

A GESTALT APPROACH TO COACH SUPERVISION

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Chapter 11

A Gestalt Approach to Coach Supervision

In recent years a lot has been written about the importance of Coach Supervision and what it entails but, for the purposes of this chapter, we will regard supervision as a place that the coach can review his client work, receive high quality personal and professional development as a coach, and where complex ethical and boundary management issues can be explored.

Supervising Individuals and Group Supervision

Coach Supervision can happen both on a one-to-one basis and in a group, where a small group of coaches meet with a Supervisor on a regular basis. In group supervision the available time is usually divided between the coaches, and the session can take a number of formats. The two most typical are:

The Supervisor takes a strong lead and works sequentially with each coach on the material they have brought, engaging other group members when appropriate.

The Supervisor 'holds' the overall process, but the group members take a much more active lead in shaping the approaches and experiments used to help each coach explore the material they have brought and offer more of their own perceptions and reactions.

The first approach can be very valuable with a group of relatively new coaches, where learning the process of group supervision is important, whilst the latter offers more creative possibilities for more experienced coaches. The Gestalt Supervisor is more likely to lean towards the second approach and to engage the whole group in a range of ways. For very experienced groups, this includes the option of supervising them on their supervision of each other!

A wide range of levels of focus of supervision

We will focus this chapter on how a Gestalt Coach Supervisor might work with a coach, or group of coaches, linking this to the core principles already covered at depth in previous chapters. To do this, we will align our work here with Peter Hawkin's very well established model of supervision,

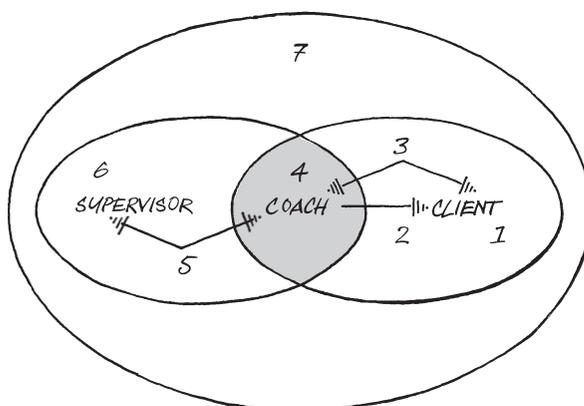
The Seven-eyed model¹, which gives a very comprehensive overview of the lenses (*the Hawkins and his co-authors refer to 'modes'*) through which the coach and coach supervisor can view the practice (*and practise*) of the coach.

The diagram below shows two overlapping sub-systems:

- The coach-coachee sub-system, ie the actual coaching work that the coach brings into supervision;
- The supervisor-coach sub-system, ie the system that comes into being when the coach, or group of coaches, comes to a supervision session.

Both of these exist within a wider system, which represents the wider context of both the supervision and coaching work. This offers seven lenses (*modes*) that can become the focus of a supervision session.

Fig. 11.1: Hawkins' The Seven-eyed Model



Mode 1 is the world of the 'end client' ie the coachee, their context and story, the person in whose service the coach supervision is ultimately for.

Mode 2 is the repertoire of interventions that the coach is currently using with the coachee.

Mode 3 is the relationship between the coach and the coachee.

Mode 4 is the coach (*what the coach experiences in the presence of this coachee, what the coachee's material evokes etc*).

1. See *Supervision in the Helping Profession*, Hawkins, P & Shohet, R, Open University Press, (1989) and *Coaching, Mentoring and Organizational Consultancy: Supervision and Development*, Hawkins, P & Smith, N, Open University Press, (2007).

Mode 5 explores the dynamic that is occurring between the coach and supervisor (*Mode 3*) and whether it is being replicated in some way between the coachee and coach (*Mode 3*), ie is there some sort of parallel being played out?

Mode 6 is the supervisor's self-reflections on what she is experiencing, here and now, also her roles and responsibilities to the coach and coachee.

Mode 7 is the wider context in which both the coaching and the supervision takes place (*eg the organisational system in which the coachee works, the stakeholders with whom the coach has relationships, the wider social, cultural, ethical context for all parties*).

