

How executive coaches see value arising from peer group supervision

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Abstract

This article, based upon a grounded theory study of coaches undertaking peer group supervision (PGS), examines how PGS might be structured by examining the modus operandi and modus vivendi of one Executive Coaching Peer Group. The paper argues that any group of coaches may construct a supervisory framework for themselves and this can be attractive from a cost and availability point of view, however, there are also some innate limitations of PGS which need to be considered at the design and implementation stages of such a framework.

Key words: coaching supervision, executive coaching, peer group supervision.

Introduction

The adoption of supervision by coaches and mentors has increased significantly over the past 10 years according to Hawkins and Turner (2016) and there is a significant body of published research about supervision practice, process and modes, (Bachkirova, Jackson & Clutterbuck, 2011; Clutterbuck, Whitaker & Lucas, 2016). However, there is an under-representation of the voice of the coach undertaking supervision and how value arises from this commitment. Specifically, there is limited published research as to how PGS operates from the point of view of peer group participants.

Supervision has many functions: Kaduhsin (1992) refers to three when describing social work supervision – managerial, educative and supportive functions. This parallels the three functions described by Hawkins and Smith (2006) – developmental, resourcing and qualitative. Hawkins (2014) also states that supervision is a key part of “continuous professional development.” Bachkirova (2011) further suggests that supervision provides an opportunity for the coach to develop “self”. My research seeks to discover whether the coaches in this study refer to self and or professional development when describing the benefits that they gain from PGS.

The voice of the coach in supervision does appear in a limited amount of published literature, (Butwell, 2006; McGivern, 2009) and these studies point to “what might work better.” Passmore and McGoldrick (2009) reflect, from the perspective of the supervisee, how there might be an improved process for supervision. Both Butwell (2006) and McGivern (2009) influenced my own consideration of what might be the more important aspects of what makes PGS work well, or not so well. I sought to explore whether this was to do with good processes, shared behaviours and values, or other aspects.

My specific interest in how coaches see the value of supervision in PGS arose because I am a participant in PGS and I am aware of the multiple lenses that this model offers to me. These lenses include, for example, that of the supervisor, the supervisee and the observer. I was interested to know if it is the case that each lens gives rise to different perspectives and, if so, which of them support what Bachkirova, Stevens and Willis (2005, pp.16-17) describe as “the continuing development of the coach and effectiveness of his/her coaching practice through interactive reflection, interpretative evaluation and sharing of expertise.” I was also keen to understand more fully how PGS as a supervisory model can support the broader development of the coach, what Passmore and McGoldrick (2009, p.158) describe as “an increased ethical capacity and confidence to persist and persevere and

deliver coaching of a superior quality.” I also wished to understand how and in what way a peer group might provide the right environment for improved coaching practice.

Finally, I also observe the potential for there to be some sort of social value for coaches to be joined together in a peer group, perhaps part of what Kadushin (1992) describes as the “supportive” function of supervision and what Pinder (2011, p.196-204) refers to as “the benefit of mutual support and shared experience.” It occurred to me that whilst many forms and modes of supervision are generally available, and moreover there are many supervisory models to choose from (Gray & Jackson, 2011; Hawkins & Schwenk 2011; Clutterbuck 2011; Turner, 2011) there is little written about PGS and how groups organise and structure their supervisory work.

It is also clear from published literature that there are some potential difficulties concerning the quality of the supervision in peer groupings. For example, Clutterbuck et al (2016) warn of the possibility of “group think”, and (Bachkirova & Jackson 2011 pp. 230-238) caution about the risk of “the absence of a qualified supervisor” within a peer group. I was therefore interested to examine how and in what circumstances the PGS model is appropriate in theory and in practice.

Clutterbuck et al (2016) recently reported on the continued development of PGS models which can include qualified supervisor facilitation of co-facilitation - ‘static’ groups that meet regularly over time, and also ‘chain’ supervision groups who re-order the supervisor and supervisee roles over a period on a rolling basis. I was therefore interested to understand what coaches say about what they gain from PGS and how this learning might support the future development of such models.

Using findings from a grounded theory study, this paper examines how 6 Executive Coaches (Figure 1, below) who work in a commercial coaching and mentoring practice organise and experience PGS. This examination covers both the supervisory framework used by the group – the modus operandi - and the social and behavioural conventions that the group have devised – the modus vivendi. The paper identifies how this peer group see value arising from this model of supervision and points out some of the potential limitations of PGS in practice.

