Reflections from the Field

Reflections on supervisors' motivation for ethical practice and development

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Abstract

This case study shares the reflections of volunteer co-facilitators delivering a co-supervision space for practicing coach supervisors. The purpose of the initiative was to encourage members to engage in ethical practice opportunities, delivered under the auspices of the Association of Coaching Supervisors. This paper outlines the context and structure of the initiative. Participant feedback and attendance data highlighted a strong initial response which then faded. Cancellation data indicates some interesting behaviour amongst learning professionals. The authors offer and discuss hypotheses for the implied resistance to ethical practice. They offer questions for further research and reflection.

Keywords

supervision, ethical practice, supervision techniques, skill development, professional standards

Introduction

As practising coaches and supervisors, one of the joys of supervision work can be the longevity of the relationship. Whereas coaching relationships will tend to last 9-12 months, supervision relationships often last many years. Indeed, we notice that some supervisees only change supervisors when their existing supervisor retires. The depth of the work we do in supervision means that a trusting relationship is vital, longevity facilitates this and allows the supervisor to notice developmental shifts overtime.

Given this context, we wondered how supervisors avoid becoming habituated in how they work with their supervisees and how they keep their practice fresh. Clearly, the supervisor like any helping practitioner will engage in continuous professional development, extending their repertoire through training and further reading. However, Michelle noticed a curious difference between how coaches and supervisors embed new approaches into their practice. Post-qualification many coaches engage in co-coaching triads as a means of embedding and extending their coaching

practice. This arrangement starts on training courses and often continues by alumni. Yet this seemed not to be the case amongst the supervision community.

Perhaps, because we are confident as practitioners, we believe we can adopt new approaches without error. Perhaps because we have enduring and open relationships with our supervisees we can specifically contract to learn together. However, when we practice a technique with our peers, it builds a much stronger sense of how, as an individual practitioner, we want to work with it so that it is congruent with our over-arching style. Additionally, when we are on the receiving end of a new technique, we can develop a greater credibility when briefing the client by sharing experience of the possible impacts of a particular technique. But if we must practice a technique before we can use it outside of a training environment, we are in a "catch-22" situation (Heller, 1961). Who is going to be our first practice supervisee? Also, we need to bear in mind that many times we may 'pick up' a new approach, not at a training event alongside others, but through reading or social media and even word of mouth. The notion of implementing a technique when we do not fully appreciate how it might impact the supervisee is surely unprofessional at best and verging on unethical at worst.

The case study

In 2020 Michelle approached the Association of Coaching Supervisors (AOCS) with a potential solution to this 'catch-22' dilemma. The concept mirrored that of co-coaching. In collaboration, Michelle and AOCS invited supervisors to come together in a virtual Co-Supervision Space (CSS) to practice techniques in an environment of psychological safety (Edmondson, 1999), to extend their skills and to get genuinely candid and developmental feedback from peers. The sessions were monthly and of two hours duration. Yvette, with her wider AOCS volunteer role in member communications, joined Michelle to co-facilitate the sessions. Together they became the CSS facilitator team.

The supervisor participants worked with familiar principles:

- The host recommends new techniques suitable for use in one-to-one coaching supervision work.
- Participants practice in triads where each person takes a turn at being supervisor, supervisee and observer.
- Observers protect time for feedback and facilitate this to keep the focus on the learning of those in the Supervisor role.

Michelle and AOCS were keen to underline that the CSS was not a space for use as a replacement for regular supervision. Rather, the clear intention was that it was an intervention to supplement it. This was because the focus for learning was the practising supervisor, and so as the receiving supervisee it was entirely possible that unfinished business could occur and that they would need support, which was not possible in the AOCS CSS space.

The facilitator team developed a communication and marketing plan including the use of the regular AOCS monthly news update, the AOCS Twitter account, and the LinkedIn AOCS community page alongside short explanatory videos, blogs and guidelines developed to set up the process for success.

What began as an experiment became embedded as a benefit for AOCS members and continued for a second year. All involved hoped that momentum would build; however, towards the end of the second year the facilitators invoked a pause to engage in a learning review. Here, we document the facilitator observations from that review and supplement with observations from our wider practices.

