Continuous Professional Development and Avoiding the Vanity Trap: an exploration of coaches' lived experiences of supervision

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Abstract

This research reported in this paper set out to explore and understand the lived experiences of coaches in supervision and captures the views they have formed as a result of their experience. It was discovered that there is a clear link between supervision and the continuous professional development experienced by participants. What also emerged is a view about a set of conditions that needed to be met for participants to have the confidence to open up their practice to scrutiny. A phenomenological methodology was used in order to explore participants experience and views. Participants' verbatim comments are used to present the findings from which emerged four key themes. These themes underpin much of what the literature espouses with regard to efficacy of reflective practice and continuous professional development.

Key words: Coaching; coaching supervision; continuous professional development; reflective practice

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore the experience and perceptions coaches have about the affect of supervision on their continuous professional development. The resistance to being supervised found in a number of studies (Salter 2007, Association for Coaching 2005), suggests that some coaches fear and misunderstand supervision, whilst many coaches can feel they are too experienced to need it. However, the leading coaching bodies advocate supervision as a requirement of membership, which in an unregulated market is arguably an important indicator of professionalism. If the experience of participants in this study showed evidence of supervision contributing to their ongoing professional development, it might encourage more coaches to try supervision themselves. In turn this may make a valuable contribution to the professionalisation of coaching.

Hawkins and Smith (2006, p.xiii) argue "Supervision supports self-reflection as a key practice in developing mature and wise practice". According to Hawkins and Schwenk (2006, p.19), "For coaches, coaching supervision is an essential part of their continuous professional development. It is the pivotal link between theory and coaching practice." Hawkins and Smith (2006, p.12) however, argue that the "advocacy of the importance of supervision is running ahead of its practice". This is borne out in the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD, 2006) Coaching Supervision survey that shows whilst 86% of coaches responding to the survey believe that coaches should have supervision, only 44% actually do so.

The practice of supervision is strongly advocated by all the leading professional associations for coaching and mentoring including, for example, the European Mentoring and Coaching Council (EMCC), the Association for Coaching (AC) and the Association for Professional Executive Coaching and Supervision (APECS), all of which have statements regarding the requirement for supervision in their Code of Ethics.

Bluckert (2003a) suggests a two-fold purpose for coaching supervision:

> *Firstly to provide support and ongoing learning for the coach through the ongoing examination of the coaching process and, secondly, to provide a quality control mechanism for the client. (2003a, p.4)*

It could be argued that this creates a tension between the desire to control quality on the one hand and the learning and developmental aspect of its role for the coach on the other. It is possible that some coaches may see supervision as a "necessary chore, something that gives an appropriate veneer to the profession of coaching" (Bluckert, 2003b, p.1) and not as the crucial learning and support mechanism that it might arguably be. Some coaches may just be tempted as a tactic to have supervision in an attempt to differentiate themselves in the market without embracing the imperative around their own ongoing learning and development as a core part of the quality of their practice as a coach. Yet if supervision were to become mandatory for practising coaches there may be implications for the efficacy of it. If supervision is a voluntary activity that coaches lend themselves to freely and with commitment, it may stimulate better learning outcomes. In the same way that coaching is rarely appropriate where the individual is not committed, mandatory supervision may similarly be antithetical.

However, Badger (1985) argues, "supervision is a very private experience" and Gardiner (1984) suggests that supervision is rarely open to view. Whilst there seem to be studies relating to the experience of being supervised these appear to be associated with counselling and social work, for example Leddick and Dye (1987). Given the increased focus on the promotion of the need for supervision in coaching, I therefore felt the findings from this study would be a worthwhile contribution to the body of knowledge in the coaching profession.

Literature review

Literature to inform this study was drawn from a wide range of publications within academia, journals and the professional bodies, as well as books addressing continuous personal and professional development, reflective practice and supervision as a means of learning. The review provided a backdrop to the themes identified in the study and the following six key issues were considered.

- **The drive for quality**

Supervision originated in psychotherapy and has been well developed in that field as well as psychology, social work and counselling and is regarded as a way of checking good practice and enabling ongoing development. Hay (2007) argues following the explosion of growth in the coaching profession over the last decade, there has been an increasing drive to agree and maintain standards and a movement towards regulation of coaching through the proliferation of training and accreditation schemes. This push for quality appears to be resulting in an increased pressure felt by coaches to take up supervision as part of the professionalisation of coaching. Many commentators refer to the role supervision plays in maintaining standards and how it serves not just the coach but also the profession and the public. Therefore, those in the helping professions have an obligation to be in supervision, (King and Wheeler 2001, Jenkins 2001, Jacobs 2000, Hawkins and Smith, 2006 and Hawkins and Shohet 2006, Hawkins 2008).

