

Group supervision in organizations

“The term ‘supervision’ is loaded with unhelpful associations of power (watching over) whereas in most contexts it is a collaborative and supportive process.”

David E. Grayⁱ

More and more external coaches are engaging in coach supervision. There are various forms of coach supervision, including 1-to-1, group and informal peer-to-peer supervision. Group supervision is often commended on the basis that it is cheaper than individual supervision. This is to overlook the benefits described by those undertaking group supervision. Participants talk about the value of learning from others and being part of a system. Group supervision is less common within organisations, yet the benefits would appear to be potentially transformative in terms of helping organisations become collectively better at coaching and more adept at navigating change.

What is coach supervision?

Coach supervision became mainstream 12 – 13 years ago. Early models had their roots in counselling, psychotherapy and social work, origins that may have deterred some coaches from early adoption. The very word ‘supervision’ continues to put many people off, conjuring up images of a factory foreman scrutinising the actions of workers on a production line. But as external coaches have become more familiar with the intentions of supervision, so participation rates have climbed. A global survey conducted in 2017 suggests that 83% of external coaches worldwide now undertake some form of supervisionⁱⁱ.

Coach supervision is said to perform three functionsⁱⁱⁱ:

1. Helping coaches to develop their skills, knowledge and capacity.
2. Providing emotional support.
3. Ensuring the coach’s work is of a required standard.

The last two functions are up for debate. Some writers suggest that because coaching is different to counselling, in that the coach supervisor has no formal responsibility for the ability of their coaches, the third purpose is defunct^{iv}. Other

Group supervision offers at least three benefits to organisations over and above the value of individual supervision.

studies report that coaches seeking emotional support often find it from people other than their supervisor.

Individual vs group supervision

Last year we spoke to seven group supervisors and 57 coaches being supervised^v. Some of these groups were public groups for external coaches and some were internal. We asked the coaches why and when they undertook individual supervision and when they went to group. They said they went to individual supervision when they wanted to discuss very personal issues that they didn't feel comfortable bringing up in a group. They went to group supervision when they sought diversity of perspective and the opportunity to learn from others. Many said that working as a group also helped them work more systemically with their clients. These insights suggest that group supervision has an important role to play for organisations in helping leaders learn from each other and in becoming more adept at navigating complexity and managing change. Group supervision would appear to offer three important potential benefits to organisations.

1. Capability building

Many coach skills programs emphasise the teacher-student relationship. Class sizes are large with a focus on model-sharing and theory. Such programs fail to recognise the power of collective learning. Leaders attempting to implement new behaviours rarely get it right first-time. Our research suggests that what leaders value most, over and above insights offered by an expert facilitator, is the opportunity to learn from each other's experiences. A group supervision model can exponentially improve the likelihood that leaders will successfully change their behaviour after any kind of leadership skills program, working in cohorts of 5 to 8. From a change perspective we are providing a reflective space in which people are able to make sense of their experiences in a safe and non-judgmental environment. The primary role of the supervisor is to facilitate learning rather than instruct.

2. Systemic thinking

Many organisations still think in terms of simple cause-and-effect. If I pull *this* lever, then I can expect *that* outcome. Leadership is often discussed in similar terms – if I apply this new skill, then I can expect to transform some aspect of my business. The truth is somewhat different. The environments in which we work these days are complex, with many factors playing in a part in the emergence of change. We can think of the organization as a complex system, with lots of moving parts, a network of multiple relationships, all shifting and evolving over time. Within the big organizational system exist sub-systems – teams and groups for example.

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The effective leader is adept at reading these systems and intervening appropriately. A systemic group supervisor helps coaches to look at the world through a systemic lens, starting with the dynamics existing within the group itself, and provides a 'safe' space for participants to start experimenting with interventions to shift the patterns of those group dynamics.