Methodology

This grounded theory research is conducted through the constructivist lens of Charmaz (2008) and the findings of the research are grounded in the views of the respondents. The research was conducted within the interpretivist paradigm and reflects my own social constructivist view of the world. By adopting the Charmaz (2014) approach to grounded theory I could be at the heart of the research as both method and theory emerged and my work iterated and matured.

NAME	COACHING EXPERIENCE	GENDER	AGE RANGE	QUALIFICATIONS
JILL	2 years	F	50-55	Graduate
HARRY	12 years	M	60-65	Coaching Diploma
JOHN	10 years	M	50-55	MBA
JAN	4 years	F	50-55	Graduate
DAVID	12 years	M	50-55	Coaching Cert(s)
KEN	8 years	M	50-55	Graduate

Figure 1. The respondents taking part in the research study

Whilst the main thrust of the research was to discover how value arises from PGS, rather than how PGS is organised, what became clear was that the source of value of supervision was inextricably connected to its form and its protocols, and thus the ways in which it is organised, even though these protocols were never formalised or documented by this group. Six executive coaches took part in the

research and as Figure 1 illustrates the group were experienced former executives with a spread of coaching experience.

Data collected comprised 6 x 90-minute audio recorded interviews, the main research question being “How would you describe the value of Peer Group Supervision?” My qualitative question sets developed over four cycles in response to the way in which the enquiry evolved with the executive coaches. I transcribed the audio recorded data to typed hard copy and began using colour marker pens to identify key words, phrases and themes.

Then, by an iterative process of memoing and coding, (Charmaz, 2014) and periods of reflection during that process, six categories or themes emerged which I reduced to four as my data analysis achieved saturation (Charmaz, 2014). These categories are shown in Figure 2, below, as connected pyramids of reflection. The red line in Figure 2 indicates the flow of reflection during supervision and the blue line the reflective feedback loop as one part of post- supervision activity