Given that the focus of Gestalt is to raise awareness of the real figure of interest (*see Chapter 2*) and mobilise appropriate action (*see Chapter 3*) this model provides a rich framework through which to explore Gestalt's key methodologies: phenomenological exploration, working in the here and now (*see Chapters 5*) and active experimentation (*see Chapter 6*).

Mode 1: the client's world

We have already learnt that what becomes figural for a person at any moment in time is a function of their unique context (*their history, thoughts, feelings, experiences, hopes, desires, fears, insecurities etc*). This means that in any coaching session there will be a massive amount of data available for the coach to consider: the setting, what the room is like, what the coachee actually says, how they say it, their non-verbal behaviour, just to name the most obvious. However, it is inevitable that the coach will only pick up a fraction of this available data because of the 'filters' through which they perceive their coachee and the setting in which they are working together.

When reviewing any coaching session during supervision, the critical objective is to help the coach tease apart the actual data provided by the coachee from the interpretations, assumptions, projections (*see Chapter 4*) that the coach has made, in order to shed new light on the recent coaching session and open up different possibilities in subsequent sessions.

One way the supervisor can do this is to help the coach distinguish between phenomenological data and their conclusions based on that data.

Think about a client of your own that you have had a coaching session with recently. Think right back to the moment you saw your client on that day... it might even be before reaching the coaching room (*important data is transmitted at the beginnings and ending of encounters, eg as you*

meet at the lift). Picture the scene as vividly as you can. How did your client look? What was their energy like? Facial expressions, tone of voice?

Try to stay with the actual phenomenological data (eg “*the coachee was red in the face and spoke very quickly*”, as opposed to “*the coachee was embarrassed about being late*”). Now consider what happened next. Play the session through as though it were a movie you are watching...

What happened at the end, how did the session end, what did the coachee actually say and do?

This is clearly an exercise that the Gestalt supervisor can invite the coach to try out in a supervision session. We find this a great way of engaging a supervisee in a different way of exploring a coaching session, especially when you have a supervisee who likes to give you a lot of detail about their client’s situation:

Coach So, at this session, all the client wanted to do was off-load (*Supervisee*): the terrible time he was having with...

Supervisor: Can I interrupt for a moment, before we go any deeper into the story, there is an experiment you might be interested in trying, as a different way of exploring the world of your client. Let me say a bit more, and see if it interests you. I will invite you to relive, certainly the first part of the session, to bring your client into the room. We don’t know where it will go, but is that of interest to you?... (*Coach agrees*). OK... go back to the moment you first saw your client, where are you both?... etc.

Another way of doing this is to invite the coach to be the client... stand, walk, sit as they sit, really feel what it is like to hold that position....

In group supervision, someone else in the group might take on the role of the coachee – imitate their tone and non-verbal behaviour (*as described by the coach*) – whilst the coach observes. Further, the others in the group might be invited to say what was evoked for them as they observed the work, or what they particularly noticed as the coach explored their client’s world.

Often, significant insight can come from simply doing this experiment. The supervisor might then engage the coach in a conversation about the sense they are making of this. A question I particularly like is “What do you know now that was less clear to you before the experiment?”. The supervision session might also then move to explore the work through one of the other lenses and offer one of the experiments outlined below.

Mode 2: The coach's interventions

In Mode 2, the supervisor helps the coach to explore the range of interventions that they are currently using with a client and works with them to explore a wider repertoire of options. This can help newer coaches develop their skills, confidence and competence, and it can support experienced coaches explore how they seem to have an options 'blind spot' with a particular client.

Given that this can be a sensitive area for newer coaches, as many want to show their supervisor that they are 'doing it right' and feel vulnerable if they think they may have missed 'an obvious' intervention, it is important that the supervisor 'grades' the experiment to match the confidence level of the coach (*see Chapter 7 and the notion of constructing the intensity of the experiment*).

In selecting a Level 1 Disassociation experiment, the supervisor might invite the coach to picture herself sitting with her client, and describe (*third party style*) the specific exchanges. Remember this?

"Imagine you are watching a film of the session. At that point of the session, what do you notice about what the people are saying to each other?"

