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Choosing a Supervisor

The EMCC Code mentioned at the beginning of this chapter referred to a suitably-qualified supervisor. However, coaching is still relatively new as a profession so there are not yet any generally agreed qualifications. At the same time, there are highly qualified supervisors whose previous experience may not include coaching but who might nevertheless be suitable.

Within transactional analysis, for instance, the route to becoming an internationally-accredited supervisor involves some 5 to 7 years training plus international examinations to reach analyst status, followed by another 5 to 7 years to qualify as a supervisor. During the latter 5 to 7 years, you are allowed to practice as a provisional supervisor under the overall sponsorship of a fully qualified supervisor (i.e. 5 -7 years plus two more international examinations). This qualifying process means that you learn a lot about how to supervise.

There are of course non-TA approaches to supervisory training that will be just as thorough, and there are also experienced coaches who will make excellent supervisors even if they lack formal qualifications. You will need to decide what is best for you. You may feel it is important to take into account how much any potential supervisor knows about coaching and what you do, although if you are one of the first in a field it may not be that easy to find such a person.

Another factor to consider is what any potential supervisor knows about supervision. Again, in a new field you may not find a great amount of choice amongst highly experienced supervisors. You might at least check that any prospective supervisors do at least place a high value on the process of supervision and have arrangements in place to have regular supervision themselves.

Personal characteristics will also be important. Is your potential supervisor a 'good' person who respects and values others? Is the potential supervisor self-aware and growing? Is the potential supervisor professional and ethical?

Activity 3.2: Choosing a Supervisor

Consider the following – you may find a yes/no response is sufficient but, if not, try rating each factor from 1 to 10 for importance. You can then check out potential supervisors against your priority ratings, or even compare against the complete profile.

How important is it to you that your supervisor:

- Has experience as a coach – if you are a beginner coach yourself this may be essential but if you are fairly experienced you may be able to 'teach' your supervisor what she or he needs to know.
Note also that there is a range of coaching typologies – for instance, business coaching may vary considerably from life coaching so that such experience is irrelevant.
- Has experience of the context(s) in which you practice – again, as a beginner you may need more of the normative, role-modelling aspects of supervision but if you are experienced you may prefer a supervisor who can challenge you from a different perspective.
- has experience of being a supervisor – if you are new to supervision that may be important but if you are an experienced supervisee you may well be able to 'coach' an inexperienced supervisor who had other relevant qualities.
- has experience of being supervised – it is harder to imagine why you would want a supervisor who has not been supervised, unless this is your only choice – in which case, you will want to check that such a supervisor's lack of supervision is due to a lack of available supervisors and not an indication of how little value the individual concerned places on the process.

Note that professional supervisors continue to have supervision of their supervision.

- Demonstrates understanding and use of theoretical frameworks for her or his own practice and which are relevant to your practice too – as mentioned in Chapter 1, it is hard to review what we are doing without some constructs and shared language.

Consider also whether you will find it better to have a supervisor who knows many theories for a broader range of perspectives or one who uses fewer but achieves greater depth.

- Demonstrates application of theories relating to the process of supervision itself. It is hard to reflect effectively without some structured models to guide our attention. Chapters 4-6 give some examples but these are not the only options for theoretical frameworks on supervision. It is less important that the supervisee knows the theories of supervision provided the supervisor has a reliable working framework.
- is respectful of diversity in its many forms and alert to its potential benefits and pitfalls – so will respect you and your clients irrespective of race, religion, gender, sexual preferences or any of the other ways in which people are different – and will work actively with difference to maximise the advantages that can come from contrasting perspectives and experiences.
- is aware of the impact of values, beliefs, assumptions, frames of reference, maps of the world, and so onso will work in ways that take account of your map of the world, and your client's, whilst also taking care to ensure her or his own map is not biasing the process.
- has the capacity for self-regulation – the supervisor will need to foster this in you so it is important that any supervisor is able to monitor her or his own reactions, decide which relate to his or her own issues and which might be useful indicators for you – and also use this awareness skilfully so that you become more self-regulating rather than conforming to the supervisor's uncontrolled reactions.
- demonstrates a commitment to continuing professional development for self as well as for others – most members of professional bodies are nowadays required to maintain CPD logs but it is worth checking out a potential supervisor's attitude to CPD – a chore to keep records or a genuine commitment to seek out opportunities to develop professionally and personally?
- Shows a willingness to abide by an appropriate Code of Ethics and Professional Practice. Even those who are not members of any professional body can still commit to a 'borrowed' code that fits their circumstances. There are, for instance, non-EMCC members who have chosen to state that they operate to the EMCC Code (although there is of course no route for complaints in this case, so it might be more meaningful for clients if they became members).