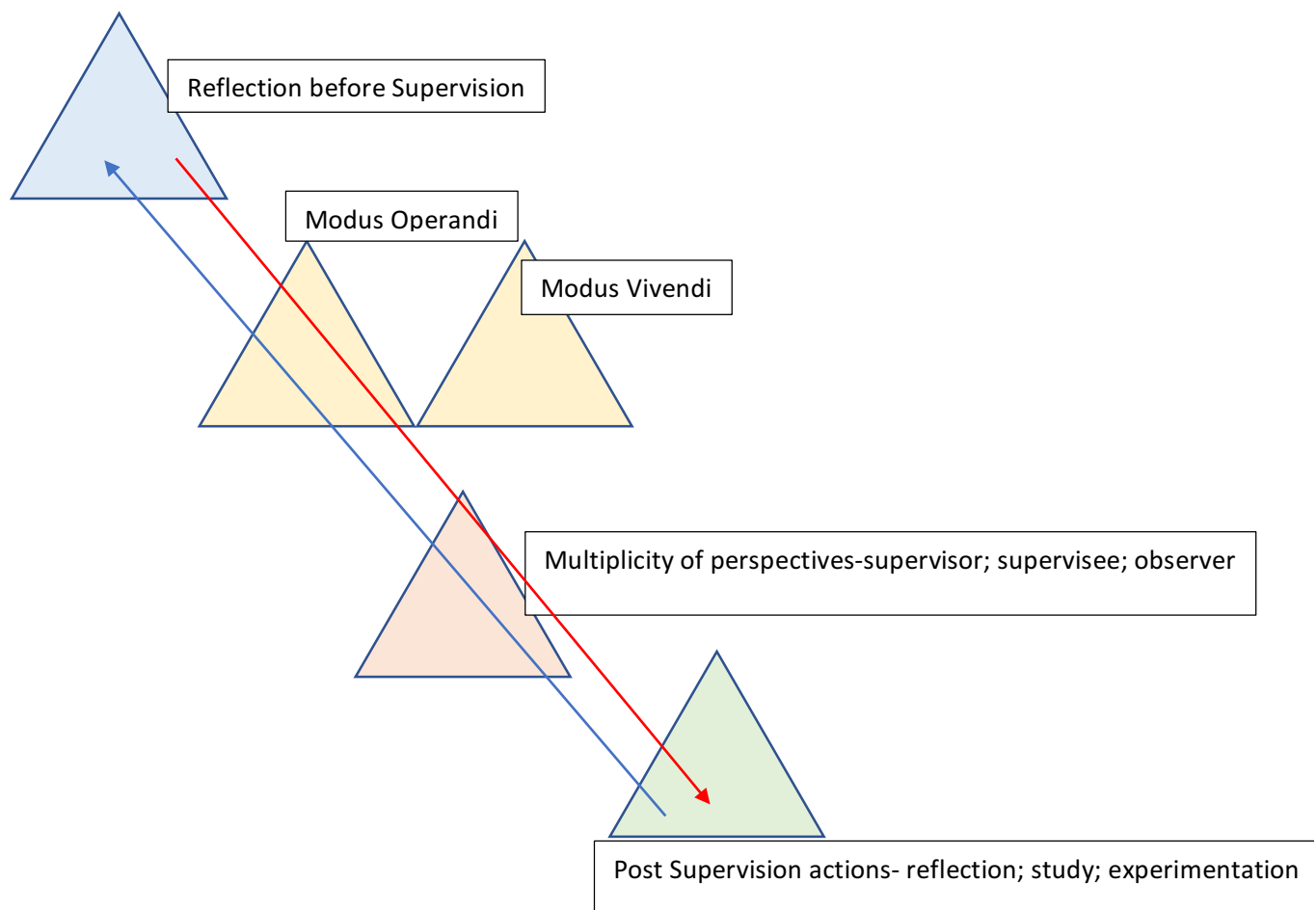


Figure 2. The link between the reflective nature of PGS and its modus operandi and vivendi .

One of the most important categories that emerged at an early stage in the research relates to the way in which the peer group organised itself, the unwritten conventions or protocols including both the expected behaviours and contributions; I labelled these as comprising “modus operandi” and “modus vivendi.” In other words, how this group determined how to live and work with one another, individually and collectively, and, as Figure 2 illustrates, these modes overlap and are connected.

Findings

The findings include some of the verbatim observations of the executive coaches who took part in the research which illustrates how they explain the value arising from their experience of PGS. I describe in more detail how the *modus operandi* and *modus vivendi* work together to create the framework for their PGS model and how, consequently, a stream of reflective learning and development is made possible for the executive coaches concerned. Finally, I set out the potential limitations of the PGS model.

Modus operandi

The coaches in my research group had not committed any supervisory contract to paper, but instead had formed a broad consensus of how the PGS sessions were structured. This contrasts with the observation of Clutterbuck et al (2016, p23) who state that a common feature of Group Supervision is “a contractual agreement suggested by the group supervisor and then amended/tailored by the group before they sign up.”

The unwritten but commonly accepted operating ground rules for the coaches in this PGS model are:

- Quiet and private space free from interruptions
- Check-in before supervision to achieve “presence”
- Roles to be volunteered by individuals – free choice to be supervisor or supervisee
- Client and customer confidentiality – anonymity of subjects accepted
- Focus always on the coach and not on the client
- Focus on the problem and not the solution
- Unconditional positive regard for supervisee

Whilst there are a wide range of available models of supervision from the “seven eyed model” (Hawkins & Schwenk, 2011), the “seven conversations” (Clutterbuck, 2011) and the “three worlds, four territories” model (Turner, 2011), very little is written about the minutes leading up to the “act of supervision”, the exception being perhaps Clutterbuck (2011, p.56) who does refer to “the coach’s reflection before dialogue” in his “seven conversations” model.

This research group places great emphasis on the need for quiet preparation, usually a 15-minute period of Tai Chi exercise together. Then follows a check-in period of about 5 minutes before the supervision session itself begins, during which each participant provides a brief update about how they are feeling and what is on their mind before supervisory dialogue commences.

Brown and Ryan (2003. p.822) claim that “dispositional and state mindfulness predict self-regulated behaviour and positive emotional states”. As one of the respondents, Jan, put it “*It is hard to go into supervision without doing some kind of check-in. We need to know what is on people’s minds and for people to know what’s on my mind.*”

The next process is for there to be space for any individual to volunteer whether they have any “gift” of a coaching issue that they would like their peers to help them with. Once a volunteer proposes an issue the protocols are:

- The supervisee has sufficient time to explain the issue, usually 10-15 minutes
- Each peer, in rotation, is then allowed to ask a question, but for clarification only
- The tendency is then for one of the peer group to “lead” as supervisor but this is not a matter that is ever pre-agreed or contracted. It simply happens.
- The other members of the peer group, in “listening mode” are encouraged by practice and experience not only to listen but also to observe the vocabulary and behaviour of supervisee – notably NOT the supervisor
- The observers are then invited by the lead supervisor to ask further clarification questions or to provide observation or comparison inputs, for example: “this reminds me of an experience I had,

and this is how it affected me” or, “I noticed you were very animated as you spoke”. The purpose of such inputs is to encourage the supervisee to open up and to say more.