3. Culture shifting

Think about your organisation's efforts to instil a coaching culture. Many organisations don't get past first base. Trainers come into the organisation, tell leaders what coaching is, teach them new skills, and depart. Participants go out into the organisation and try out those skills, sometimes successfully, often not. Usually the problem is that staff now being 'coached' by these leaders don't understand what is happening. Their previously helpful manager has stopped being helpful and is now just asking lots of questions. No one has included them in the conversation '*what is coaching?*' nor consulted them on how they want their leaders to behave. Group supervision is a place for leaders to share their perspectives on coaching, to work out together what version of coaching is most likely to prove useful in their particular organisational context, and to agree how they will progressively engage the rest of the organisation in that dialogue. This same kind of process works for the implementation of *any* kind of change.

Group supervision is therefore an almost essential tool for organisations wishing to develop the ability of their leaders to coach, to lead more effectively, and to facilitate change. If the word 'supervision' doesn't inspire you, then call it something else. What you call it isn't important.

Getting started

In the research study referred to earlier, we asked participants what an effective coach supervisor does. They identified the following aspects of role:

1. Logistics

Both supervisors and coaches said the ideal group size is somewhere between 5 and 8 people. You might choose to go slightly bigger if you aren't expecting 100% attendance rates. Less than 5 coaches, and you start to lose the diversity of perspective and the opportunity to work with the group dynamic. Above 6 to 8 people and not everyone has the chance to fully engage. One and a half to two hours was the ideal session length. Below 90 minutes, again too few people get the opportunity to raise issues. More than two hours is effortful, and for most people is too many hours out of the day. Most groups met monthly.

Effective coach supervisors role-model desired behaviours. They refrain from giving advice or otherwise voicing judgment, and they challenge others respectfully.

2. Contracting

Earlier we said that many coaches don't go to supervision expecting to be assessed, and that others don't come to supervision looking for emotional support. But some do. Other differences also emerged in our research. Some participants were happy if just two or three people brought an issue to a session, others wanted everyone to have an opportunity to share something. Some valued a bit of teaching, some preferred to focus exclusively on case studies. Some liked to work with the same groups over time, others were happy to be flexible. Good contracting is essential if a group is to provide value. Participants must have a choice whether to attend or not. If they don't have choice, then they will either be absent or a lot, or else won't say much. If you have people sitting silent, then the group is unlikely to function well. There must be a clear purpose to come together, and there must be very clear rules around confidentiality. Confidentiality is particularly important for internal groups. The group supervisor needs to consider existing relationships between participants with an eye on trust. Without trust, a group won't function.

3. Managing the agenda

The coach supervisor has an important role to play in helping the group establish how it wants to operate. Participants look to the supervisor to provide structure, to determine how much time will be spent checking in to the session, how many issues will be addressed and to manage time accordingly. The exact structure deployed will be part of the contracting process, but once decided upon, it is usually the group supervisor's role to ensure that structure is adhered to.

4. Creating a learning environment

Managing the agenda is one thing, managing the dynamics of the group is different. The group supervisor is expected to make sure the group has ground rules in terms of what behaviours are acceptable and what behaviours are not and holds the group accountable to abiding by those rules. Participants who move quickly into giving advice, for example, may make others feel they are being judged, such that they withdraw from the conversation. Effective coach supervisors role-model desired behaviours. They refrain from giving advice or otherwise voicing judgment, and they challenge others respectfully.

5. Thinking systemically

Group supervision is a great forum to help participants adopt a systemic perspective, and to learn how to work more effectively with group

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dynamics. Most of the supervisors we spoke to had been trained in at least one methodology for working with teams and groups.

If you are considering bringing group supervision into your organisation then this may feel daunting. Consider building some of the following into your learning plan:

- Seek out coach supervision training. Coach supervision training is being offered in more and more countries these days.
- Learn about group dynamics. There are various models and frameworks around, and again opportunities for training.
- All the supervisors we spoke to had supervisors of their own to help them become (even) more effective. Find a supervisor who has experience of working with teams and groups.
- Connect with other internal practitioners and form your own peer supervision group.

Whichever route you choose, consider it a good investment. As organisations come to further understand emergent theories of change, so they will come to further appreciate the value of creating a reflective learning space amidst the often manic pace of modern corporate life.

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Notes & Acknowledgments

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