

Coaches should not be supervised

Julius Weinberg

This paper examines a coaching myth: the need for supervision. It approaches the issue from the perspectives of language, values and effectiveness. Asking what supervision is, if it is consistent with the values of coaching and if it works. It concludes that coaches should neither seek, nor provide, supervision, that the term does not describe what coaches need for development and quality assurance. The use of the term 'supervision' may be holding the domain back by implying a particular interaction which coaches may disagree with, and by discouraging coaches from seeking, developing and exploring methods of development with which they feel comfortable. Finally, it identifies serious, undisclosed conflicts of interest.

Keywords: Coaching; coaching psychology; supervision; ethics; conflict of interest.

Introduction

SUPERVISION HAS become an established practice in coaching and coaching psychology (Division of Coaching Psychology, n.d.) and organisations often demand that coaches they contract with have supervisors (Bachkirova et al., 2020), many of the coach accreditation organisations (I refer to these as 'accrediting agencies' later as they have no formal status, but do have power in the market place) expect coaches to have supervisors. Supervision is supposed to have a number of functions, developmental, growing the coaches skills, resourcing, supporting the coach emotionally, and providing quality control (Tkach & DiGirolamo, 2020).

This paper explores the myth of supervision for coaching from the perspectives of language, values, and effectiveness. Asking what supervision is, if it is consistent with the values of coaching, if it works and who benefits. The first challenge is that the conceptual foundation of supervision in coaching is poorly articulated. A recent systematic literature review of supervision in coaching (Bachkirova et al., 2020) showed lack of clarity over what coaching supervision was, with multiple definitions. However, common themes were

identified, these included 'developing the competence and capability of the coach... providing a supportive space ... encouraging professional practice related to quality practice and ethics'.

Language

Language is important, coaching is largely about conversation, verbal and non-verbal communication. Therefore, coaches should be particularly attentive to the meaning of words. I have previously argued (Weinberg, 2022) that they also appear to be confused about 'supervision'.

The meaning of supervision in ordinary language is clear, 'the action or function of overseeing, directing, or taking charge of a person', it is 'the direction and overseeing of work' ('supervision, n.', n.d.). Supervision is what supervisors do, it implies oversight, additional expertise, and hierarchy. Language does change, and there are times when a meaning may be peculiar to a particular domain. A recent paper on coaching claimed that that supervision 'has a different meaning when used in our context compared to common, everyday speech' (Hill et al., 2022). However, this can

lead to confusion, particular in a practice (like coaching) where many practitioners will be familiar with the traditional meaning of supervision. If a professional group chooses to use language in a way that deviates significantly from normal there should be a good reason.

The caring professions, perhaps made uncomfortable by the notion of oversight, or hierarchy, make statements such as ‘there is no single or agreed definition of supervision, at its core, supervision is a process of professional learning and development that enables individuals to reflect on and develop their knowledge, skills, and competence, through agreed and regular support with another professional.’ (Health & Care Professions Council [HCPC], 2021). In ‘The Manifesto for Supervision’ (Hawkins et al., 2019) a ‘call to arms’, supervision is defined as ‘a formal and protected time for facilitating a coach’s in-depth reflection on their practice with a trained Coaching Supervisor’ and is said not to imply a hierarchical relationship.

There is no entry in the Oxford English Dictionary which resembles that used by the HCPC, or in ‘The Manifesto’ or that used in many of the published papers on supervision in coaching. Private languages and domain specific meanings, can confuse and have been extensively critiqued in ordinary language philosophy (Parker-Ryan, 2012). If a word does not have the right meaning for a situation one should seek the right word, not make a word mean what one wants it to mean, this is the world of Alice, ‘When I use a word,’ Humpty Dumpty said in a rather scornful tone, ‘it means just what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less.’ (Carroll, 2012). Orwell (2021) criticising the inaccurate use of language, claimed that truth was hidden, not illuminated by vague, meaningless language.