The facts

Table 1: Attendance across two years of the Co-Supervision Space sessions

	2021	2022
Number of sessions run	1 per month (except August) = 11	1 per month = 11 (1 cancelled due to small numbers)
Number of bookings	163	70
Total participant group members	46	31
Range of participant group sizes	10 - 21	5 – 13
Number of returning attendees (more than 3 sessions across the year)	20	7
Number of people joining AOCS due to CSS	-	4
International representation (no. of countries)	21	9

Note: data captured by booking system Eventbrite

Benefit experienced by participants

During 2021 participants received a Responster survey link to provide feedback immediately after the session. The following feedback highlighted clear benefits for attendees although the number of survey completions was consistently low:

- From **January 2021** - "I found it useful to practice the techniques myself and to observe and experience the techniques as practiced by others in my triad - so much easier to do it in a safe space where you can get it wrong rather than trying it out for the first time on a real client".
- From **April 2021** - "It has a good structure, support materials, and we were able to carry on and finish all three rounds. It was also useful to learn from the other participants. Being my first time, it exceeded my expectations."
- From **July 2021** - "Once again a great opportunity for experimentation and learning from experience."
- From **December 2021** – "Living and working in France and only ever really sharing my practice as a Coach and Supervisor with French professionals, I really enjoyed "meeting" practitioners from all over the world operating in their respective cultures. This helped me to expand my practice from focusing too much on only thinking, analysis and depth. The French naturally go in these directions as do I So for me, diversity in terms of participants is a critical success factor."

After what felt to the facilitators and to AOCS like a successful first year, a decision was made to extend the CSS space for a further year. In the second year we also changed the session timing from 13:00-15:00 (UK) to 11:00-13:00 (UK) to accommodate a changing work schedule and add in a 'knowledge share' session. This new session was a response to participant feedback that they felt rushed by the plenary discussion at the end of standard sessions. Additionally, in the Participant Choice session, participants prioritised knowledge sharing over the practicing of techniques. The intention was to share "hints and tips" of working with new techniques (see Table 2).

While this practical exchange was already a feature of the plenary discussion, we hoped that with more time to practice more of the techniques (year 2 were offered the same prompts as year 1) a greater array of practiced experience would be available. However, the second year did not gain the momentum hoped, indeed overall attendance figures dropped.

Table 2: Example plenary points participants made

Supervision Techniques in Lucas (2020)	Hints and Tips shared by the AOCS members
Eclectic Chapter: Exploring Boundaries by Angela Dunbar (p. 35)	As well as drawing a client representation on paper, using the physical space can land as being more responsive.
Seven Conversations by David Clutterbuck (p.84)	Builds confidence in front of a real client as it unfolds, and tentativeness as the simple description on paper belies the complexity in the action of experimentation. Offer the choice of starting conversation to the coach. Notice over time the client's preferred starting points over time to work with what emerges at this level.
Existential Chapter: Deliberately Self-Centred Supervision by Michelle Lucas (p. 129)	Turning off a video camera if in a group session can increase a different level of richness in what clients offer.
Woking with Shame using Embodied Coaching by Tsafi Lederman and Jenny Stacey (p. 140)	Having alternative words for shame or being able to describe the concept in diverse ways is often useful in cross-cultural situations.
Gestalt Chapter: Giving an Object a Voice by Michelle Lucas (p. 151)	Particularly useful if a client becomes stuck and need a new perspective or to thing more widely about something. The object does not need to be in the same physical space as the client; it could be something through a window.
Positive Psychology Chapter: Give Yourself an 'A' by Clare Norman (p. 199)	Try inviting clients to speak the letter rather than write if the time available is short; speaking is more of an immediate response in the moment rather than the longer time needed to write a letter.
Developmental Transactional Analysis Chapter: Exploring the Potential for Collusion by Michelle Lucas and Lynda Tongue (p. 231)	This is a complex technique – declare that you are going use it. Working out what is us, and what is them relies on sharp observations on the content of the work to bring into the awareness of the client.
Handling Relationship Conflict Using the Drama Triangle by Julia Menaul and Lynda Tongue (p.239)	If the supervision topic does not easily fit, this might show up in finding the roles at play here. Useful to be aware of the 'Winner's Triangle' (various versions) too.
Solution Focused Chapter: The Tomorrow Question by Michelle Lucas (p.268)	Be prepared to hold lightly the notion of tomorrow. The client may have the reality of the next day in front of mind of a more expansive and spacious period or may want to focus on the transition.
Solution Focussed Scaling Questions by Evan George and Denise Yusuf (p.260)	This technique is also useful as a check-in process and if short of time, can be quite quick. Check for any somatic responses to the numbers on the client's scale. Enable them to choose and work with their scale.
Systemic Chapter: Working with the Shadow by Clare Norman (p.295)	A 'deep' technique so timing and pacing are critical. Contract more explicitly for the psychological safety of working with the process.
Transpersonal Chapter: Centring by Paul King (p.322)	The technique became what a statement in the material says it is not. "Centring is not a self-contained isolating experience; it is defined as…." (Lexico, 2019). Give more emphasis to step 3 and notice how easy to expand the awareness and go outside the centre of not. There are links to constellations too.
What's my environmental footprint? By Penny Walker (p.338)	This felt more like coaching and seemed ahead of its time.