This growing trend in the requirement of supervision for coaches seems to be emerging both from and within organisations. This is evidenced, for example, by Bluckert (2003a) and Jarvis (2004) who point to the pressure for standards in an unregulated field from clients who are investing heavily in coaching services. More recently Hawkins and Schwenk (2006) suggest organisations are beginning to see the benefits of supervision and want to hire coaches who come with a quality assurance. With this trend in mind and in the context of this study, therefore, it seems appropriate to review the functions of supervision.

- **The functions of supervision**

Kadushin (1976, p.21) identifies what he found to be the principle cluster of functions discharged by the supervisor as being, "administrative, educational and supportive", (Robinson 1936, Towle 1945, Miller 1977, Burns 1958). Building on the work of Kadushin (1976) and Proctor (1988) however, Hawkins and Shohet (2006) refer to the main functions of supervision as developmental, by developing skills through reflection on practice, resourcing, for managing emotions and avoiding burn out, (Pines *et al* 1981, Maslack 1982, Fineman 1985, Glouberman 2002), and qualitative, in terms of quality control, dealing with blind spots and vulnerability.

Hawkins and Smith (2006) list numerous definitions of supervision including the one from Bachkirova *et al* (2005) which suggests:

> *Coaching supervision is a formal process of professional support, which ensures continuing development of the coach and effectiveness of his/her coaching practice through interactive reflection, interpretative evaluation and the sharing of expertise. (2005, www.brookes.ac.uk).*

Most definitions emphasise the multiple functions of supervision including quality and the focus on transforming practice. The literature reveals the tensions that exist around the role of supervision in coaching. The duality between assuring quality and the developmental aspect of supervision capture this. Peach and Horner (2007, p.228), writing in the social work context, refer to using supervision as "support or surveillance" pointing to the tensions in that environment. It is however, the potential transformational aspect of supervision that brings a focus to its developmental role which is considered next.

- **The focus on professional development**

The importance of professional development is widely recognised in the literature but as Wilkins (1997) points out, whilst most professional bodies recommend it, guidelines vary. Hawkins and Smith (2006, p.125) describe continuous personal development as being at the heart of continuous professional development and "by developing our self we are developing our practice." Hawkins and Smith (2006) argue that someone in the people professions who has stopped learning has probably stopped doing good quality work.

Ongoing professional development can be seen not only as a source of continuing enrichment as well as a safeguard for clients but, as Connor (1994) argues, it offers possibilities for affirmation, support and different perspectives against which to monitor our own performance. These different perspectives can be triggered by the reflective practice that supervision encourages.

- **Reflective practice**

For Wilkins (1997, p.7) professional development is not just about learning in the formal sense of training it is also about "reflection and discovery." Hay (2007, p.4) argues that supervision and self-reflection are valuable to anyone who "engages in an activity that is intended to contribute to the development of another human being." Reflective practice is addressed, for example, in the works of Schon (1987 and 1995), Mezirow (1990, 1991, 2000), Moon (1999), Bolton (2001), Brookfield (1994), Boud and Walker (1991) and Boud *et al* (1985, 1993). Schon's work (1987, 1995) has been influential and he uses the term "artistry" to describe professional practice and the process of reflection in and on practice, (Higgs *et al* 2006)

Moon (2005, p.4) describes a "through the looking glass model" of reflection which "opens up more developmental and reflexive space." According to Brookfield (1995, p.2) what makes for good quality reflection is "a constant focus on unearthing and exploring assumptions" and being able to develop through increased awareness. Reflection can stimulate the psychotherapeutic development of the practitioner and this can also be seen as essential to good practice as argued by Corey (2005) and Nelson-Jones (2006).

- **Development of the coach**

Hawkins and Smith (2006) describe the development of the coach in terms of a continuum from skills, to performance, to development and ultimately transformation. Skills and performance relate to the required competencies and capability a coach needs and represents what Argyris and Schon (1978) and Argyris (1976), referred to as single loop learning. Development and transformation relate to the coach's capacity and ability to shift between levels of learning and require double loop learning. This will involve the coach being able to change how they perceive something and to see it from another point of view. Higher levels of transformation, according to Hawkins and Smith (2006), require triple loop learning, which brings in a more systemic reflection process.

The literature suggests that the amount of experience and perhaps developmental level of the coach, influence what type of learning they encounter in supervision, (Bachkirova and Cox 2007, Bachkirova 2004). Page and Wosket (2001) make the distinction between newly trained and more experienced practitioners who may be more motivated to learn new tools as opposed to focus on the relationship dynamics of their work. This reflects what de Haan (2007) and Wilkins (1997, p.4) suggest as "emphasising relationship above technique."