With more experienced coaches you might offer a Level 3 physical enactment (*or in this case start with a re-enactment of what they actually did*) inviting the coach to try a classic two-chair experiment, moving from their own seat to the client's chair as they replay the dialogue. As supervisor you would be checking out their immediate 'here and now' experience as they do this:

"What do you experience as you say that to your client right now?"

You might even see if the coach can access their rationale for the intervention at the time with their client:

"What do you notice in your client? What is your thinking about what will be useful to her?"

To help them widen their options, there are a number of ways that the supervisor can invite the coach to be creative:

- *"OK, no holds barred, what do you really want to say to your client at this moment?"*
- *"What would 'Supercoach' do right now?"*
- *"What is the most outrageous/whacky/creative/challenging thing you could say right now to your client?"*
- *"What would you never dare say to this client?"*

In group supervision, each of the other coaches might say what he or she would do at a particular point. The Supervisor might follow this with a combination of inviting the coach to try some of the options out, really exaggerate them, and play around with them, all the while exploring the coach's experience of working in this way.

Mode 3: The relationship between the coach and coachee

Mode 3 is about the relationship that the coach and coachee are co-creating together. Because the coach is an integral part of the co-created relationship, they have to learn to stand away from the relationship (*or hover above it*) to be able to see it more clearly and to make choices about what they might want to shift in the relationship. Gestalt's active experimentation is a particularly effective way of supporting supervisees to do this.

Once again, the supervisor invites the coach to stand away from the coaching and to observe him or herself working with their client. Depending on the coach and their personal style, there are different ways of doing this. The coach could:

- do it in their imagination and describe what they see happening
- draw a picture of the relationship;
- use objects in the room to represent the two of them;
- use two chairs and picture them sitting together;
- physically enact some of the relationship.

Experiment

Imagery and metaphor can be very illuminating. Here is an experiment you can try now, or could use with a supervisee of your own:

Think of a coaching client of your own with whom you have a relationship that you would like to understand better. Imagine that you are a fly on the wall watching the two of you as you are in your coaching sessions. Watch for a while...

Now, pause the scene for a moment. If the relationship were a dance, what kind of dance would it be? Or a piece of music (*piece of art, film, fairy story... take your pick*).

"If you and your client were on a desert island together, what would happen?"²

2. Thank you Peter Hawkins for this one.

In group supervision one creative option is to have the coach talk a bit about the relationship, and then invite the others in the group to draw it, or to actually enact it, to see what new awareness witnessing this evokes in the coach.

The supervision session would then focus on what sense the coach makes of this and what he or she might need to do to create a shift in the relationship if the coaching is to have maximum value for both coach and coachee.

From here the work could move in a number of directions, for example, to what this evokes in the coach (*the next mode, Mode 4*) and the part they play in the dance; or it might move to how the coach is intervening with the client (*Mode 2*).

Mode 4: The Coach

Mode 4 focuses on the coach, what gets evoked in him when working with this client. What he might be getting ‘hooked’ by and how to understand what of this is a re-stimulation of the coach’s own history versus what might be useful ‘data’ if shared with the client.

The route into Mode 4 can take many paths. The coach might already be aware that there is something about this client that ‘hooks’ a particular reaction that is worthy of exploration. Or the supervisor might notice something potentially interesting in the coach’s tone of voice or non-verbal behaviour as he talks about the client, and so interrupts the unfolding story in order to bring the coach closer to his ‘felt experience’ (*and hence to raise greater awareness of the real figure of interest (see Chapter 2)*). This might be as brief and simple as ‘catching the moment’ and asking the coach to shift their awareness to his own reaction:

Supervisor: (*noticing a particular facial expression*) “What happened just then?”

Or the supervisor might describe to the coach what she noticed:

Supervisor: “As you spoke then about the your client’s reaction to her new colleague, you sat back in your seat and held up your hands like this (*mimics the gesture*). Were you aware of that?”

Coach: “No, no not at all”.

Supervisor: “Are you interested in trying something out? How about repeating what you said, and exaggerate that movement, and notice what happens as you do so... (*coach does this*)... So what do you become aware of as you make that gesture?”

Coach: “Feels like I am pushing my client away from me or maybe I am backing away from her...”

Supervisor: “Ok, you might try saying each of those as you make the movement, ‘I am pushing you away’, ‘I am backing away from you’... (*Coach tries it*)... What happens?”

