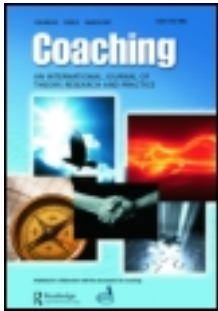


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What is coaching supervision and is it important?

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In this study 33 executive coaches from Australia/New Zealand, and 29 purchasing clients, were interviewed about the functions of coaching supervision. Though coaches cited supervision as the intervention they would be most likely to deploy if they felt the need for emotional support, few coaches said they often felt the need for such support. The predominant function of coaching supervision for coaches was developmental. For purchasing clients, on the other hand, the primary purpose of supervision was quality control, though only 21% of purchasing clients insist on supervision as part of a quality assurance process. In this context, the notion that coaching supervision should be mandatory, regular and undertaken individually with a qualified coach supervisor is discussed.

Keywords: coaching; executive coaching; supervision; coaching supervision; continuing professional development

Introduction

Coaching supervision is an emerging development in coaching practice (Grant, 2012). As it emerges, so has concurrently emerged a community of practitioners who believe all coaches should be undergoing supervision. The Standards Australia Handbook for Coaching in Organisations (2010), for example, prepared by a committee of academics, coaching organisations, clients and coaching bodies, suggests that all coaches should be engaged in professional supervision on a regular basis, that coaching supervision should be subject to a formal, mutually agreed arrangement, and that the supervisor should be an experienced and competent coaching practitioner familiar with the process of supervision. Bachkirova, Jackson, and Clutterbuck (2011), on the other hand, note that while having a supervisor now appears to be regarded as essential practice in Europe, this is not a universally held view, and that such views may contribute to tension in the debate around supervision. If coaching supervision is regarded as essential practice in Europe, Passmore and McGoldrick (2009) suggest that it may be spoken about more often than it is practised, at least by coaches in the UK. They point to a general lack of clarity as to the various benefits of supervision when considered alongside other professional development interventions. Passmore (2011), for example, suggests that while new coaches may benefit greatly from group supervision, more experienced coaches may benefit more from the use of learning logs and peer mentoring.

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Models of supervision

Gray (2007) and Gray and Jackson (2011), drawing on the work of Carroll (1996), provide a short history of the development of models for supervision, beginning with the evolution of models within the fields of counselling and psychotherapy. Early informal, psychodynamic models were followed in the 1950s by more didactic models focused on skills development. In the 1970s, developmental models emerged and models concerned with social roles. One of the best known social role models is the Hawkins and Shoher model, which later evolved into the 'seven-eyed' model (Hawkins & Schwenk, 2011), a model originally developed for counsellors and psychotherapists (Hawkins & Smith, 2006) before being developed for use by coaches. Carroll (2006) outlines a systemic overview of coaching psychology supervision which places greater emphasis on the role of the organisation, and Munro Turner (2011) adapts the seven-eyed model to specifically include 'the work world'. Recent books edited by Passmore (2009) and Bachkirova et al. (2011) describe other supervision models designed for, or adapted to, coaching.

The purpose of coaching supervision

Hawkins and Smith (2006) describe three functions, cited also by Munro Turner (2011) and the Standards Australia Handbook for Coaching in Organisations (2010):

- (1) *Developmental*. Developing the skills, understanding and capacities of the supervisee.
- (2) *Resourcing*. Attending to the emotions of supervisees, so that they do not allow themselves to be affected by the emotions of the client.
- (3) *Qualitative*. The supervisor may have a responsibility for the supervisees work, ensuring the supervisee's work is of the required standard.

Moyes (2009) describes these three functions and highlights also a particular aspect of the developmental, namely the capacity of the supervisor to facilitate a transformational shift if they and/or the coachee get stuck. In a discussion of coaching supervision, as opposed to counselling supervision, two of these three functions are worth particular consideration. The emphasis on the *resourcing* function serves as a further reminder that many of today's approaches to coaching supervision can be traced to therapeutic and clinical practice. However, coaching is not the same as counselling or psychotherapy even though an increasing number of therapists may now be coaching (Bluckert, 2005) and performing the role of supervisor (Hawkins & Smith, 2006). Farmer (2012) suggests that coaches may often seek supervision from therapists because they are more available and cheaper, thereby perpetuating in practice a clinical approach to supervision, which may not be justified (Butwell, 2006). Moyes (2009) differentiates between coaching supervision and coaching psychology supervision, defining the latter as explicitly addressing 'the psychological nature of the coaching process, as well as the application of psychological theory and methods within the coaching process' (p. 163). The *qualitative* function is also worth examining from the world of coaching. Gray (2004) suggests that coaching should be evaluated and Carroll (2009) also suggests that one function of supervision is assessment. Armstrong and Geddes (2009) disagree on the basis that coaching is, as yet, unregulated. They suggest supervision has a monitoring function only in certain situations, such as coaches in training or being subject to the standards of an employer. The qualitative function implies that the supervisor is in some way more experienced than the person they are supervising, or holds some additional form of qualification. For some coaches, however, coaching supervision may