It might also be argued that a coach/supervisor relationship could create an ideal adult learning context for coaches. Kolb *et al* (1971), Juch (1983) and Revans (1982) amongst others have developed approaches to adult learning pointing to the richer experience when learning follows a cycle of action, reflection and new sense making followed by action. Hawkins and Smith (2006) argue that this process of what Revans (1982) termed action learning is what happens in supervision. Good adult learning practice (androgogy) as argued by Knowles (1980) recognises that people have existing learning and experiences and that adult learning is more effective when connected with the learner's already accumulated knowledge and experiences.

Coaching supervision research

The amount of research into coaching supervision is currently somewhat limited. There are however, some notable reports, which have influenced current thinking and practice. The Hawkins and Schwenk (2006) survey and report for the CIPD argues coaching supervision is an essential part of a coach's continuous professional development and recognises the need for coaching to develop its own models of supervision.

In 2005 the Association for Coaching carried out a survey to explore coaches' reactions to their guidelines on supervision. Whilst they found support for their proposals, they also reported a resistance from some coaches whom they acknowledged needed to have a voice and be understood.

Salter's (2007) research sets out the pros and cons of mandatory supervision. Salter argues that supervision is feared and misunderstood and concluded "coaches needed to have more confidence in its potential for them as professionals." She argues that many coaches do not understand the potential of supervision and saw the supervision agenda being driven by the professional bodies without sufficient regard for the concerns of coaches who were reticent about its efficacy.

These studies contribute to the body of knowledge in the coaching profession but deal primarily with issues related to the drive for quality and standards and whilst some employ mixed research methods, they do not address the more intimate aspect of coaches' personal experiences of supervision. The literature in general focuses on models of supervision in other helping professions but there is still not much evidence for the coach about the real benefits of supervision in coaching. I therefore wanted to address this gap by picking up where Salter's (2007) research concluded and explore how valuable supervision is to the coach and what the potential is in terms of supporting their ongoing personal and professional development. This study therefore set out to understand that potential by exploring the lived experiences of participants and to see if a clear link can be found between supervision and their ongoing professional development.

Methodology

The literature reviewed points to the importance of the developmental role of supervision and the part reflective practice plays in this. Reflecting on the problem of investigating how valuable supervision is to the coach, I felt it was necessary to explore the perceptions and self assessments of participants. I needed to determine the best strategy to undertake the study and to answer my central research question: 'What is the experience of being supervised?' I reviewed a number of methodologies testing my purpose and the key aims of the study, which included:

- To understand the lived experiences of coaches in supervision
- To capture their views and the meaning they have made as a result of their experiences
- To look for a perceived link between supervision and their ongoing learning and development

An interpretative phenomenological approach seemed appropriate for exploring and understanding these personal experiences and views. An interpretative approach is "concerned with understanding the social world people have produced...in order to negotiate their way around the world and make sense of it..." (Mason 2002, p.56). A qualitative approach considers the "why" of a research question rather than the "what" or "how". A phenomenology as Imel *et al* (2002, p.4) point out focuses on the "essence or structure of an experience" and as Creswell (2007, p.57) argues a phenomenological study "describes the meaning for several individuals of their *lived experiences* of a concept or phenomenon". Therefore this approach lends itself well to researching the lived experiences of coaches in supervision and creating an in-depth study.

My particular interest in supervision was prompted by my own very positive experience of it. This experience helped to exercise my critical self reflection muscle and it rekindled my appreciation of the value in this type of relationship for opening up learning opportunities for me personally as well as for my coaching practice. I recognised however, that other studies have shown a resistance to supervision by experienced coaches and indeed some of my own peers shared this view. I therefore wanted to try and suspend my own presuppositions to the best of my ability and focus on the lived experiences of the participants, be they good, bad or indifferent. I therefore chose to 'bracket' (Husserl 1931, Moustakas, 1984) my own experiences and suspend my judgement in the way I set out to gather and analyse the data.

I collected data through semi-structured interviews with six participants and the interviews were recorded and transcribed with their permission. Seidman (1998) suggests the interview is a flexible way of having a good quality conversation from which meaning may be interpreted. I found using a semi-structured format enabled participants to tell their own stories about their experience of supervision and this generated rich descriptions in terms of data. Silverman (2000, pp.291-292) asserts that interviews are often seen as the "gold standard of qualitative research" and are appropriate for focussing on the meaning of a phenomenon (Robson, 2002). Interviews are not without their problems in the research context (Mason, 2002, Creswell 2007) and I needed to remain aware of the presence of my own bias in the process. I found keeping a research diary invaluable in this respect, trying to 'bracket' my own bias as far as possible by "disciplined and systematic efforts to set aside prejudgements regarding the phenomenon" (Moustakas, 1994).