Coach: “I am backing away. She sounds so judgemental as she describes him, I actually feel a bit shocked...”

Notice here, that the supervisor is simply describing the phenomenological data, with no judgement or interpretation, with the intention of helping the coach get clearer about his own ‘process’. Staying in Mode 4, the coach and supervisor would now spend some time exploring what of this reaction ‘belongs to the coach’ ie what from his history might be being triggered by this client:

Supervisor: “From your own life, what do you know about ‘judgemental?’”

Or

Supervisor: “Who might this client remind you of?”

The coach may be able to answer this question, in which case the supervision work focuses on helping the coach disentangle his history from the current situation.

On the other hand, he may be unable to locate the reaction within his own experience. When this is the case, it is possible that the coach’s reaction may be a genuine response to the behaviour of the client and might mirror the reaction that other people in the client’s world have to the client. When this is the case, the coach is in possession of data that is potentially useful to the client. We talked about Coach Presence and Use of Self in Chapter 10. Here the coach’s reaction has arisen within the interaction between the coach and client, and Gestalt theory would assume that it has some relevance to the client.

The supervision session might, therefore, return to Mode 2 (*Coach’s Interventions*) to explore how the coach could share this data should it happen again, in the service of the client’s own awareness:

Supervisor: “Imagine you are back there in that moment and this time you are more consciously aware of your reaction. Take a look at your client, what could you say about your reaction in the spirit of giving her information and without seeming to ‘judge’ her?”

The distinction between ‘what is the coach’s and what is the client’s’,

however, is by no means easy, and it is almost always going to be a mix of the two. The important thing is that by spending time in supervision exploring this, the coach will be able to recognise that (*at least*) some of his reaction to the client comes from his own ‘material’ and can, therefore, take account of this when next with the client.

Modes 6: The Supervisor’s role, responsibilities and self-reflection

I’ve put this mode first because identifying the roles and responsibilities on the supervisor, will clarify what happens in the relationship (Mode 5). As with Mode 4 the supervisor also needs to pay close attention to how she is feeling and reacting to the coach, especially as there are different roles and the opportunity to explore Parallel Process.

The 3 different roles the supervisor has to play are:

1. Coach
2. Mentor
3. Advisor

She has to be skilled in all three roles and be able to choose which to focus on with the coach at any point in the session.

1. Coach – There is no need to expand on this role since this is the function of the book. However, the supervisor needs to have at least five years coaching practice, be able to articulate her own framework and methodology as well as being versed in a wide range of coaching approaches.

Within the Spectrum of Coaching Practice (*Chapter 1*) a lot of supervision would fall into the Skills Coaching level, since it is helping the coach to develop their skill to deliver a more effective service.

However in Gestalt supervision there is a lot of scope for the supervisor to share her own experiences, success’s and failures, also her emotional responses to the coachee (Mode 1), and the relationship the coach/coachee relationship (Mode 3). This would take the supervisor into the Performance and Developmental level of coaching (*Chapter 1*).

2. Mentor – This is the role of providing guidance, bringing in ideas and suggestions for the less experienced coach; especially around the choice of interventions of Mode 2. The Gestalt supervisor would be thinking in terms of the type and level of experiment the coach could try, offering ideas and different angles. This needs to be used judiciously as the coach can easily feel inadequate and undermined by ‘the expert’ especially if they are a novice coach.

3. Advisor – The supervisor has a responsibility, a ‘duty of care’ to the coachee Mode 1 and his organisation, Mode 7. She is there to ensure that

professional standards are maintained, the coach is practicing safely and ethics are adhered to.

In complex ethical issues the supervisor has to give advice and guidance on action which she would be held accountable for, if a complaint was made.

Gestalt does encourage exploration into emotional areas which can surface deep childhood difficulties and traumas so clarity from the supervisor on whether to continue or refer to a therapist, is critical.

Mode 5: The Supervisor – Coach relationship and concept of ‘Parallel Process’

By understanding the Supervisors roles and responsibilities, the Supervisor/Coach dynamics can be more clearly identified and understood.

