

Supervision for coaches?

The question about the need for supervision for coaches has become a "hot potato" (Slater, 2008) in the world of coaching. It is part of the worldwide debate whether coaching should be a profession or remain a business industry as is? Should coaching professionalize? There is no clear cut answer to this question yet. Those who advocate the professionalizing of the coaching industry mostly advocate for supervision as one of the hallmarks of a profession. Interestingly enough there are other professions that do not have supervision. Many coaches though stress the wonderful benefits of supervision for the industry and also on a personal level for coaches themselves. But there is no unanimity about it amongst coaches.

Interesting statistics about supervision

It is said that less than 50% of coaches worldwide partake in supervision. Tina Slater (Slater, 2008) revealed in her research about the current thinking on coaching supervision that the professional background of many coaches is not that of psychotherapy where supervision originated. Coaches come from varied professional backgrounds such as consultancy (40.8%), management (30.8%), executives (30.2%), teaching (15.7%) and sales (13.8%). In her research 65% of coaches felt that supervision should not be made mandatory and 65% felt that coaching should not follow in the footsteps of psychotherapy because coaching is not a therapy and neither is supervision. In the debate about supervision for coaches there is therefore the feeling that we should opt for a different wording than "supervision". Perhaps we should call it something along the line of "coaching for coaches" or "mentoring for coaches". Only 25% of coaches who have experienced supervision directly contribute the quality of their coaching relationships to supervision.

What would coaches want from supervision?

This negative view of supervision is surprising. Can it perhaps be contributed to a perception that supervision does not necessarily fit the coaches' needs for feedback and development? If supervision is to become acceptable in the industry of coaching we will have to ask and listen to what coaches want, to their needs and requirements. To the best of my knowledge there is no research on this topic. However the world of therapy has a long tradition of supervision and even there research is scarce about what supervisees want. Frank Thomas quoting the research of Heath and Tharp in this regard (Miller, 1996) states that supervisees in the field of psychotherapy say the following:

- 🍷 *"We want relationships based on mutual respect."*
- 🍷 *"You don't have to be a guru."* What is wanted is a setting of collegiality rather than a relationship of hierarchy. Wheeler (Nelson, 2007) says that supervisees wanted supervisors to set their expertise to the side and rather listen and be flexible. Supervisees don't want to become clones of the supervisor.
- 🍷 *Supervise us or evaluate us; not both."* This could relate to the fact that in the research of Slater (Slater, 2008) 46% of the respondents felt that the coaching industry should not

be regulated. I suspect that much of the resistance towards supervision and especially mandatory supervision can be contributed to the fear of evaluation for the sake of regulation. Supervisees want to feel safe in supervision. Supervisors should not operate as “gatekeepers” (Thomas as quoted by Wheeler, Nelson, 2007). Supervision as evaluation has the serious danger that mistakes will simply be swept under the rug and disappear from the discussion and will leave us with a sanitized view of the supervisee’s practice (Nelson, 2007).

- *“Assume that we are competent. We are hard enough on ourselves already.”* De Shazer (as quoted by Wheeler, Nelson, 2007) therefore avoided asking supervisees to look at themselves in supervision. In his view supervision should rather be about practice rather than the practitioner.
- *“Tell us what we’re doing right. Affirm us. Empower us.”* Supervisees want to believe in themselves and develop their own style and skills (Nelson, 2007).
- *“Listen to us. Make supervision a human experience.”* Wheeler (Nelson, 2007) states that supervisees want supervisors to create a participatory experience and show interest in their professional growth.

What should supervision be?

If we attach value to what supervisees want I propose that we see supervision as a “conversation during which supervisor and supervisee engage in a dialogue that mutually shapes the meaning of the experience” (Rudes, 1997). In this endeavor the supervisor is a member of the team who co-creates a dialogue that is collaborative, circular and nonhierarchical (Rudes, 1997). The aims of supervision could be the following:

- It should be a collaborative dialogue between supervisor and supervisee which is informed by the supervisee’s experience and expectations rather than by what the “expert” supervisor understands of what will be helpful (Rudes, 1997).
- Supervision should enhance the supervisee’s development whether or not the supervisor approves of the way the supervisee does coaching (Thomas, 2000). The supervision dialogue should lead to a fit with the culture of the supervisee (Rudes, 1997).
- Supervisors should help supervisees to clarify their own developing ideas and learn what they do which is affirmative. They should lead supervisees to the threshold of their minds (Nelson, 2007)
- Believing supervisees to be competent supervision should nurture and encourage the useful elements of the supervisees’ practice enhancing their understanding of their own practice (Nelson, 2007).
- Supervision should be about noticing and amplifying useful change that makes a difference to the supervisee as they seldom see it for themselves (Miller, 1996).
- The aim should be to coax ability and knowledge from the supervisee (Nelson, 2007). Supervisors should facilitate concrete images of success in the practice of supervisees and thereby elicit the strengths, skills, abilities and resources of supervisees to further their development and best practices (Presbury, 1999).

Solution-Focused Practices

In my humble opinion Solution-Focused Practices could contribute to make supervision more acceptable and fruitful as a human experience that contributes to meaningful development and growth for the practices of coaches. This certainly was my own experience of supervision the past twelve months. What do Solution-Focused Practices offer to supervision?