In terms of the scope, the participants were all practicing executive coaches. Five were freelancers and one had been a freelancer and was now employed managing a team of executive coaches. I followed Patton, 1989, and Seidman, 1998 guidelines to scope potential participants. I eliminated coaches with a psychotherapeutic background on the basis that they may have been more predisposed to supervision as a requirement of their professional membership and I was more interested in the experience of coaches who had not had that stipulation.

The data analysis process required some four hundred pages of data to be synthesised and at the same time ensure that I 'bracketed' my own experience in the process. I was guided by Husserl's (1931)

phenomenological approach and bracketing was addressed through Colaizzi's (1978) procedural steps. These steps included:

1. Each participant's verbatim transcript was read to acquire a sense of the whole.
2. Significant statements and phrases pertaining to the experience were extracted from each manuscript.
3. Meanings were formulated from the significant statements. "Creative insight" (Colaizzi 1978 p. 59) was used to move from what the participant said to what they meant and to gain understanding from the encounter.
4. Formulated meanings were then organised into themes and the themes in turn evolved into clusters and eventually categories were formed.
5. Results were integrated into exhaustive descriptions from which understanding and meaning of different factors was extracted.
6. The essential structure of the phenomenon was then formulated.
7. Validation was then sought from the study participants.

The emphasis at this stage, was on the descriptive rather than the interpretative. The approach proved to be thorough and allowed participants to get involved in verifying the data. In practical terms bracketing took the form of being mindful of my own presuppositions and taking time out of the research process to reflect on my own bias and write my reflections in my research diary. The process of naming my own bias helped me try and distinguish between my interpretations of what a participant may have meant and concentrate on what they actually described.

The nature of validity in qualitative research can be problematical (Mason 2002). Guba and Lincoln (1989) suggest it may be more appropriate to establish the trustworthiness of the findings and Creswell (2007) suggests using the term "verification" as a way of establishing the credibility of the study. For this reason it was important to ensure that participants were involved in verifying the data.

In addressing the limitations of this study I recognise that size and context should be noted. This research however, represents an in-depth study and as Fink (2000) argues, the sample size is appropriate. I also acknowledge the concern about the lack of standardisation in interviewing, as Robson (2002, p.273) claims "biases are difficult to rule out". Despite my attempt at bracketing I do not think that I can be totally objective. It was therefore important to articulate and accept my involvement and perceptions in it, which I tried to do by drawing on my reflections in my research diary. I therefore, feel that the use of my research diary and approach to bracketing and participants involvement in verifying the findings has contributed to limiting researcher bias.

Analysis & findings

Initially a number of themes emerged from the data analysis, which evolved into clusters and then four categories were formed. Eventually through the data reduction process each category consisted of three supporting themes (See the Table 1 for an overview of the themes). The four key theme categories were: Granting permission; Opening my practice to scrutiny; Taking a look in and through the mirror; Improving my practice.

The participants' verbatim comments are used in the theme descriptions in order to try and bring their stories and the study to life as well as evidence the themes themselves.

1. *Granting permission*

Making a conscious decision in choosing to have supervision as well as having a number of conditions in place was important to participants. The need to be able to trust, feel confident and safe in the process as well as having a non-judgemental and non- hierarchical relationship with their supervisor was key.

1.1 *Establishing trust and the importance of contracting*

Participants described the quality of the relationship and the need for contracting at the beginning to help manage expectations on both sides as important. Reference was made to managing boundaries and feeling there was a safe risk free environment within which to be open and honest. One participant, for example, described this:

> *The whole thing of the responsibility of the supervisor, the openness and the honesty that needed to be in the relationship and taking that risk…and that feeling of safety and confidentiality…and it has to be trusted and respected colleagues to be able to give you that feedback and be blunt with you. (Roanna).*

The process of contracting and ensuring boundaries are in place seemed to enable participants to feel they could grant permission and establish a good quality relationship. For example:

> *…I was looking for somebody who had that understanding really so that we could be mindful of it and say "no stop, boundaries, take that to your therapist"… so contracting up front is important. (Jane).*

> *…it's about who do you give permission to? I…found somebody I would give that licence to… (Roz).*

These experiences suggest that an effective contracting process is just as important in the supervision relationship as it is in coaching. Choice was also an important factor.

