struck by the capacity of the individuals concerned to genuinely set aside their personal agendas to ensure that others had space to learn. Similarly, I had some admiration for those who were brave enough to be vulnerable in the presence of others who could 'make or break' their careers.

3. Who said that...?

What I expected

Although I had not worked with this group of people before, I had worked on other coaching assignments with this particular organisation. Generally speaking, I have been quite 'fond' of the clients with whom I worked. The organisation provided its people with a lot of development and, typically, individuals were keen to learn and open and receptive to feedback. This meant I was genuinely looking forward to working with the group. Noticing that was helpful, as it reminded me that my sense of comfort when working with this organisation might cause a lack of objectivity.

What happened?

In the contracting session we talked about the organisational culture and the group typified it as a 'nurturing parent' approach. I remember being surprised that they were well informed about transactional analysis (TA). Interestingly, this dynamic played out in the contracting session itself when we were talking about how we would divide the time. One of the more senior participants suggested that the more junior participants' development needs should take priority. Given the fairly recent discussion about the existence of a 'parent-child' culture, this allowed us to explore the offer and response within a TA framework. It wasn't too hard to surface the parallel process at play between the organisational culture and the behaviour in the supervision group. This led to some chuckles around the group. Importantly from a contracting point of view, we agreed an equitable way of dividing the time and I agreed to monitor what actually occurred.

During my own supervision I caught myself referring to a participant as 'one of the girls'. As an adult female who herself takes issue with being referred to as 'a girl', I was genuinely flabbergasted. Where on earth had that phrase come from? I voiced this with my supervisor and it became clear that I had been sucked into the organisation's culture; I too was colluding with the position of 'parent'. What was most disarming was the realisation that I only spotted this during supervision, not while I was working with the group. This demonstrates the power of parallel process and how easily anyone, including the supervisor, can be caught by it. I wondered how I could ensure my neutrality more in future and it occurred to me that it might be helpful to sit outside the circle when the group was reviewing cases, and this was indeed possible in a couple of the workshops.

> How do we navigate the tension between holding the responsibility for ethical practice while respecting and appreciating the organisational culture?

> Being subject to the effects of parallel process was definitely the most surprising of the surprises. I'm sure I would not have noticed this had it not been for my own supervision

What I learned

I learned that I am still learning! I still don't know if what I experienced in supervision was a result of re-living the session on behalf of the participants or whether I was in fact colluding as a 'nurturing parent' in the session. It highlighted to me the usefulness of recording sessions so that we can genuinely replay what happened. At the next session I resolved to actively notice and resist as much as I could my pull to protect, and to see what happened; maybe this would provoke some discomfort.

As a result I was able to reflect on some of the choices the group had made about discussion techniques – the group seemingly took the least challenging option. I also discussed the record of who had brought what cases and in what order. As a result the behaviour in the group changed, with the first participant opting for a more challenging framework for discussion, setting the tone that today's session would be 'different'. With hindsight I realise another option would have been to share my own supervision experience.

4. Be careful what you wish for...

What I expected

Working with a group of ex-store managers who are naturally action-oriented and who weren't formally qualified coaches, my biggest fear about the group was that they wouldn't understand reflective practice. To manage this, I spent time labouring the point around contracting and I introduced techniques that I thought would help structure the reflections. This helped me to clarify the purpose of group supervision and demonstrate that it was not an informal chat among professionals, or an opportunity for me to wax lyrical about my coaching experience, or the space for me to pass judgment about whether they got it 'right' or 'wrong'.

What happened?

My fears proved unfounded. The ease with which they chose to experiment with the different techniques was remarkable. There were some wonderful moments when I encouraged them to work in a 'fishbowl'. Some of them commented on the impact on their mindset of physically leaving the inner supervision circle – they almost immediately experienced an observational and objective quality. Others observed that it was difficult not to 'butt in' and be part of the discussion and yet they also became intrigued about how the dialogue unfolded (often in a different direction to the one they would have prompted). So this was a real lesson for these technical experts in the value of listening more than talking.

What I hadn't anticipated was that they would use these supervision techniques with their own teams. In the third workshop they informed me they found the techniques so useful that they'd created a community of practice and were independently engaging in peer supervision between workshops.

COACHES	KNOWN	FEEDBACK FROM OTHERS Business as usual	OPEN WINDOW Trust & respect & learning
	NOT KNOWN	"BLIND SPOT" Emergent / group dynamics	FEEDBACK TO OTHERS Espoused best practice
		NOT KNOWN	KNOWN
		SUPERVISOR	

Figure 1: Using the Johari Window to consider the origin of my surprises

What I learned

The use of the supervision techniques with their own teams caused me to wonder if I had created an unmanaged risk in the business. No formal supervision was provided once the research had ended. With the value of hindsight, I could have contracted with them more clearly that these techniques were only for use by a trained supervisor or a coach who is receiving supervision.

However, through my own supervision it became clear some of my anxiety was actually disappointment that they didn't need me in order to be able engage in reflective practice with their own teams. In reality, of course, these were all mature and highly successful people managers. They already demonstrated a high degree of emotional intelligence (hence their being identified for the change project) and therefore the risk of them not exercising an appropriate duty of care was, in fact, low.

Clearly it was appropriate to question the ethics of this new reality. However, there was definitely a need for me to accept that, in a way, my work was done. In a far quicker time than I had ever anticipated, I had 'trained the trainer' and was experiencing my own sense of loss.

Discussion

In trying to step back and look at where these 'surprises' came from, I was reminded of the Johari window[1] (see Figure 1). The surprise around confidentiality came from the mismatch between what was known by one party and not the other. From my perspective as a trained supervisor, there was an expectation that I would need to educate the coaches about best practice in handling confidentiality. Conversely, the coaches were experts in their organisational culture and educated me in what was 'business as usual'. This perhaps sums up the challenge for the supervisor of internal coaches – how do we navigate the tension between holding the responsibility for ethical practice while respecting and appreciating the organisational culture?

Being subject to the effects of parallel process was definitely the most surprising of the surprises. Given that this resulted from the emerging group dynamic, I'm not sure that I could have anticipated this. I feel quite sure I would not have noticed this had it not been for my own supervision, separate from the organisational process. This was a useful reminder of how quickly the supervisor can be subject to a pervasive parallel process.

I probably could have anticipated that the coaches would not have experienced a negative impact from 'role power' and that they would seek to use the techniques themselves. Given the learning organisation culture, the 'open' part of the Johari window was considerable and mature. Not only were they comfortable in being vulnerable in order to learn; they had a real thirst for wanting to create a similar learning experience more widely.

Food for future thought

The purpose of the original research was not particularly concerned with the ethics surrounding internal coach supervision. However there are a number of questions that I now believe merit further research.

- How does organisational culture impact on the way coaching and coaching supervision is practised? What happens when there is dissonance between best practice and company culture?
- How can you prepare for the power dynamics that stem from formal and/or informal roles in the organisation? How will you know what's not been said?
- How do you spot parallel process? Does this mean external supervision is essential rather than a choice when working with internal coaches?
- Practitioners who are not trained in either coaching or supervision are keen to play a 'supervision' role with peers. So, what does a trained supervisor bring to a reflective practice group that goes beyond facilitation? Specifically, what does this look like when the trained supervisor takes a non-directive stance? ■

Reference

1 Luft J, Ingham H. The Johari window: a graphic model of interpersonal awareness. Proceedings of the Western Training Laboratory in Group Development. Los Angeles: UCLA; 1950.

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