Table 3: Attendance data month by month and according to topic across two years of the Co-Supervision Space sessions

MONTH	TOPIC (2021)	2021 (attendees)	2022 (attendees)	TOPIC (2022)
Jan	Eclectic	21	13	
Feb	Existential	18	6	
Mar	Gestalt	16	7	
April	Person Centred	19	8	Knowledge Share
May	Positive Psychology	14	7	
June	Psychoanalytic – Developmental TA	15	6	
July	Solution Focused	11	7	
Aug	NONE	-	1	Knowledge Share (cancelled due to small numbers)
Sept	Systems Thinking	15	8	
Oct	Thinking Environment	10	2	
Nov	Transpersonal	13	8	
Dec	Participant Choice	11	5	Knowledge Share/Participant Choice

Our reflections

The proposed "knowledge sharing" sessions were the least well attended, with the facilitators cancelling the second one (in August) due to low numbers. When bookings were low for the third one, the facilitators broadened the agenda to encourage people to attend for practice or for a learning review as an alternative to knowledge share.

This segment of the Co-Supervision Space was an interesting one to observe. The plenary session came after the three rounds of co-supervision practice. Participants were invited to share their learning which they could apply when they were delivering future supervision (i.e., What did you learn about you (the Supervisor) in your supervision practice today?) Initially when reporting back participants placed more emphasis on the impact of the technique on the supervisee – when in fact our enquiry was more of an introspective one. Initially it seemed that as practitioners who support the client's learning, there was less curiosity about our own. We wondered whether this was about learning new habits, and/or creating a greater sense of trust and psychological safety.

Over the year the focus of the sharing shifted towards this intended enquiry. This did however take considerable active management by us as facilitators, to guide contributions towards the intended perspective. Reflecting on this experience, the facilitators noticed how they had shared their own experiences of the technique, as a means of prompting wider discussion. While pertinent, the facilitators departed from their intended neutrality, the roles of hosts and practitioners learning in step with attendees. Perhaps unwittingly a "teacher: pupil" or "parent: child" dynamic (Berne, 1961) arose. Who was best served by this - the facilitators or the participants - is a question for the facilitators to further reflect on.

Looking more closely at participant numbers, while the sessions felt rich and engaged, the reality was that only 5% of the AOCS membership base were attending. As a professional body where our primary purpose is a developmental one and where we pay deliberate attention to quality assurance of our work, this felt disappointing. While the time change of the session between years 1 and 2 may have contributed to the drop out, this did not feel like the whole story.

One of the facilitators experienced a similar challenge in their independent Practice. The Co-Supervision Space was for the practice of individual supervision techniques. The facilitators excluded practice of group supervision techniques, partly because of the complexity of co-ordination on the day and partly because practicing new techniques where group dynamics could also be in play required a different level of facilitation. Michelle offered similar practice-based experiences with the focus on group supervision techniques called Group Supervision Experimentation Labs. While interest in the pilot was high and led to two versions of the events as paid-for programmes, momentum was slow to build. Here the number of people attending was much smaller in order to invite a higher degree of psychological safety. In year one the sessions were 'open' and then in year two attendees formed a specific cohort where Michelle facilitated developmental feedback rather than enabling triads to self-manage. Michelle intended both changes to increase the sense of psychological safety. Participant feedback on the experience was positive for example:

- "I appreciated the hands-on experience and immediate feedback; lots of grace and allowance from fellow learners to experiment in a clunky way without embarrassment"
- "I have new models and feel more ready to use with my own group"
- "It allowed me to revisit models I have used in the past, but not lately, and consider why this is, it gave me confidence to try new ones and be confident of using them in the moment"
- "A great opportunity to try new processes with experienced practitioners"

However, after the second year, Michelle mothballed the programme as the marketing effort outweighed the financial return.