Modus vivendi

The group also developed a behavioural and values framework and I have termed this the “modus vivendi” comprising the following:

- A safe space, which was directly linked to the group’s desire for a climate of openness and trust
- Emotional engagement and a preparedness to expose feelings without being judged
- Generosity of support (especially as between experienced and inexperienced coaches)
- Developmental space – an acceptance that for there to be growth in coaching capability through supervision there needs to be an element of challenge
- Trust
- Avoidance of “post mortems” or side-bar discussions after supervision
- Social engagement – the need to feel connected to other professionals given the sometimes lonely nature of a coach’s experience.

Two aspects are worthy of note, the developmental nature or purpose of these peer group supervisory meetings and the social dimension of the occasion. The coaches are unanimously of the view that PGS is primarily about self-development and that the developmental process is two-way; this aligns with the views of Gray and Jackson (2011, p.20) that “Teaching (or more accurately learning) is at the heart of the relationship for the supervisee but also for the supervisor.”

The group also see development as an emotional experience, as Carroll (2009, p.217) describes it, “The supervisee does the work, brings the agenda, reflects, learns, and goes back to his or her work supported, energised and changed”. Jan explains, “*PGS is very much about reflecting and thinking about how to get better and to do that you have to be emotionally engaged.*”

The social engagement afforded by the monthly PGS meetings for this group is highly valued, as David put it, “*There is definitely a social dimension...a mutually supportive environment is hugely positive, if you are not doing that it can feel quite lonely.*” There is also evidence that social engagement and learning and development are inextricably linked, Wenger (1999) suggests that learning is fundamentally experiential and fundamentally social.”

How the PGS model creates value for coaches

In summary, value arises for the coaches in this study as follows:

- The need for pre-supervision preparation and reflection
- Their model fosters a climate of mutual trust, safety and confidentiality
- Learning is amplified by listening to the experience of others
- Post supervisory reflection is rich and may have multi-perspectives
- Post supervisory action includes experimentation and study and more reflection
- Continuous PGS meetings (monthly in this case) provide an opportunity for a cycle of learning and development
- The multi-lenses available to coaches as they are supervisor, supervisee or observer gives rise to multiple layers of reflection and perspective

The multiple lenses and the multiple inputs from the peer group work in combination:

What is so different about PGS is, that although my own supervisor knows me well, the peer group open up different reactions and perspectives so that I get multiple perspectives as opposed to my own supervisor, who in the nicest possible way, is more predictable (David).

This peer group is strongly focused on segregating what they term “client issues” from “coach issues” with a clear preference to focus on the latter. Hawkins and Schwenk (2011, p.30) refer to the importance of “getting the client in the room”, however the modus operandi of this peer group creates a more specific, arguably narrower, consideration - that of coach’s *relationship* with the client. This is

what Turner (2011, p.41) terms the ‘coaching world’ in the ‘three worlds, four territories’ model of supervision; this relates to the importance of the coach and the coachee relationship in their coaching session and what Hawkins and Schwenk (2011, p31-33) refer to as mode 3, the relationship between the coach and coachee, and mode 4, the coach’s awareness, in their ‘seven eyed’ model.

Thus, whilst consideration of the coach-coachee relationship is very much encouraged in the model of PGS in this study, the client issues or dilemmas are not:

Things that do not help are unwarranted suggestions or helpful hints because of a gruesome fascination with the details of the client side rather than the coach’s and I am sometimes frustrated by the fascination people sometimes show in client matters. (Harry)

This group were representative of what Clutterbuck and Megginson, (2011) term “systems eclectic coaches” with a broad range of knowledge, skills and styles or modes of coaching. A clear unifying characteristic of the group is the desire they share to learn and experiment and this in turn appears to flow directly from reflection both during and following supervision:

PGS is part of my experience of reflecting with others around. Is there a clear direction to my development? No...Am I learning to practice differently- absolutely. Maybe it is simply enough to pick up tools and learning from supervision – who knows what might be useful in a particular context. (Ken)

Modus operandi and vivendi is part of a system of reflection

The connection between how this group organise their supervision and how they use it for self-development and learning emerges as what I describe as a ‘stream of reflexivity’ as illustrated in Figure 2 above. The cycle of reflection, learning, experimenting and developing is connected and is a model of double loop learning (Argyris, 2005) which benefits both the individual coach and the peer group. The value of this reflective cycle is also identified by Grant (2012) as one of the major benefits derived by coaches receiving supervision.