Some practical considerations

Having chosen a supervisor or a group of reflection-colleagues, you need to determine how much supervision to have. Various professional bodies set out hours of supervision required per hours of practice but these generally relate to counsellors, therapists, clinical psychologists and the like. The typical client issues for these roles tend to involve deeper psychological processes so it is probable that coaches need a lower ratio.

Hence, if a counsellor is expected to have one hour of supervision for every 6 hours practice, a coach might need only 1 in 12. Of course, this is a guide only and rather like the proverbial piece of string. If you are new to coaching and/or find it stimulates personal issues for you, you will need more supervision. If you are an experienced coach, you may need less supervision, but on the other hand, you may now work with more challenging clients and so you will need more supervision.

There is also a decision to be made about whether you will benefit more from regular supervision or from scheduling supervision to match a varying workload. Should you get supervision weekly or

monthly – or have a supervision session after every 12 hours of working with clients – or a mix of both patterns?

And do you need the discipline of scheduling supervision sessions for a minimum number of times (say quarterly) across the year so you keep the habit even when your workload dips? Or is it more effective to have a series of supervision sessions for a while and then take a break while you consolidate what you have learned?

Your choices around the various scheduling options need to be based on factors such as your preferred learning style and your need to be prompted to move around the learning cycle to maximise your learning, your level of experience as a coach and as a supervisee, and your working patterns, including how central or occasional your coaching practice is. You will probably also need to take into account the nature of your clients and your practice, the expectations of your clients and any organisational stakeholders, and, of course, the expectations of the supervisor.

Another factor that will impact on your scheduling of supervision is the timing of the supervision slots. There are some very different opinions about the length of supervision sessions. Coaching sessions often last for an hour or more and I am aware that some supervisors follow this pattern. However, once we get into the sort of in-depth analysis that often involves exploring the coach's own issues, I have found that 20 minutes at a time for an individual supervisee is probably more appropriate. Reflecting and analysing is a challenging and impactful process and my experience has been that after 20 minutes our ability to absorb new learning reduces significantly.

It is possible, of course, to run for longer and pick up several points. However, we need to be careful that this doesn't simply reduce the impact of each aspect addressed. A series of 20 minute slots will mean that the work is far more focused and potent, even if they are run one after the other with some clear punctuations between them such as a couple of minutes break or some re-contracting. Process reviews, when the members of the group reflect on the supervision they have just observed, will help to create natural breaks between slots. It is even better if supervisees can take turns so that their learning has time to settle before they work on the next issue.

I have been writing as if your supervision sessions will be face to face, either with one colleague or supervisor or in a group. It is becoming increasingly common to arrange supervision by teleconference or through a one-to-one phone call. I have supervisees around the world and it is expensive to visit them too often. Without wishing to advertise any particular service, I now use a teleconferencing service and also one that operates via my broadband connection. This latter arrangement allows us unlimited talk time at no additional costs above having the line in the first place. We can also exchange diagrams or texts via our computers, and set up simple cameras at either end so we can see each other. I am not that technologically minded but the set up procedures were very easy to follow.