It is a very vulnerable position for the coach to reveal his professional mistakes, shortcomings and inadequacies, but unless that becomes possible the key issues will not be addressed. So the supervisor will be constantly paying attention to the quality of the relationship between them and how to maximise that.

EXAMPLE

The coach is talking away positively and enthusiastically about his coachees. The supervisor is feeling drowsy and unengaged but also puzzled about why she should be experiencing this lack of attention. This is a new supervision relationship so it's not as if there is a lot of repetition in content. In good Gestalt fashion the supervisor carefully discloses her experience and shares her puzzlement at why this should be so. The coach is a bit shocked but on exploration with the supervisor identifies that he wants to give a good impression and demonstrate he's capable. He discloses that he's not yet willing to expose his difficulties and is hiding his anxiety. This unblocks the interruption so they can really make contact and become productive together.

Because the Supervisor/Coach work is much more skill-based in terms of the coach delivering a service, a more equal, Lower Strategy Higher Intimacy (*Chapter 8*) relationship can be maintained. This works well in when they are in the Coaching or Mentoring roles and helps the coach to feel that they are in a collaborative rather than authoritative relationship. In doing this, the supervisor is also modelling the qualities of a good coach.

Of course when there are ethical issues or evidence of poor professional standards, the supervisor has to take authority and be in a High Strategy Low Intamacy relationship to give advice and guidance on what needs to change and happen.

It is therefore important that, when using Mentor and Advisor roles, the supervisor needs to be aware of her own grandiosity and desire to be the expert. Being aware of her own authority – needs and careful not to project her own expectations and approach onto the coach, creates a more conducive context for the coach to self-discover. So the supervisor needs to go to supervision on their supervision!

Parallel Process

Since the supervisor is simultaneously paying attention to both the coach/coachee and their supervisor/coach relationship there is an opportunity to draw parallels between the two.

The supervisor has the ability to step back and observe the ‘dance’ that is unfolding in their relationship and consider if in some way it mirrors the coach/coachee dynamics of Mode 3. It is a strange phenomenon but likely to be a function of the system being replicated at different levels.

The coachee can unconsciously treat the supervisor in the same way he has been treated by the coachee. We know that parents will treat their children the way they have been treated by their parents, even if they hated it. In addition the supervisors ability to somatically resonate (*Chapter 7*) with the coaches unaware emotional state will provide data on what might be happening in Mode 3.

Often the route to this realisation comes through Mode 6, the supervisor’s awareness of and reflection on what is being evoked in her in the here and now by this coach and this client’s story. Staying with a theme from an earlier example.

Supervisor: “I have noticed for the last few minutes that I have been experiencing tension in my jaw, and the desire to give you a strong push. This has caught my interest as it is not how I usually experience myself with you. Does that make any sense to you in relationship with this client?”

Coach: “Yes! I really wanted to give her a shove, to tell her off”.

This is an example of Supervisor disclosure/use of self, where the supervisor:

- Becomes aware of her internal reaction
- Checks to see if this has triggered something from the Supervisor’s own history
- Concludes that this doesn’t seem to be the case
- Tests it out with the coach as possible useful data

In group supervision, it is not unusual for the whole group to get caught up in a parallel process. For example (*again following the above example*) the supervisor might suddenly notice that all the questions being asked of the coach are beginning to sound ‘judgemental’, mirroring the theme of the coach/client relationship.

Another example of Mode 5, the parallel process, might look like the following:

Supervisor: “We have been talking about your client’s judgemental tone and your judgement of her. I’ve noticed a few times in this session that your tone in response to my questions has been a bit sharper than I’ve noticed before, and I wonder if you might be feeling the need to push me away? Or feeling judged by me?”

By linking the coach/client dynamic with what the Supervisor is noticing about the supervisor/coach dynamic, the possible parallel process becomes clearer, and the way becomes clear for a conversation about what else is happening in the coach/client relationship.