This flow of reflection is similar in most respects to what Clutterbuck (2011, p 54) terms the “seven conversations in supervision”. One of the unique features of group supervision involving peers is the multiple lens, multiple perspective nature of the experience, which generates multiple “feeds” to the reflective practices of the coaches and provides many opportunities for learning and development.

It seems that the levelling of relationships between respected and trusted peers (because of the agreed modus operandi and vivendi) creates a climate of trust, a motivation to help others, and an encouragement to learn and develop in a group free of hierarchy, a group of equals. As John puts it “*the personal value is to explore an issue with equals knowing that I am in a safe environment.*”

Potential limitations of peer group supervision model

The peer group in this study have, perhaps by trial and error or instinct - this is not clear from the data- established a modus operandi that includes “role rotation” so that there is a sharing of roles and responsibilities, which it appears facilitates rather than impedes learning. Pinder (2011, p197) points out “peer supervision has the advantage of there being parity between the participants.”

Whilst there are many claims that supervision is of clear benefit to coaches (Butwell, 2006; McGivern, 2009; Armstrong & Geddes, 2009), Clutterbuck and others (2016, p.24) set out the limitations of group supervision which include “group dynamics” and which if not handled well can impede learning.” It is further suggested that a stable group “can become too familiar, routinized in how they work and at its worst become collusive or trapped in ‘group think’.” (Clutterbuck & others, 2016, p.31).

It appears that the dynamics of this peer group, with their eclectic mix of experience and practice, help to mitigate “group think”. This is similar to Pinder (2011, p.197) who observes: “A coach at the latter stages of development as a coach/supervisor will require less leadership from their supervisor or colleagues.”

The limitations or areas for improvement in the peer group supervision model studied in this research are as follows:

- The absence of a qualified supervisor amongst the coaches
- The lack of a summary post supervision of what had been experienced by the group at that meeting
- The issue of “too much to see” (Bachkirova & Jackson, 2011, p234) If it is accepted that one of the main functions of supervision is ‘helping the coach see more than they currently see’ (Bachkirova, 2008, p.17) this becomes more complex when working with group dynamics.
- The lack of continuity to enable a coach to revisit an issue since group attendance might vary from month to month
- The avoidance of discussion about coaching tools or techniques could be unhelpful for novice coaches
- Post supervisory experimentation by coaches was not explored or shared – what I term “learning leakage.”

Bachkirova and Jackson (2011, p.230) strike a note of caution in their consideration of PGS, “the apparent simplicity of the peer-supervision mode may obscure the inherent challenges and the additional skills that are needed to practise it.”

We need to revisit our model of supervision – it has served us well for over 5 years, but none of us are qualified supervisors and we are not sharing group learnings or reflections frequently enough (Ken).

The most concerning limitation is potentially the lack of a qualified supervisor amongst this peer group. Bachkirova and Jackson (2011, p.233) caution that “we would argue that competent supervision requires skills and perspectives over and above the coaching experience.” I believe that this is a valid concern and one which this peer group is aware of, to the extent that members of that group are setting out to complete their supervisory accreditation to help them help their peer group improve their current supervisory standards.

Finally, what I term “learning leakage” is potentially weakening the opportunity that the group in the study have to help their own learning and development. This arises not from a lack of desire by the individuals in the group to practice “continuous professional development” (Hawkins, 2014) or development of “self” (Bachkirova, 2011), but rather from a gap in the PGS modus operandi so that group double loop learning (Argyris, 2005: Hawkins,1991) is being diluted.

Summary and Conclusion

This study set out to give voice to coaches who are under-represented in the supervision literature. I explored how executive coaches see value arising from their experience of peer group supervision and compare this to published academic and expert explanations of the value and function of supervision.