One final point on practicalities is cost. I am not going to quote supervision fees in this book because the information will quickly date. However, you can expect that supervisors will charge more than coaches because they will have had to set aside time and money to add supervisory skills to their coaching competencies. My own training as a transactional analyst took about four years whereas my training as a supervisor then took another six years. I also spent two or three years working through NLP practitioner, master practitioner and finally trainer qualifications. I think of this like any other profession – the further you move up the levels, the more it costs you, so the more you expect to charge for your services in order to justify what it has cost you already.

This can be quite a problem for new coaches and many supervisors will be sympathetic and offer financial reductions until a coach has an established client base, especially if the coach trained with the supervisor's organisation. I recommend that you ask openly about financial arrangements and be prepared to admit it if you can't afford the fees. Check out also for grants and bursaries that may be available. If you are employed within an organisation, make sure that management understand the

importance of budgeting for your supervision as well as for your training. If you are in the not-for-profit sector, check out how the question of supervision is dealt with.

Relationships

There are some relationship aspects that also need attention when you are choosing supervisors and reflection-colleagues.

Dual relationships

This echoes similar considerations for coaches and clients. A client may be reluctant to 'confess' to weaknesses if the coach is a line manager. Likewise, a supervisee may find it hard to reflect on areas for development if the supervisor has any managerial responsibilities for the supervisee's practice.

It is pointless to insist that these need not be a problem, that supervisees are adults and should be able to manage such a relationship. It is just as unhelpful to say that supervisors should have enough skill to separate their different functions. We are all still human beings and not strictly rational machines.

So it seems that the normative element of supervision may conflict with the formative and supportive aspects. If supervisors are held responsible for the supervisees' work, they will inevitably be tempted to tell the supervisees what to do sometimes rather than letting them learn from their own mistakes.

Where the normative element relates to a shared professional background, it will be easier to offer role modelling that supervisees can accept or reject. With this relationship, a supervisor will only need to intervene directly to prevent a coach from doing something that will actually be harmful – to the client, the coach or other stakeholder.

However, if the supervisor is also the line manager, then any coach 'errors' may well be counted against the supervisor/manager in her or his own performance appraisal, just as any other shortcomings amongst the subordinates will be judged as a managerial failure.

It may be that you have no choice and your organisation expects your line manager to be your supervisor. In that case, accept the shortcomings of this arrangement and make every effort to find an additional, neutral supervisor, even if you have to sort this out and pay for it yourself.

Another form of dual relationship may arise when a supervisor is also a counsellor or therapist. This may seem beneficial but the nature of the relationship with counsellors and therapists is significantly different to that with a supervisor. You will see this from the material in Chapter 1 on positioning your practice. It is not easy to mix working in the here-and-now with using regression. Once someone has regressed and experienced the nature of relating from that standpoint, it is hard to switch back to here-and-now, two rational adults reflecting together. Even therapists arrange to have a supervisor who is not the same person as their personal therapist. Hence, if you want some therapy on personal issues and find it hard to stay in the here-and-now to work on them, find someone else to undertake the role of therapist for you. That way, you experience two different approaches, with no confusion, and hence both are more potent.

Yet another form of dual relationship that impacts on supervision just as much as it does on coaching is when there are additional social and/or sexual relationships in existence. We know that it is risky to coach our own family and the same difficulties apply to supervision. It is too hard to separate the various strands of the relationship. Confront your supervisees about their discounting and they are likely to take it personally. If you are close enough to supervisees, you will probably have a similar frame of reference in many respects so you won't even notice their discounting because you are discounting in the same way yourself.

One final consideration - however much you aim to work in the here-and-now, the supervision process is likely to involve some element of dependency from time to time. If the supervisor is also a consultant to the supervisee, it will be hard to ensure that any consultancy work (and associated fees)

is not being offered to the consultant/supervisor because the customer/supervisee has gone into dependency mode without realising. Ethically, supervisors need to avoid consulting to supervisees or they need to ensure a third party, such as the supervisee's manager, is asked to check out and confirm any business arrangements.