This echoes the experience of Yvette who through a business collaboration attempted to draw like-minded professionals to think more about working with difference in Diversity – Beyond the Obvious. The three workshops also provided nine core and two developmental continuous professional development hours for one of the coaching professional bodies. The facilitator team worked hard to achieve a diverse set of participants through making direct approaches and having a range of pricing points.

The eight pilot participants provided positive feedback:

- "I found a firm unconscious bias that I need to continue to work on." Personal Training Instructor.
- "I have dipped my toe in the water and gained added depth to my knowledge. Now to put it into practice." Experienced coach and coaching supervisor.
- "I look forward to thinking about how to take this back to the internal coaches in my organisation." Internal coach.

A second workshop failed to materialise though, with only a third of those interested in a position to pay for their development. Again, the facilitator mothballed the product as the marketing effort outweighed potential returns on investment.

Discussion

These experiences could suggest a level of resistance amongst supervisors to experiential learning in our community. We are curious about why. Some of our hypotheses about the resistance are:

Table 4: Some hypotheses about sources of resistance

Concerns about the Facilitators	The style of the facilitators did not sit well with attendees, while curious to experience the opportunity, one experience was sufficient to decide against returning.
Concerns about the triad process	The self-managing nature of the sessions may not have suited some learning styles.
Concerns about psychological safety	Working with people on a "random" basis may not appeal to some participants due to the repeat nature of introductions and contracting for ways of working. Practicing with peers may trigger a fear of exposure – random independent triads may not have offered sufficient "holding" of the learning environment.
Different levels of practitioner maturity (Dreyfus and Dreyfus, 1980)	Some CSS participants had only just completed training; as a "novice" perhaps working with participants with different supervision training and accreditation was disorienting and so they did not experience this forum as generative. Some CSS participants were deeply experienced practitioners or "experts"; perhaps the experience generated no new learning over and above what they had already learned through their existing practice.
Access to alternative continuous development options	Some practitioners may have their own forums for practicing new techniques ethically and giving and receiving professional feedback. Some people may contract for experimenting to use new techniques directly with their clients.
Not perceived as useful	Some people may not want/need to expand their repertoire and/or are comfortable using their existing "go to" approaches.
Parallel processes (Searles, 1955) between the facilitators and participants	We noticed now how as a facilitation team our energy dropped as numbers reduced. There may have been unnoticed systemic intentions, interventions, or impacts that contributed to the reciprocal drop off in participants. We often used the practice time for our joint CSS 'to do' list e.g., admin, marketing, communication pieces, general catch-up, quarterly reflection. Again, this may have caused dissonance in the system, there may have been a systemic entanglement or parallel process if we were not "walking the talk".

Over the course of the two years of events, we also noticed other patterns emerging that provoked our curiosity about professional behaviours. Most practitioners who have ever run an "open" event will know that the number of bookings and the number of attendees are two entirely different things. Our assumption was that most of our colleagues will have been on the receiving end of booking behaviour of clients – so how would this affect their own booking habits? Table 5 shows what we observed:

Table 5: Participant booking behaviour

Participant Booking Behaviour	Observations
Booking and cancelling with prior communication and good advance notice of a week or more	≤10% of bookings.
Booking and communicating non-attendance /sending apologies on the day before or of the session	Approx. 35% of bookings.
Not arriving to the session with no communication before or after	Approx. 35% of bookings.
Booking for a series of sessions and never showing "repeat offenders"	Approx. 20% of bookings.

When we started the CSS sessions, we limited numbers and therefore it felt selfish for potential participants to book a place and not attend, as the facilitators could invite others to take the place in service of generating more participation. However, we recognised quickly that there was no need to put an upper limit on the numbers as we could manage the organising with both small and larger numbers.

This led us to a more laissez-faire attitude of "whoever is in the room, are those meant to be in the room." Participants were adults making their own decision to attend or not and while it was frustrating to deal with changing numbers, we simply accepted that frustration as the "as is" situation.

In our facilitator learning review, we wondered if our response was appropriate. Should we have managed this - and the additional admin - more proactively as we did in the first quarter with follow-up e-mails? Would we have been so accepting if our paying clients behaved this way? Were we colluding with a "lack" of professionalism where people do not communicate changes to plan, and us as facilitators did not invite them to account for, or explore, their behaviours? We also wondered whether positioning the CSS as a free AOCS membership benefit, influenced "on the day" decisions about the "cost" or importance of attending / not attending.

