



Revisiting The Role Of Coaching Supervision

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Abstract. This article address some concerns about the use of professional supervision in coaching. The ambition of coaching communities to become a "proper" profession in the light of current realities is being challenged. The author suggests a new role for coaching supervision that may lead the way even for other more established professions.

Keywords: coach; coaching; coaching supervision; regulating profession; ethics; coaching community.

The idea of coaching supervision still divides coaching communities into those who are keen and practicing and those who are not or less so. In this article I would first like to address some concerns of the unconverted that are quite legitimate. Then I will question the ambition of coaching communities to become a "proper" profession in the light of current realities. And finally I will suggest a new role for coaching supervision that I hope may lead the way even for other more established professions.

Addressing concerns

One of the first arguments of those who are against supervision is the lack of evidence that it actually improves the quality of coaching. There are usually two angles on the issue of evidence typically mentioned by two different groups of coaches. Those from a business background are inclined to look for the "bottom line": are there hard data that suggest substantial benefits from introducing supervision? In contrast, practitioners with roots in psychology and counselling may be more inclined to look first at the complexity of the coaching relationship: what could go wrong in coaching and can supervision prevent potential problems?

Looking at the first perspective, I have to agree that considering coaching supervision as a business case, not much evidence exists as yet to insist on its value. However, to be fair: it is incredibly difficult to design research that would allow exploring a direct link between the process or even the fact of supervision and the effect of this on the practice of the coach. It is even more difficult to demonstrate its impact on the work of the client. At the same time, if we dismiss the value of supervision on this basis, the introduction of many managerial practices and even education as a whole could also be questioned (Bachkirova et al., 2011).

Looking at this issue from the second angle brings to the fore the complexity of coaching with its many functions and purposes in different contexts. In fact, in comparison to counselling this complexity is much higher and on this basis I have argued elsewhere that supervision is more important for

coaches than for counsellors (Bachkirova, 2008). For example, coaches usually have more than one client in their engagements making the coaching relationship more complex in the light of various stakeholders' needs. Supervision may be helpful in untangling these. Coaches are less equipped than counsellors to identify mental health issues impinging on the boundaries of coaching, so they would benefit from another pair of eyes to check their concerns. Coaches may also need help in identifying the effect of their personal processes on their work because they are not required, prior to coaching others, to undertake compulsory counselling or other personal development work themselves, as are counsellors. The value of coaching supervision in relation to this complexity is difficult to quantify, but the emerging research shows that coaches can see many benefits as a result of being supervised.

Another concern is also related to our sister field of counselling. Coaches were suspicious of the idea of supervision in coaching because it meant following in the footsteps of the professions that they wanted to be different from. Even if it is important to have supervision in coaching, maybe it should be different from supervision in counselling? It makes sense to re-think some features and practices, including the need for supervision being mandatory.

Some coaches are worried that supervision could lead to cloning of coaching styles, that it would stultify the diversity and creativity that comes from the multidisciplinary origin of coaching. In the light of this the actual term "supervision" causes unfortunate associations in the minds of some coaches. The "cloning" concern is quite serious but hopefully preventable with good education of coaching supervisors. The issue of 'supervision' as a term, however, is less important as long as we agree what we mean by it.

Becoming a profession?

The topic of professionalization of coaching is complex and sensitive because becoming a profession is an ambition that is close to the hearts of many coaches (Lane et al., 2010). However, we have to admit that far from being a publicly recognised profession we are not yet a self-regulated one. Although much work in this direction is done by many professional bodies, the actual fact of such a variety of them suggests that so far we are probably a market-regulated practice. But is it that problematic? We live in fast changing times in which many traditional concepts about professions are also changing. The complex and emerging nature of challenges that individuals and organisations face force many professions to question what used to be the norm: the boundaries between them, how to identify standards of work, levels of expertise and even what professional practice is in principle. Maybe in a very coaching way this could be seen as an opportunity? We may not need to follow established practices in other professions. Some of these worked before but are questioned now; some were never perfect but were kept out of inertia. Some professions and professional bodies became powerful empires which care about their own existence and promotion of their membership more than about those who use their services. If we agree that the overarching value of professionalization is continuous improvement of the quality of our work, what are the ways of achieving this? Education and training of practitioners are the first steps in this process. Membership of professional bodies is important as members adhere to voluntary codes of ethics, use opportunities for CPD and networking. Accreditation was designed as another method of ensuring quality, but it is far from perfect in practice and in principle, because it is static, past-oriented and inevitably oversimplifies the complexity of coaching practice. Client organizations are also utterly confused with many different kinds of accreditation of coaches.

Another way to improve the quality of our work

Thinking about this quality it is worth revisiting the uniqueness of coaching as a practice. In addition to its multidisciplinary origin, coaching is highly diverse in terms of application, including a fast growing type of "coaching style work" within many other professional fields. By its nature coaching is designed to respond to the complex and emerging challenges of our clients. If we are helping others to improve in such a creative, individualised and holistic way, why should the quality of our own work rely on crude and static accreditation systems? I suggest that the dynamic and responsive system of professional supervision is a much better way to support it. Such supervision is not for catching wrongdoing. I am sure that most coaches care deeply about their clients and the quality of their work. They know that quality and self-improvement depend on constructive feedback. However, for coaches access to feedback is naturally limited, unsystematic and infrequent. Although we collect regular feedback from our clients it is not the same as from those who can look at our work from an informed position of a specialist in this area. Therefore I am suggesting a status of supervision not from an expert stance and not only for beginners in coaching. I would like to see the role of supervision as our professional conscience in practice. It would be a regular and multilevel exploration of our work that is chosen by us not out of fear or for self-promotion, but as a personal commitment to self-improvement. This kind of supervision is more than CPD. It involves not only learning new things, but also questioning what we do now: an element of professional accountability. This kind of supervision is also more than a one-off accreditation, because it is live, continuous and truly interactive.

Some implications

This supervision should not be mandatory. It is our professional conscience that should be the drive for regular reflection and questioning of our work. Indeed I hope and believe that discretionary supervision is likely to work better than if it were mandatory. *Many forms of supervision.* Supervisory provision for this purpose can be as varied and creative as coaching. It has to answer the need of the coach at his/her particular professional stage. For example, the coach may have at the same time one professionally trained supervisor, a buddy coach who is only learning supervision skills, join the supervision group and occasionally use some focused supervision sessions with a particular specialist. Each arrangement provides a different perspective and a different combination of support and challenge. *The cost of supervision.* This kind of supervision should be affordable. *Role of professional bodies.* Professional bodies can put more effort into organising various forms of coaching supervision instead of expensive and time-consuming accreditation systems.

Role of the supervisor. For this type of supervision supervisors are not priests, who help you in letting go of your professional sins. They are not famous coaches, association with whom may raise your profile. They are respectful companions in your professional commitment to quality and those who you gave a licence to challenge you. *Knowledge of the supervisor.* I believe that supervisors for this role need knowledge and skills over and above those of a coach. Typical functions of supervision are seen so far as qualitative, developmental and resourcing for fellow coaches (Hawkins & Smith, 2006). Not all coaches are equipped to fulfil all three because of the variety of coaching approaches and styles. One more function also should be added according to the vision of supervision described here: supervisors are looking after the health of the profession as a whole. To serve these functions we need more research and wider knowledge base of coaching supervision. These are gradually developing through specialized courses for supervisors, emerging literature and professional debates.

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