1.2 *Having the freedom to choose and not be coerced into supervision*

The freedom to choose to have supervision and select the right supervisor was important. There was general recognition that "it's coming down the track at us" (Roz), but a sense that being forced would be detrimental at an individual level and for the profession as a whole. Roz goes on to describe this:

> *I think people have to choose it. It's like coaching; you'd never coach somebody if they hadn't chosen to have it....I came to a point where I was ready and found somebody that I would give that licence to, but up until that point, I admit I was probably being a bit precious about it but [if forced] it's a waste of time because you would spend the whole time defending instead of learning. (Roz).*

The reasons for choosing to have supervision were important and did not necessarily have to do with meeting professional body requirements:

> *I see it as an integral part of who I am as a coach but not something that I'm required to have...If you take the therapeutic approach it is a requirement, (1) to be in therapy (2) to be in supervision…so you have no choice…I am doing it because I believe it contributes to my own learning and development, so it's a very conscious choice. (Jane).*

This element of feeling ready to take supervision seemed to be associated with how the supervision relationship was perceived.

1.3 Supervision as non-hierarchical and non-judgemental

There was a clear expectation that supervision would be a non-judgemental experience or a way of being supervised in the managerial sense of hierarchy:

> *I'm thinking about this whole kind of equals' piece for me…this is something about where I am now in my experience, because I've got a lot of experience, so I don't walk into the room as somebody who doesn't have any. It's not teacher pupil stuff…I didn't want him saying, "well what you need to be doing is…" in that kind of parent/child approach… (Jane)*

Participants also described experiences of not feeling judged in supervision even after sharing difficult situations:

> *…there was a real sense of the restorative and supportive due to the fact that there was absolutely no judgment in the room…about the coach I had been in that context. (Roanna).*

Most participants put considerable effort into establishing the conditions they felt would result in good supervision experiences. It was these conditions that set the backdrop against which the next theme emerged.

2. Opening my practice to scrutiny

Participants described a need to be brave and humble enough to open their practice to scrutiny and this would have been difficult if the conditions described above had not been met. They valued the professional support available in supervision and recognised having supervision afforded them a degree of credibility.

2.1 Having the humility to open up my practice to exploration

The notion of humility was present in the descriptions of the more experienced as well as less experienced participants. The need to be self-critical as well as accepting a feeling of vulnerability was described. One of the more seasoned coaches shared her view about not being vain, arrogant or fearful in relation to exploring her practice and looking for improvements she could make:

> *…there will always be things that I can learn and change and develop. That's a very fundamental belief of mine…so I never have the arrogance…to say I don't need it because that's about vanity…I don't see how anybody could…say "I don't need it thank you, I've been coaching for x number of years"…I'm careful about who I choose to share things with, but that's not getting in the way of me sitting down in the room…because I believe that value will come from that opportunity. (Jane).*

Having the right mindset and not assuming many years of experience removed the need for supervision seemed to be part of the humility needed:

> *…to be open to the idea that you might sometimes work as a pretty poor coach, why would you be different from anybody else? In any profession you come across people who are pretty smug and they'll refer to how long they have been doing it and how successful they've been and for me that's a real warning sign. You can get over confident. (Roanna).*

The conditions described in the first theme, 'Granting permission', can perhaps be seen as the pre-conditions that coaches need to have in place in order to demonstrate the humility needed. The professional support from supervision was also valued.

2.2 Recognising the value of professional support

Participants valued help dealing with doubts and insecurities in supervision and saw it as a way of providing a safety-valve. There were descriptions of the affirming nature of supervision and how coaching was often seen as a "lone wolf" profession with the risk of feeling isolated. One participant described it like this:

Coaching is such a lone wolf thing…It's easy to get into a...spiral of thinking...supervision just sort of breaks that open and makes you feel you're not in it on your own...it enables you to step back...when you can't see the wood for the trees, because that happens to everybody. (Valerie).

In seeking this support by opening their practice to scrutiny participants also seemed to recognise that having supervision also provided a degree of credibility to their practice as a coach.

2.3   The importance of demonstrating credibility

Supervision was seen as worthwhile investment, a way of benchmarking your practice, a differentiator in a crowded market and an important quality check. There were also views around the ethical and moral responsibility to have supervision to protect client's interests and seeing supervision as a way of making coaches accountable to their clients and the profession as a whole. Most participants had a view of the future of supervision in coaching and this is captured in how Roanna described it:

…there's going to be more demand for it in providing more than the sort of fairly loose level of evidence that's requested at the moment…organisations will become more rigorous about that because they're starting to understand the benefits of it for themselves. (Roanna)

3.   Taking a look in and through the mirror

Participants described the idea of looking in the mirror and being helped to step through it and look back at themselves to take a systemic view, a meta reflection and see a different perspective through someone else's eyes. They valued exploring assumptions and experiencing an increased self-awareness and how this helped them see the influence they had on the coaching relationship.