simply be the facilitation of reflective practice, such that coaches can provide supervision to each other. Thomson (2011), for example, cites Christian and Kitto (1987) in defining supervision as ‘a process whereby one person enables another to think better’ (p. 103).

The systemic supervisor

A final aspect of coaching supervision also merits discussion. Hawkins and Smith (2006) distinguish between the attributes of coach and coaching supervisor on the basis that a coaching supervisor must be able to adopt a systemic approach. Their definition of coaching supervision explicitly refers to the supervisee’s capacity to understand the client system. Bachkirova et al. (2011) suggest that this systemic perspective is essential in coaching supervision, and that more linear approaches may be unhelpful to both coach and client.

The purpose of this study was to further explore the attitude of clients and coaches in Australia and New Zealand. Grant (2012) has already surveyed the views of coaches in Australia. He surveyed 174 Australian coaches by means of an online questionnaire and found that 83% of coaches undertook some form of ‘supervision’, though only 26% had a formal supervisor. About 18% had an informal supervisor and 39% used peer supervision. He reported that coaches appear committed in general to regular supervision, with the most common time frame being fortnightly, and that coaches use supervision as an opportunity for reflective practice; to develop new insights and perspectives, and to maintain the delivery of good quality coaching, particularly in dealing with difficult cases. The majority of coaches surveyed believe coaching supervisors should have a specific qualification in coaching supervision, and they said the main barriers to coaching supervision are (1) cost and (2) a lack of qualified supervisors.

In this study, it was decided to explore the views of both clients and coaches. In exploring the views of coaches it was decided to interview coaches rather than conduct a survey, in order to be able to further interrogate and understand the views expressed. It was also decided to begin interviews without specific reference to supervision, instead seeking to understand coach’s strategies for managing the different suggested functions of supervision.

Methodology

Participants

Coaches

Standard sampling techniques require that the researcher has access to a list of all the members of a population (Salganik & Heckathorn, 2004), information that is unavailable in an unregulated coaching industry. At the same time, choosing a sample of coaches all drawn from the same institutional setting is unlikely to generate representative insights, and so a version of respondent-based sampling was used (Salganik & Heckathorn, 2004). Cognisant that many coaches in Australia/New Zealand are members of their national psychological association and/or members of the International Coaching Federation (ICF), and that these two bodies have different supervision requirements the researchers initially contacted roughly equal numbers of coaches known to be members of their national psychological association, members of the ICF or neither. Cognisant also that both the national psychology associations and the ICF have strong state chapters, and so may have locally preferred approaches to supervision, it was decided to invite roughly equal numbers of coaches from NSW, Victoria and New Zealand. An initial group of 11

coaches were invited, who then referred the researchers to a further 22 coaches. [Table 1](#) details the profiles of coaches interviewed, including data collected from coaches during the interview, namely, did participants consider themselves to be sole practitioners or members of a coaching collective, and how many years they had been practising as an external coach.

Purchasing clients

Because not all organisations deploy coaching services, and because organisational responsibility for the procurement of coaching services is not transparent, standard sampling techniques again were not considered to be appropriate. The authors drew up a list of 50 purchasing clients, known by the authors (1) to be responsible for purchasing coaching services on behalf of their organisation, or to have had that responsibility in the recent past, and (2) to have experience purchasing coaching services from more than one provider. A total of 29 purchasers accepted the invitation, from 26 different organisations. The 26 organisations included 4 subsidiaries of multinational companies with headquarters based outside Australia and listed in Forbes 2000 biggest companies. A total of 11 were listed on the ASX 200, 4 were government agencies or departments and 5 were privately owned including partnerships. Of the 29 purchasing clients interviewed, 16 were based in Sydney, 10 in Melbourne, 1 in Brisbane and 2 in the USA. The 29 purchasing clients were collectively accountable for an annual spend of approximately \$5m on coaching services.

Interview process

A grounded theory approach was used in which the processes of data collection and analysis were conducted in parallel (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Accordingly the interviewer used a semi-structured questionnaire ([appendices 1 and 2](#)) with a licence to explore new themes as they emerged. One interviewer conducted all the interviews, making hand-written notes including selected quotes, which he later typed up.