While the feedback on the CSS experience was largely positive, we did also receive "moans and groans" that some participants came unprepared. The irritant was that with the allocated practice and feedback time for each triad member, reading from or clarifying the technique brief reduced valuable time for the practice. Ironically, we always invited participants to arrive 15 minutes early to ensure they have the exercise briefs available, and/or to re-fresh their minds on how they want to work – and yet very few people took that invitation up.

Clearly some participants held this in their awareness:

- From **February** 2021 - "A reminder to access the techniques in advance. It completely passed me by this time, so I came in a little cool."
- **December** 2021 – "I know I'm preaching to the converted here, but my ROI was always much higher when I did the preparation: printing off the methods, reading them, thinking about what I wanted to practice, deciding what I was going to bring as the supervisee."

As co-facilitators, we experienced resolving participants' irritations as difficult. On the one hand we wanted participants prepared to maximise their learning experience – on the other, we wanted an Adult-Adult space (Berne, 1961), with an inclusivity to different learning and organising styles. We did not see it as our role to mandate preparation.

In our learning review we noticed it as an interesting conundrum – the same issue might also present amongst supervisees. Is it appropriate to contract and mandate for preparation? How do we respond when people have not done this? Similarly, we became curious about how we applied this thinking for ourselves. When we are receiving development or our supervision, do we operate by the same rules or expectations as we have for our clients?

The contract between the facilitators and AOCS did not include us surveying participants on these points, and indeed our experience suggests that these kinds of behaviours are not peculiar to AOCS members or this development. This learning review prompts us to consider a broader

research enquiry into the supervisor's dilemma of how best to engage in ethical practice and how we act (or not) as role models for professional behaviours.

Further research questions

- What is the nature and range of coaching supervisor personal development opportunities to support and challenge people to be at their best in service of their work?
- What is the role of professional accreditation bodies in communicating and embedding the principle of ethical practice of learning and development ahead of client interventions?
- In the business and practice of coaching supervision, where does/do new practice(s) get practiced, such that practitioners stay fresh?

Conclusion

We see this experience as a moment in our own developmental journey, using Yvette's own Three Ps Model we share the impact of moving forward this attempt at ethical practice, through three inter-related reflections – Personal, Profession and Practice.

Michelle's reflections:

- Personal: It has been an odd experience witnessing people's willingness to place me in the role of expert as a result of my author and editor role, when as a facilitator my intention was for equity. I am left wondering what it is in me that invites this and also what it is in them that leads to them giving away their own power so readily.
- Professional: I have been heartened by those practitioners who entered into an experiential and experimental space with such an absence of ego. This speaks volumes to the learning orientation of the AOCS members who quickly generated psychological safety as new colleagues practicing together. By contrast I notice my disappointment that this has not led to a more sustainable strand of CPD for our community. In turn this has led to greater curiosity about whether the need that I see for ethical practice, is shared by our wider profession.
- Practice: As I move towards the next chapter in my work and life where time for non-work activities is becoming the priority, delivering the AOCS Co-Supervision space as a volunteer has challenged me to consider where I put my time. If this was an employed role, no doubt I would be pushing to continue the events; however, when voluntary activities sit alongside my own business development, it is only possible to sustain those initiatives which have their own momentum.

Yvette's reflections:

- Personal: My growth as a supervisor has been significant. I gained starting points for each philosophy and have moved from a preferred fixed mode to a supervisee responsive mode.
- Professional: The profession has a community of like-minded individuals who pay attention to their development from an ethical viewpoint. The number seems small based on this experience. I am curious to explore further.
- Practice: Connection, collaboration, continuation, and consolidation of this work is important to me. Collaborating with another master practitioner, reflecting on our own and the profession's integrity has been incredibly rewarding.

Questions for further reflection

- Have we stumbled upon a case of double standards – do we do as we say? or do we do as we do …. because no-one seems to notice?
- Is not the very essence of ethical practice doing the "right thing" even when no-one is looking?

- Where was our work as the hosts/facilitators of CSS focussed? On Personal development, Professional development, or Practice development? How did this impact participants and us?
- What might be the dilemmas faced by willing volunteers to reflect the host organisational views and balance their own stance?

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