3.1   Valuing the opportunity to reflect on practice

The mirror metaphor was typical of the way participants experienced having focused time to reflect in depth on their practice. The idea of being in the moment and shining a light on specific situations and the sense of being in a reflective container were all described. For example:

They will challenge they will push me. They'll hold up the mirror to me and say, "Listen to what you're saying"… (Carla)

Most participants felt supervision was the only place to effectively reflect on practice:

So it's the discipline of that reflective container to step back...to see the whole system…and the systemic impact of the coaching…where else has a coach got to reflect on…the holistic piece of their practice…with all those complexities and layers? I think it's the only place. (Roanna).

3.2   Exploring assumptions and recognising how they can be limiting

Participants valued becoming aware of their limiting assumptions in supervision. They described it as a way of peeling back, unravelling and getting underneath some of their own pre-conceived ideas. Supervision was seen as a way of confronting these ideas and becoming more aware of the unconscious influences and role of the sub-conscious. One participant described it like this:

...I realised how my…unconscious prejudices, must have been at play. I hadn't exactly written him off but maybe in a way I had…so it was a really good hard knock that made me think you can't afford to be cosy… There was an insight I was blindly not conscious of and I can't see that I would have ever become conscious of it without the supervision. (Roanna).

3.3 Raising my self-awareness and recognising what I bring as coach to the coaching relationship

Participants described how supervision helped them to spot patterns and habits in their practice. There were descriptions of becoming more aware of their emotions and feelings in the coaching relationship and identifying interferences in the relationship. One participant described a supervision experience that raised self-awareness of her feelings and habits:

> …there was this...client who I ended up dealing with in this…session like his mum. He was very disappointed that he hadn't achieved what he wanted to so...I realised...as the result of a conversation with my supervisor, how I want everybody to be happy and in a really good place at the end of the coaching session and that's not always appropriate. You know maybe he needed to be uncomfortable to actually give him the kick up the bum to go away and do what he needed to do. That was an interesting insight about the habit I've got. (Roz).

It was the increased self-awareness and insight that help participants to move on and continually improve their practice.

4. Improving my practice

There was a strong consensus on the value of the bespoke nature of supervision in addressing individual needs. Participants appreciated the opportunity to explore coaching theory in relation to their practice and felt they benefited from the professional challenge of supervision. This they felt made an important contribution to their on-going professional development.

4.1 How the bespoke nature of supervision can be the best continuous education for the coach

This theme came from many references made to the benefit of a tailored approach to learning through supervision. For example:

> ...it's so bespoke it's the best form of education...when you are in supervision it's exactly what you need and it's nothing less than that. (Valerie).

Most participants made distinctions between what they experienced through supervision compared to attending workshops and seminars. The more structured agenda driven aspect of most training programmes was mentioned in contrast to supervision in which they felt they could reflect and shape the agenda. The opportunity to explore theory and practice together also seemed an important factor in the effectiveness of supervision.

4.2 Bringing theory and practice together

In particular the more experienced participants saw supervision as a way of bringing theory and practice together in a practical way. One of the participants described this:

> I've got lots of experience…I've got lots of theory...so…it's a process to make those two things mesh together, as seamlessly as they possibly can. I believe there is added value in having a third person to help me mesh those things together… (Jane).

It appeared to be this focus on the practice of being a coach where all participants wanted to be stretched and challenged in order to continue to grow as a professional.