The interviewer met regularly with a colleague during the interviewing process to discuss the emergence of key themes and in particular different meanings being attached to words such as ‘supervision’, ‘coaching’ and related terms and concepts, such as ‘quality control’. Recognising and exploring these apparent discrepancies was an essential component of the research process (Corbin & Strauss, 1990).

Table 1. Profile of coaches surveyed.

	No.	Sole practitioner (SP) or member of a collective?		Experience (years coaching)	Member of the ICF	Registered Psychologist	Member APS/ NZPS ^a
		SP	Collective				
NSW	15	8	7	7.7	11	1	4
VIC	10	8	2	10.0	5	4	3
NZ	8	7	1	6.9	4	3	6
Total	33	23	10	8.2	20	8	13

^aAustralian Psychological Society/New Zealand Psychological Society.

All participants were told that their responses would be treated as confidential. Interviews with Sydney-based participants were conducted face-to-face, the rest of the interviews were conducted over the phone.

Coaches

Participants agreed to participate in 45 minute interviews about aspects of their practice. The actual duration of interviews varied between approximately 30 and 45 minutes. The questionnaire began with questions relating to the theoretical purposes of supervision (Hawkins & Smith, 2006; Moyes, 2009), without specific reference to supervision. Two aspects of development were explored; general development and ‘getting unstuck’. Two aspects of client protection were explored; ethics and managing the sometimes different agendas of client and coachee. Only after answering these questions did the researcher ask specifically about supervision.

Purchasing clients

Participants agreed to participate in 45 minute interviews about coaching Return on Investment (ROI) and coaching supervision. The questions on supervision were asked after the questions about coaching ROI.

Results

Coaches

The vast majority of coaches said they considered using supervision if they got stuck in an assignment or if they needed support (Table 2). About 36% mentioned supervision as a component of their ongoing learning plan, 27% said they used supervision to ensure they were practising ethically and just 6% mentioned supervision as part of their strategy for ensuring they successfully navigated the needs of both client and coachee.

Table 2. Top 5 approaches to managing different purposes of coaching supervision.

	Learning (%)	Getting unstuck (%)	Support and self-awareness (%)	Maintaining ethics (%)	Navigating client/coachee needs (%)
1	Supervision (36)	Supervision (79)	Supervision (76)	Ingrained (39)	Clarify expectations upfront (60)
2	Studying for a coaching qualification (30)	Self-reflection (24)	Self-reflection (24)	Self-reflection (39)	Monitor regularly (27)
3	University study (24)	Read/research (21)	Talk to coachee (9)	Supervision (27)	Review at the end (19)
4	Conferences/seminars (21)	Talk to client/coachee (12)	Read/research (9)	Clarify coaching agreement (15)	Coach the client (15)
5	Psychometric tool accreditation (9)	Has never happened (6)	Has never happened/Talk to client/talk to therapist (6)	Talk to coachee (9)	Principal commitment to coachee (12)

Sixty-four per cent of coaches mentioned at least one form of learning activity. The prevalence of supervision may be understated here, given that supervision is sometimes a mandatory component of formal study programmes. Learning objectives were broad ranging and diverse including coaching skills (e.g. challenging the coachee effectively, establishing measurable outcomes and team coaching) and personal qualities (e.g. presence and authenticity). Twelve per cent specifically talked about managing complexity or systemic aspects of coaching assignments. Although a high proportion of coaches mentioned supervision with respect to getting stuck and seeking support, 21% of coaches said they never or rarely got stuck, and a similar number said they never, or rarely, required support. Of those who did seek supervision for these purposes, most sought supervision occasionally, when required. Relatively few coaches sought out supervision when faced with an ethical dilemma. The majority said that they felt their ethics were ‘ingrained’ or otherwise fully integrated in their practice. When asked which ethics they referred to, 54% specified ICF ethics and 30% professional psychology ethics. Although many coaches talked about how challenging it could be to manage the ‘coaching triangle’ of coach, coachee and client, few mentioned supervision in this context. The majority focused on contracting, usually at the beginning of an assignment.

Forms of supervision

When asked if they undertook supervision, it became clear that not all coaches shared the same understanding as to what supervision meant. Some coaches, for example, referred to informal consultation with colleagues as supervision, others referred to the same practice but made a point of saying they did not think this constituted supervision. Consequently answers were categorised with reference to four parameters:

- *Formal or informal*: whether or not the relationship had been established explicitly as a supervisor–supervisee, or peer supervision process.
- *Individual or group*: one-to-one, or as part of a group.
- *Regular or ad hoc*: whether or not sessions were held on a regular basis.
- *Paid or unpaid*: whether or not the coach paid the individual or group supervisor.