As an approach to supervision Solution-Focused Practices would stress the following:

- *The supervisee is the expert about his/her own life and practice.* Contrary to the belief that client perceptions get in the way of professional practice and creates resistance we rely in Solution-Focused Practices on the client's frame of reference (De Jong, 2008). We want to develop well formed goals within the client's frame of reference and investigate those instances where these goals were realized in the past as benchmarks that can create solutions for the future. In this way we want to create a fit with what is helpful to the supervisee (Nelson, 2007). The supervisor can never be the expert on the supervisee's situation and supervision constructs a participatory experience through consensus and teamwork (Miller, 1996). The autonomy of the supervisee is held in high regard and the aim is the development of the supervisee (Thomas, 2000).
- *Supervisors have to adopt the posture of "not knowing."* If we want to put the supervisee in the position as expert, we have to set aside our own frame of reference as much as possible. We are always "being informed" by the supervisee (De Jong, 2008). The supervisor has expertise in the process of solution building but the supervisee is the expert of their own life and practice. The supervisee is thus not confronted with a "guru" and the relationship is cooperative and respectful (Miller, 1996) which makes for the supervisee feeling safe. But what if the supervisee is looking for advice? As a last resort the supervisor can respond in a way we call "hedging" (Rudes, 1997). Hedging is an answer to the question beginning with tentative words like: "I think that probably" In this way the supervisor lets the supervisee know that he/she does not have all the correct answers but offers a way of viewing the "reality" posed by the question. This leaves the supervisee with a choice to except the answer or to reject it as it fits the framework of the supervisee. A better way would be to investigate where this question could have been a question in the past of the supervisee but did not arise as a question. Who did what then with whom differently? This could give clues to the supervisee to answer his/her own question. The request could also be handled by asking the supervisee what difference a answer would make to his/her life and practice thereby eliciting the goals of the supervisee with the question. The supervisor can then help the supervisee develop his/her own answers.
- *Supervision should build on the strengths and successes of supervisees.* Solution-Focused Practices does not focus on deficits but on the supervisee's strengths. It works from the assumption that the supervisee is competent and has resources that the supervisor can draw upon to help the supervisee develop his/her own best practices (Thomas, 1998). In the supervision relationship many supervisees tend to be problem focused and can usually describe their problems in great detail. Our experience is that problem descriptions are not a useful resource for building solutions (De Jong, 2008). It is not as if we ignore the

problem. Without a problem there is no need for supervision. In Solution-Focused Practices we acknowledge the problem but want to move to a solution. This is best accomplished by looking for exceptions. Exceptions are “whatever is happening when the complaint is not” (De Shazer, 1988). Exceptions can also be a matter of lesser degree (De Jong, 2008). No problem is at all times the same (Berg, 2005) because the context in which it occurs differs from situation to situation. Things are forever changing and there are always exceptions that can be utilized (De Shazer, 2007). The question is therefore when was the problem less of a problem or even absent and who did what, when and where. Exploring these exceptions helps the supervisee to become aware of strengths and past successes and changes his/her self perception. It also contains possibilities to a solution for the present problem. What worked in the past might work more often than not in the present. This creates hope and motivation. The supervisor’s task is then to amplify these exceptions as significant to the strengths and successes of the supervisee and to nudge him/her to do more of what is already working (Berg, 2005) as building blocks of change (Thomas, 1998).

- *Supervision should affirm and offer compliments to the supervisee.* Compliments in Solution-Focused Practices identify and highlight resources and progress (Jackson, 2007). It is positive feedback on the supervisee’s capabilities, skills and attitudes which the supervisor directly observed. As a technique it highlights how, where and when the supervisee was effective. It also shows that the supervisor listens to and cares for the supervisee. Giving compliments is like cheerleading. It motivates to keep using known strengths and doing what works and helps supervisees to belief in a future success. Coert Visser has developed a ABC for effective complimenting as a solutions building technique (Visser, 2009). A stands for *accuracy*. Compliments must be accurate referring to something that really happened, that the supervisee did and which is worthwhile complimenting. B stands for *believable*. Compliments must not be an exaggeration but a realistic description of what happened. C stand for *constructive*. The compliment should be linked to what the supervisee want to do and stimulates growth and development. Visser also stresses that process compliments are more effective than trait compliments (Visser, 2009). Trait compliments are about some inner quality of character whereas process compliments are about what the supervisee has done effectively, a good strategy or stance taken.
- *Supervision should help the supervisee develop his/her own best practice irrespective of the coaching culture of the supervisor.* This is the beauty of Solution-Focused Practices that it is “not a method or a specific technique but rather a general attitude or basic point of view” as Matthias Varga von Kibed puts it (Lueger, 2006). It is not so much a coaching model as an approach to coaching. It is a “theory of no theory” (Berg, 2005). In Solution-Focused Practices we believe there is not only one “right” way to look at things since different views may fit the same set of facts just as well (Jackson, 2007). The Solution-Focused approach wants to help supervisees discover and regain trust in their own capabilities and to act accordingly based on their own values and interests. It wants to further self-discovery and the disclosure of opportunities (Lueger, 2006). As an approach that respect people and their views, that is positive, future and result orientated it fits “seamlessly” (Cauffman, 2007) most if not all management and coaching models.

Conclusion

In the debate about supervision for coaches it seems to me that we will have to listen more carefully to what supervisees want of supervision. It may be necessary to do research amongst coaches to determine the exact needs and requirements that coaches have for supervision. If we want coaches to engage in supervision we will have to dispel their fears and will have to show that supervision can contribute to the development of their coaching relationships. We will have to ensure that supervision is structured around a more facilitative rather than regulatory dialogue that is context-sensitive and that centers on cooperation in developing the strengths and best practices of supervisees. In my humble opinion the role of Solution-Focused Practices in attaining this should be considered.

Stanus Cloete

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