4.3 Seeking professional challenge and continuing to learn develop and grow as a professional coach

There was an attraction to being stretched and challenged in their supervision experiences. Participants saw an important link with their on-going personal and professional development. There was also recognition that through supervision they could be connected to the wider coaching community and this was seen as an important ingredient in continuing to develop personally and for the profession as whole. One of the less experienced participants described this:
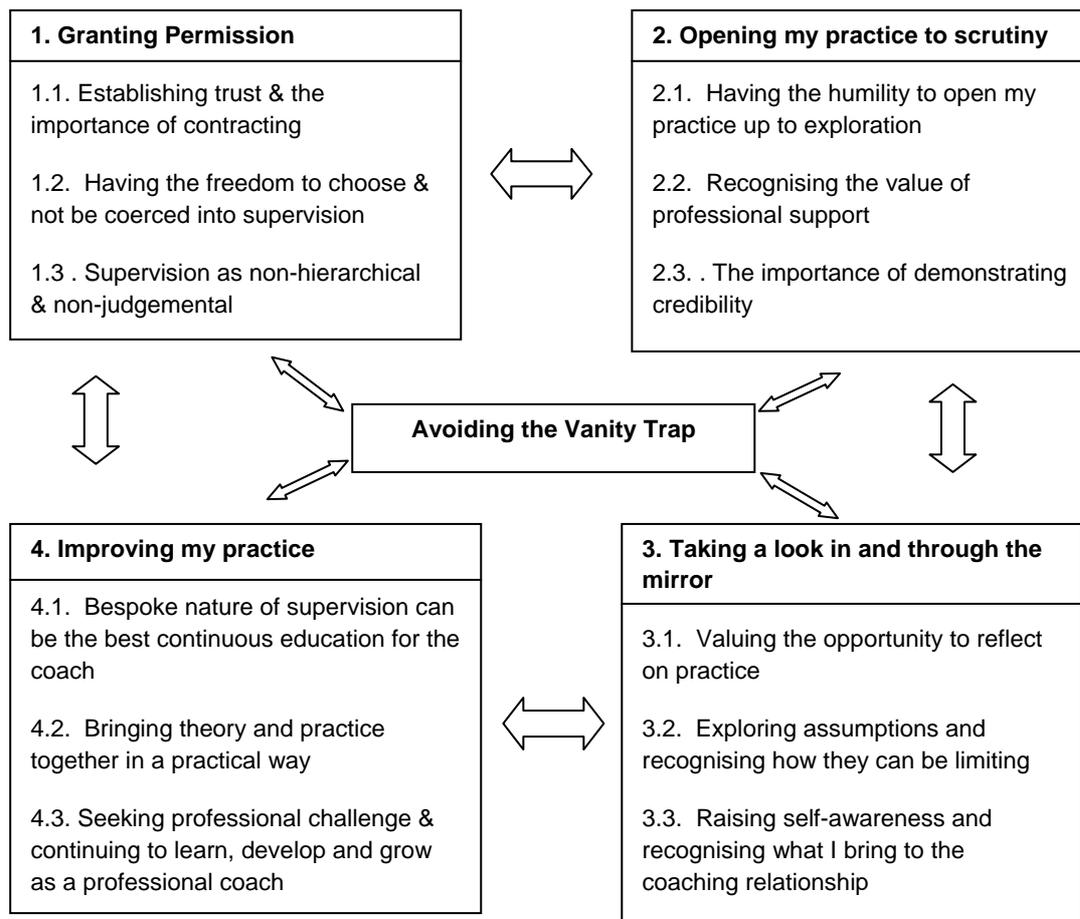
> *…it's the reflections and powerful challenges that I value…overall it's wanting to be good at what I do…It's very much about being really proficient at how I ply my trade. (Claire).*

When asked if supervision experiences had contributed to her continuous professional development as a coach Claire said, "Yes definitely". Valerie said, "It contributes enormously" and Roanna felt that "Supervision has greatly enhanced my capacity and effectiveness as a coach". Interestingly like some of the other participants Valerie also saw supervision as *"a way of being connected with the broader coaching community."*

Discussion

There are a number of implications for practice and I summarise these here. 'Avoiding the vanity trap' became an overarching theme which emerged from the study. This relates to the trap some coaches fall into when assuming their years of experience remove the need for supervision. I chose to arrange the other themes around this main one as shown in Table 1 below:

Table 1

1. Granting Permission

1.1. Establishing trust & the importance of contracting

1.2. Having the freedom to choose & not be coerced into supervision

1.3 . Supervision as non-hierarchical & non-judgemental

2. Opening my practice to scrutiny

2.1. Having the humility to open my practice up to exploration

2.2. Recognising the value of professional support

2.3. . The importance of demonstrating credibility

Avoiding the Vanity Trap

4. Improving my practice

4.1. Bespoke nature of supervision can be the best continuous education for the coach

4.2. Bringing theory and practice together in a practical way

4.3. Seeking professional challenge & continuing to learn, develop and grow as a professional coach

3. Taking a look in and through the mirror

3.1. Valuing the opportunity to reflect on practice

3.2. Exploring assumptions and recognising how they can be limiting

3.3. Raising self-awareness and recognising what I bring to the coaching relationship

The trap of assuming experience removes the need for supervision is borne out of the findings from other studies mentioned in the literature reviewed above. Hawkins and Schwenk (2006) quote Barbara Picheta's view from PricewaterhouseCoopers:

> To open one's work to scrutiny is important best practice in any helping activity. If you're going to invest in coaches in the workplace, this [supervision] is an essential part of it – it's not an optional exercise. (2006, p.15).