Mode 7: The wider context

In Gestalt the emphasis is on the importance of context. A person cannot be understood without reference to their unique context (*ie experiences, personal history, thoughts, feelings, conscious and unconscious beliefs, anxieties, fears, dreams, aspirations etc.*) because this is the ‘ground’ from which the person makes meaning of their immediate situation. Whilst individuals bring to supervision their own unique context, everything is part of a wider context, which includes:

- The wider world of the coachee: expectations (*real and imagined*) of key stakeholders, their organisation’s culture, their socio-economic circumstances, family pressures, etc.
- The wider world of the coach: their relationship with the coachee’s organisation and key stakeholders, code of professional practice, his or her economic situation, eg the need for work etc.
- The wider world of the supervisor: codes of ethics of professional bodies, reputation in the professional community etc.

On top of all of this there is also the current economic and political climate, wider cultural factors (*eg business sector, national*) and the areas that are rarely brought into the room: ethnicity (*supervisor, supervisee, end client*), society (historical and current prevailing perspectives on gender, sexual orientation and class) to name a few.

Whilst nobody could be expected to be consciously aware of all aspects of this wider field, Gestalt nevertheless holds that all parts are interrelated and to be understood a person must be seen within their wider context.

The role of the supervisor is to bring into awareness some of these influences that the coach may not have paid any attention to. There are endless experiments that the supervisor might suggest to bring some of the wider context into the supervision session.

EXAMPLE

Invite the coach to take a guided walk through their client's work environment, from observing the outside of the building, right to the space in which the coaching takes place: what do they see, how do they feel, what do they smell, what do they notice about how the people are treated there? Then ask:

What does this tell you about the world of the client? (*Mode 1 – coachee's situation*)

What do you experience as you do this? (*Mode 4 – the coach*)

Invite the coach to tell a fairy story about the coachee, starting with "Once upon a time there was..." (*Mode 1 – coachee's situation*);

Invite the coach to play out a reverse Google Earth... ie guide him through a series of steps starting with the micro level, in the client's office, to the street outside, to the town or city, to the country level, to the continent level and out to the global/planetary level. Ask the coach what they become aware of at each step.

Invite the coach to map out physically with chairs/objects; or draw on paper with symbols, their own wider world (*Mode 4 – the coach*)

Group supervision really comes into its own when other group members can 'represent' different aspects of the wider context, map or sculpt them physically in the room, speak from those different places etc.

The work concludes with inviting the coach to speculate on what new perspectives they have gained, what they realise they know little about, what questions they might want to take back to their client etc.

Summary Supervision is a place where coaches can review their client work, receive high quality personal and professional development, and where complex ethical and boundary management issues can be explored. Coach supervision can happen both on a one-to-one basis and in a small group that meets on a regular basis.

The modes of focus in supervision

The Seven-eyed Model gives a very comprehensive overview of the modes through which the coach and coach supervisor can view the practice of the coach. As the focus of Gestalt is to raise awareness of the real figure of interest and mobilise appropriate action, Gestalt's key methodologies of phenomenological exploration, working in the here and now and active experimentation can readily be employed in all modes.

- Mode 1: The world of the 'end client' ie the coachee, their context and story, the person in whose service the coach supervision is ultimately for. The supervisor helps the coach tease apart the actual data from the interpretations, assumptions, projections made by the coach in order to shed new light on the coaching session and open up different possibilities in subsequent sessions.
- Mode 2: The interventions that the coach is currently using with the coachee. The supervisor works to create a wider repertoire of options eg Level 1 'disassociation' experiment or Level 3 'physical enactment' two-chair experiment
- Mode 3: The relationship between the coach and the coachee. The coach learns to stand away from the relationship to see it more clearly and make choices about what they might want to shift in the relationship.
- Mode 4: What the coach experiences in the presence of this coachee, their personal 'process' that gets evoked when working with this particular coachee. The coach explores whether to disengage from this reaction or use it as useful data about the coachee and their relationship.
- Mode 5: The relationship between the coach and supervisor and whether it is being replicated in some way between the coach and coachee – ie is there some sort of parallel being played out?
- Mode 6: The supervisor's roles as Coach, Mentor and Advisor and responsibilities that arise. Also her self-reflections on what she is experiencing, here and now, in the presence of this coach bringing this material. How this data may be used to reflect any parallel process.

- Mode 7: The wider context in which both the coaching and the supervision takes place (*eg the organisational system in which the coachee works, the stakeholders with whom the coach has relationships, the wider social, cultural, ethical context for all parties*).

Appendix i Flow of Experience