Whilst some do embrace supervision as a ‘didactic method’ (Haan, 2016, p.xii) aimed at the pursuit of ‘client-orientated’ jobs, what is described by many authors is not supervision, but activity closer to co-coaching, peer support (Turner et al.,

2017), an action learning set (Leonard and Marquardt, 2010) or Balint group (Van Roy et al., 2015). Many authors are clearly uncomfortable with the word ‘supervision’ and invent neologisms such as ‘super-vision’. Carroll, writing about coaching psychology (Carroll et al., 2008) describes supervisors as ‘facilitators of reflection’, he questions the traditional relationship of the supervisor to the supervisee and describes how it should be a process of ‘we-learning’. However, his description of supervision still reflects a hierarchical relationship with the supervisor taking control of the learning space. Passmore, a psychological coach seems to conflate supervision with continual professional development (Passmore, 2011) and places the discussion within a framework of coaching becoming a profession. These issues are separate. In a previous paper Passmore (Passmore & McGoldrick, 2009) had called for a variety of models of continuous professional development and questioned the ‘dominant mindset’ that supervision was the only intervention to promote reflective practice. This plea seems unfortunately to have been lost, including in Passmore’s development, as he is an author of the ‘The Manifesto’ published by one of the ‘professional bodies’.

In its statutory ethical guidance the General Medical Council (GMC) (2013) states that doctors ‘must regularly take part in activities that maintain and develop your competence and performance’ and that they should ‘find and take part in structured support opportunities... (for example, mentoring)’. The GMC recommends the development of reflective practitioners and encourages the development of team and group reflection (General Medical Council, 2021). Where the GMC does mention supervision it is consistent with the normal meaning where there is a role for direction and overseeing. Similarly, in their statement of ethical principles and conduct, the statutory bodies in Engineering (Engineering Council, N.D.) do not promote supervision.

The risks to the public are far greater in Medicine and Engineering, and the commitment to development and improving professional practice no less, than in coaching.

Values

Values are seen as an ‘essential reference point’ for coaching (Stelter, 2017, chap. 18). Ideally we create a web of consistent, coherent and mutually supportive values to live by (Dworkin, 2013). Considering how values interact with situations is at the core of self-reflection, development and action. Our values create responsibilities, and we should approach what we do from the perspective of responsibilities (Dworkin, 2013), not as a result of duties imposed by ‘accrediting agencies’, or commercial contracts. As coaches we have a responsibility to seek to improve, to quality assure what we do, to take advice and guidance if we may be moving outside our area of competence and to promote the value of coaching more widely. We should ask if acquiescence with the language of ‘supervision’ is the best way to address these responsibilities .

Coaching is largely a non-directive activity, the key expertise is to enable the client to find their own solutions, coaching draws upon the client’s desire to change, even when goal-directed (Ives, 2008). A coach would probably deny that they have greater expertise than the client (except perhaps in developing and sustaining a coaching conversation) and are unlikely to describe the relationship that they have with the client as hierarchical. Coaches are unlikely to describe their relationship to their client as a supervisory one. It seems odd that a mode of interaction coaches would consider inappropriate for their clients has been proposed (and increasingly imposed) as appropriate for the development and support of coaches themselves. Supervision, as it is properly defined, could be argued as, in fact, inimical to coaching.

A core value of coaching is honesty. There is a growing market in supervision, courses in supervision, and ‘accreditation’ of super-

vision (‘Supervisor Accreditation – International Society for Coaching Psychology’, no date; Supervisor Accreditation, no date). Indeed ‘accrediting agencies’ are demanding that coaches have supervisors. A number of those who publish extolling the value and virtue of supervision are also engaged in providing courses on coach supervision, or promoting the accreditation of coach supervision and advising the ‘accrediting agencies’. Despite this clear conflict of interest no declarations of interest acknowledging this have been identified in papers on supervision in coaching .

Effectiveness

A 2009 literature review of coaching supervision (Moyes, 2009), suggested that coaching supervision was under researched, and offered no comment on research related to effectiveness. A systematic literature review (Bachkirova et al., 2020) suggested that supervision in coaching had ‘value’, this meant a subjective impression of benefit to the supervisee, however, no studies clearly showed that supervision was effective. Studies were largely small, qualitative, and discursive. In 2021 it was recognised that whilst a small number of studies showed that perceived value to coaching supervision there was a ‘hope that evidence of the impact of coaching supervision might be forthcoming’ (Bachkirova et al., 2021, p.xx). In 2022 supervision is said to have ‘come of age’, yet no evidence is offered of improved outcomes for the coachee (Hill et al., 2022).