The resistance to do this may come from a perception that models of supervision borrowed from other helping professions are not relevant to coaching as Hawkins and Schwenk (2006) point out. Some coaches are cynical about the commercial motives of those promoting supervision. Salter's (2007) argument that coaches fear and misunderstand supervision may also be valid. It may also be that the coaching profession has not yet arrived at a consensus on the role and function of supervision as evidenced by the array of different statements about supervision in professional bodies Codes of Ethics.

The third and fourth themes, 'Taking a look in the mirror' and 'Improving my practice' capture the main benefits participants experienced in supervision. It can be argued that in these findings a light can shine to show the potential and benefits available to the coach through supervision. In this study, it is here that the link between supervision and the ongoing professional development of participants is found.

It can be suggested that the first two themes, 'Granting permission' and 'Opening my practice to scrutiny' create a set of conditions or ground rules that are required in order for coaches to willingly open up their practice to scrutiny. Therapeutic empathy as describe by Watson (2002) was evident in the descriptions participants gave of the relationship they wanted with their supervisor. However, they did not see supervision as therapy and this perhaps highlights a fundamental difference in the perception of the model and type of supervision that counsellor's experience and that which coaches' feel is appropriate for them.

To a great extent much of what the literature points to is reflected in the lived experiences of participants in this study. If more coaches are persuaded to 'Avoid the vanity trap', it could be that the two primary purposes of supervision in relation to assuring quality and promoting the development of the coach are in fact addressed.

Conclusions

My aim in embarking on this study was to explore the experiences coaches have had of supervision and the views they have formed about it. In particular I wanted to see if there was a clear link between supervision and the ongoing professional development of the coach and to shine a light on the potential benefits for the coach.

The main conclusions, which I have drawn from this study include:

A Link between supervision and the ongoing professional development of the coach

The participants in this study indicated a clear link between the perceptions of their experience of supervision and their ongoing professional development as a coach. This endorses what the literature argues and the professional bodies promote about the benefits of coaching supervision and echo my own personal experience of it.

Ground rules for successful coaching supervision

The importance of the coach feeling they have granted someone permission to supervise them and trust them enough to give that licence seems to be an important finding. To feel ready, have the choice and be prepared for supervision and to be open to the learning possibilities rather than feeling coerced into it, will no doubt

produce better learning outcomes. It will not serve the professionalisation of coaching to create a situation where more coaches merely tick the supervision box, nor will this do much for quality assurance.

The professionalisation of coaching

The findings from this study suggest no matter how experienced a coach is, 'Avoiding the vanity trap' by opening up one's practice to supervision can help not only the ongoing professional development of the individual but be potentially significant for the profession as whole. Hawkins (2008, p.35) has argued, "Supervision needs to become the learning lungs" that assist the coaching profession in its learning, development and cultural evolution. Supervision as an important benchmark in terms of professionalism was described by one of the participants like this:

> It's an opportunity to benchmark, to check the quality to be resorted by going through that process and I think it does highlight areas for development. I think it's all part of the drive for quality and I do see it as being a real differentiator for coaches with supervision skills and coaches being under supervision. (Roanna).

The literature on continuous professional development

The main focus of these conclusions relates to the implications for practice. However, the findings from this study also have implications for some of the theory discussed in the literature review. The role and functions of supervision being developmental, resourcing and qualitative as argued by Hawkins and Shohet (2006) seem to be supported by these findings. In particular the developmental role of supervision experienced by participants reinforces the theoretical arguments for reflective practice. Some of the experiences of participants appear to evidence what Schon (1987, 1995), Mezirow (1990, 1991, 2000) Brookfield (1994) and Boud *et al* (1985, 1993) argue in relation to the efficacy of reflection in and on practice. For participants in this study supervision seemed to open up "more developmental and reflexive space" (Moon 2005, p.4) enabling them to develop through increased awareness. Corey (2005) and Nelson-Jones (2006) have argued that reflection can stimulate the psychotherapeutic development of the practitioner and that this is essential to good practice in the helping professions.

This study may to an extent offer evidence and carry forward some of the theory discussed in the literature review. I hope that it will also encourage more coaches to try supervision themselves and experience the potential value it may offer them in relation to their own ongoing personal and professional development. To some degree this may well depend upon the quality of supervision experienced and this points to the need for the profession to ensure effective selection, training and accreditation of coaching supervisors. This suggests that what makes a good coaching supervisor is a potential and welcome topic for future research.

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