In summary, the attractiveness of the PGS as uncovered by this research includes:

- It is a versatile framework at can be adapted for the needs of groups with a range of perspectives
- There are few barriers to the establishment of PGS by experienced coaches
- There is evident value flowing from PGS because it is by its nature a group activity and provides more than one supervisor perspective as compared to one-to-one supervision

The value arising from PGS for the coaches in this study include:

- The social nature of meeting in a peer group helps to foster trust and sharing
- The multi-perspective of being a supervisor, supervisee or observer within the peer group directly feeds the process of reflection and a flow of reflexivity
- Learning and experimentation is supported by reflexivity

- Continuous professional development and personal development is stimulated

The development of different supervisory group models has been reported by Clutterbuck et al (2016) and presents peer groups with choices and options to refresh or revise their practice models to discover what works best for them. Therefore, improvements and enhancements to PGS methodology can be instigated by peer groups themselves and current literature is a help in that context. The findings of this grounded study indicate that, with care taken to contract to design the *modus operandi* and *modus vivendi*, PGS is a model that encourages social interaction, personal and professional development and learning and is readily available to any group of coaches that can self-organise. Moreover, the versatility of PGS models and the possibility for experimentation, constant review and refresh of practice appears to make it highly attractive and accessible.

This research shows that the peer supervisors in this study developed a particular way of operating which leads to the model presented. There appears to be merit in agreeing the format of the model between members with formal contracting around both *modus operandi* and *modus vivendi*. This study shows that there are some desirable features of both modes and more work might be done in using the checklists shown in my findings to provide a framework for peer groups to adopt and adapt for their own peer group supervision meetings.

In addition, the participants were definitive in limiting the amount of time and attention that they devote to the condition of the client, preferring instead to focus on the nature of what is going on as between the coach and coachee and the coach's awareness. Their focus is thus centred on what Hawkins and Schwenk would classify as mode 3 and 4 of their seven-eyed model of supervision. This is not to argue in favour of this specific approach, rather it illustrates that the PGS model has flexibility and can be tailored to suit the group in question and indeed the group can revise its approach by consensus from time to time. The study also highlighted benefits of the model. The major benefit for coaches is the stream of reflexivity (illustrated in Figure 1) amplified by the multiple perspectives made possible in PGS. Moreover, whilst there is significant group and individual learning during PGS, much more reflective learning can be captured if the peer group adopt a deliberate *modus operandi* of summarising what they are observing when summing up at the end of their meetings.

I was particularly interested in the social nature of group supervision and I observed that there are coaches that gain value in the social inter-action of supervision; to them supervision does not have a single dimension such as continuous professional development as it is a much richer experience. This experience is linked closely to Wenger (1999) who proposes that learning is fundamentally experiential and social. There is also some evidence that PGS as a group activity helps some coaches who are experiencing loneliness as they practice coaching and this is worthy of further study.

The fact that this group does not have a qualified supervisor amongst its participants has been acknowledged and, whilst the group is undoubtedly experienced, they see this as a limitation of their model. There is an opportunity for a peer group to either chose a qualified supervisor to help them determine a framework for their PGS practice and/or to encourage one or more of their coaches to seek a supervisory qualification with a view to supporting the on-going development of their practice. It is recommended that groups practicing PGS conduct periodic reviews of their model of PGS to help to assess the risks that arise from their mode of practice and it is hoped that the research in this paper helps to illustrate this.

A potential barrier to the adoption of PGS is that some coaching professional bodies do not recognise peer supervision for accreditation. This fact alone may discourage some coaches from adopting this model even for experimentation, which would be a pity given the abundant learning and development opportunities that arise in PGS as uncovered in this research.

Limitations and Further Research

This grounded theory study has some limitations including that it is focused on a single organisation and their particular design for peer group supervision. In addition, the executive coaches

in the study were an experienced set of mature 'systems eclectic coaches' (Clutterbuck & Megginson, 2011) who conduct well-developed reflective practice. It is therefore difficult to extend the conclusions of the research as being applicable in respect of inexperienced coaches, for example. I would propose that further qualitative research amongst coaches experiencing PGS would be beneficial so that the voices of coaches can be heard and further examined. Recently developed variations in peer supervisory models, such as chain supervision, might also be usefully be examined so that coaches and supervisors are better informed about the choice and attraction of different PGS models.

There may also be a time soon to consider whether there is a possibility that some forms of PGS might become an accredited form of supervision. For example, it might be possible for a qualified supervisor approved by the relevant accreditation body to accredit PGS practice models against a set of agreed criteria and subject to periodic audit or review.

The peer group in this grounded study were unequivocal that PGS was of significant benefit to them. The complex web of reflection and learning and experimentation engendered by their PGS model continues to have an important place in their self-development. I conclude with an insightful quote from one of the participants:

If we can improve our reflection, deepening it, and doing it more often, we will learn faster and we will, through reflection, move things that we kind of know, kind of have already spotted or worked out, we will move them from our conscious knowing into our non-conscious being.... supervision is an exercise in reflection and development. (Harry)

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