It may be that the failure of the domain to advance over more than a decade is because researchers are establishing and evaluating the wrong activity under the wrong terminology, or because the terminology is distorting the activity, or willingness to engage with it.

Discussion

Coaches should wish to develop, they should act professionally, they should ensure that

they are practicing within the limits of their competence and they need support for what can be a difficult role. There is a considerable literature that shows interesting ways in which they can engage, for example in co-coaching (Alleyne and Jumaa, 2007), in developing critical action learning sets (Turner, Tee and Crompton, 2017) and peer supervision (Turner, Lucas and Whitaker, 2018). Unfortunately, many of these innovations still adopt the framework and terminology of ‘supervision’ when describing what they do.

Discussing the relationship between mentoring and coaching Hussey and Campbell-Meier (Hussey & Campbell-Meier, 2021) point out that ‘definitions matter’, Indeed they do, as do words. Words create environments, saying ‘I do’ in a particular environment creates lifelong obligations, alters your social status and your legal responsibilities. Coaches should not re-define words, it may have unfortunate consequences, shaping the interaction and inhibiting the active engagement of equals. This paper contends that the wrong terminology may cause valuable activities for coaches to be resisted, devalued and carried out sub-optimally. The language creates the wrong framework. It is not enough to say our sort of supervision is not really supervision, or that it is ‘super-vision’. The terminological inaccuracy distorts what happens (‘I am the supervisor, you are...’) and inhibits the possibilities for exploring other options.

If honesty and transparency are values of coaching, then they are lacking in the literature on coaching supervision. Those promoting an activity which is, as yet, not evidence based, and in which they have a professional and possibly a financial stake

References

Alleyne, J. & Jumaa, M.O. (2007). Building the capacity for evidence-based clinical nursing leadership: the role of executive co-coaching and group clinical supervision for quality patient services. *Journal of Nursing Management*, 15(2), 230–243. doi:10.1111/j.1365-2834.2007.00750.x

should declare that interest. That the journals, authors, publishers and ‘accrediting agencies’ do not expect it, reflects poorly on coaching and coaching psychology. A key feature of a profession is to separate personal interests from that of the public you serve and to be transparent when they may conflict.

Conclusion

The normative meaning of ‘supervision’ is clear, it should be for those who choose to redefine the word to justify that misuse, not for those critiquing it to justify the critique. We should ask why coaching has adopted an unhelpful formulation when other professions have not seen the need to. We a better language to describe how coaches can develop and support one another. If coaches believe in coaching and language they would not want supervision, nor wish to provide it. They would want to engage with other coaches in reflection and development developing a variety of models to test, ideally models that are congruent with the values of coaching.

Finally, we should set and demand high ethical standards, addressing conflicts of interest in the literature, and in the ‘professional bodies’. It is simply good coaching (and professional) practice for those writing about, or promoting the development of supervision, whether they are individuals, or organisations, to be transparent about their interests.

Author

Julius Weinberg

Correspondence

Julius Weinberg

julius@weinbergs.co.uk

Bachkirova, T. et al. (2020). Supervision in coaching: systematic literature review. *International Coaching Psychology Review*, 15(2), 31–53. doi:10.53841/bpsicpr.2020.15.2.31

Bachkirova, T., Jackson, P. & Clutterbuck, D. (2021). *Coaching and Mentoring Supervision: Theory and Practice*, 2e. UK: McGraw-Hill Education.

- Carroll, L. (Ed.) (2012). *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking Glass*. London: Penguin Classics.
- Carroll, M., Palmer, S. & Whybrow, A. (2008). Coaching psychology supervision. In S. Palmer & A. Whybrow *Handbook of Coaching Psychology: A guide for practitioners*. (p.465) Hove: Routledge. doi:10.4324/9781315820217-46
- Division of Coaching Psychology (n.d.). DoCP [Blog post]. British Psychological Society. Retrieved 18 February 2022 from <https://www.bps.org.uk/member-microsites/division-coaching-psychology>
- Dworkin, R. (2013). *Justice for Hedgehogs*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press.
- Engineering Council (n.d.). Statement of ethical principles [Blog post]. Engineering Council. Retrieved 24 January 2023 from <https://www.engc.org.uk/standards-guidance/guidance/statement-of-ethical-principles/>
- General Medical Council (2013). Good Medical Practice. Accessed: 14 January 2023. Available via: https://www.gmc-uk.org/-/media/documents/good-medical-practice-english-20200128_pdf-51527435.pdf
- General Medical Council (2021). *The reflective practitioner. Guidance for doctors and medical students*. Available at: https://www.gmc-uk.org/-/media/documents/dc11703-pol-w-the-reflective-practioner-guidance-20210112_pdf-78479611.pdf.
- Haan, E.D. (Ed.) (2016). *Being Supervised: A Guide for Supervisees*. (1st edn). London: Routledge.
- Hawkins, P., Turner, E. & Passmore, J. (2019). *The manifesto for supervision*.
- Health & Care Professions Council (2021). What is supervision? Retrieved 8 January 2023 from <https://www.hcpc-uk.org/standards/meeting-our-standards/supervision-leadership-and-culture/supervision/what-is-supervision/>
- Hill, A., Keane, A. & Gibran, K. (2022). Supervision in practice. In E. Parsloe, M. Leedham & D. Newell *Coaching and Mentoring: Practical Techniques for Developing Learning and Performance* (p.223). Kogan Page
- Hussey, L. & Campbell-Meier, J. (2021). Are you mentoring or coaching? Definitions matter. *Journal of Librarianship and Information Science*, 53(3), 510–521. doi:10.1177/0961000620966651
- Ives, Y. (2008). What is coaching? An exploration of conflicting paradigms. *International Journal of Evidence Based Coaching & Mentoring*, 6(2).
- Leonard, H.S. & Marquardt, M.J. (2010). The evidence for the effectiveness of action learning. *Action learning: Research and practice*, 7(2), 121–136.
- Moyes, B. (2009). Literature review of coaching supervision. *International Coaching Psychology Review*, 4(2), 162–173. doi:10.53841/bpsicpr.2009.4.2.162
- Orwell, G. (2021). *Politics and the English Language and Other Essays*. epubli.
- Parker-Ryan, S. (2012). Ordinary Language Philosophy. In J.F.B. Dowden (Eds.) *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.
- Passmore, J. (2011) *Supervision in coaching: Supervision, ethics and continuous professional development*. Kogan Page Publishers.
- Passmore, J. & McGoldrick, S. (2009). Super-vision, extra-vision or blind faith? A grounded theory study of the efficacy of coaching supervision. *International Coaching Psychology Review*, 4(2), 143–159. doi:10.53841/bpsicpr.2009.4.2.145
- Stelter, R. (2017) Working with values in coaching. In *The SAGE handbook of coaching* (pp.331–344). ‘supervision, n.’ (n.d.). OED Online. Oxford University Press. Retrieved 18 November 2022 from <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/194558>
- Supervisor Accreditation (n.d.). APECS. Retrieved 14 January 2023 from <https://www.apecs.org/supervisor-accreditation>
- International Society for Coaching Psychology (n.d.). Supervisor Accreditation. Retrieved 24 August 2022 from <https://www.isfcp.info/accreditation/supervisor-accreditation/>
- Tkach, J.T. & DiGirolamo, J.A. (2020). The state and future of coaching supervision. In J. Passmore & D. Tee (Eds.) *Coaching Researched: A Coaching Psychology Reader* (pp.23–41). Wiley.
- Turner, A., Tee, D. & Crompton, S. (2017). Critical action learning: a method or strategy for peer supervision of coaching practice. *Action Learning: Research and Practice*, 14(1), 53–61. doi:10.1080/14767333.2017.1282640
- Turner, T., Lucas, M. & Whitaker, C. (2018). *Peer supervision in coaching and mentoring: A versatile guide for reflective practice*. Routledge.
- Van Roy, K., Vanheule, S. & Inslegers, R. (2015). ‘Research on Balint groups: A literature review. *Patient Education and Counseling*, 98(6), 685–694. doi:10.1016/j.pec.2015.01.014.
- Weinberg, J. (2022). Empathetic or sympathetic: What do I want my coach to be? *The Coaching Psychologist*, 18(1), 29–34. doi:10.53841/bpstcp.2022.18.1.30