These four parameters give us 16 possible forms of supervision (Table 3).

Five of the coaches we spoke to undertook *only* informal supervision. When asked why they did not undertake formal supervision, replies included:

I could pay, but I don’t have many clients at the moment, and I don’t know if other coaches do. If you say you don’t have many clients, there’s a fear of being seen as a failure.

I think it’s a good idea for new coaches. I don’t feel the need for it after *x* years. Who would I get to supervise me? Who has more experience than me? I make up my own rules thanks! My clients don’t care so why should I?

I undertake supervision when I need it, usually when I get stuck, which hasn’t happened for a while. I often talk with my partners about things; particular approaches, sharing learnings, the process of coaching.

Of the other forms of supervision three were particular popular, all of them ‘formal’:

- (1) *Individual – regular – paid*. Thirty-three per cent of coaches paid someone to supervise them on a regular basis. Many sought out the services of a registered

Table 3. Forms of supervision.

	Individual				Group			
	Regular		Ad hoc		Regular		Ad hoc	
	Paid	Unpaid	Paid	Unpaid	Paid	Unpaid	Paid	Unpaid
Formal	11	2	6	0	2	10	0	1
Informal	0	0	0	33 (4 ^a)	0	3 (1 ^b)	0	2

^aFour people undertook *only* this form of supervision.

^bOne person undertook *only* this form of supervision.

psychologist, but not specifically someone with supervision training. These coaches had an average 7.3 years of experience. Overall, this appeared to be the preferred form of supervision by ICF members, with coaches paying an average \$163/session. Supervision methods tended to operate much like coaching sessions, with the coach/supervisee determining the agenda, and the supervisor probing and challenging in service of helping the coach come up with their own insights.

- (2) *Group – regular – unpaid.* Thirty per cent of coaches met with fellow coaches on a regular basis. These coaches had an average 6.3 years of experience. This was a popular form of supervision amongst the New Zealand coaches we spoke to, who found peer groups through psychology networks, ICF networks or both. Peer supervision was also popular among psychologists generally. Some peer groups included HR professionals and consultants as well as coaches. Supervision methods generally involved members sharing specific cases with the rest of the group and seeking feedback on their approach.
- (3) *Individual – ad hoc –paid.* Eighteen per cent of respondents paid for supervision on an as-needs basis. These coaches tended to be more experienced than the group as a whole (9.8 years vs. 8.2 years) and paid more for the supervision they received than those undergoing regular individual supervision (\$273 vs. \$163).

Why undertake supervision?

About 33% talked about gaining access to other people’s perspectives, 24% talked about becoming more self-aware and others talked about valuing support and becoming more confident. For example:

It’s about making sure I’m always improving, giving best service to the client. The more minds you can tap into, the better, avoiding blinkered thinking.

Eighteen per cent said they undertook supervision because they were obliged to by their professional body (Australian Psychological Society or New Zealand Psychological Society):

It’s part of my professional upbringing. I assume it’s right.

When asked how coaching had changed their practice (Figure 1), 58% talked about their development generally, and most of the other changes mentioned also related to

development, including increased confidence, self-awareness and enhanced capacities to reflect and be present (Figure 2).

It keeps me coming back to... my confidence as a coach has really improved... back to trusting the conversation – I don't have to have the solution. Not getting stuck on over-preparation, managing the nerves. It helps confidence. Just hearing different techniques, questions, the power of the question.

Only two of the coaches said they included supervisory experience and/or qualifications as a selection criterion. Fifty per cent of the 28 coaches undergoing some form of formal supervision looked for coaching experience. Twenty-nine per cent looked for a registered psychologist, though not specifically a psychologist with supervisory qualifications:

I like them both and respect their opinions. They're both relatively senior and both registered psychologists, but with different perspectives and different personalities. One's analytic and the other's opposite.

For many the process was intuitive and informal:

It depends what I want. Someone very different to me. Sometimes who they are as a person. Can I learn something from this person? Does this person inspire me? It's intuitive.

There was an informal network in play anyway and we invited others in. The core has been there since the get-go, three years now. It's a reasonably diverse group; consultants, coaches, senior HR people, a new guy from xxx with a testing and assessment background.

Thirty-six per cent of the 28 coaches undergoing some form of formal supervision had no contract in place. About 36% agreed expectations upfront, and 18% described a process

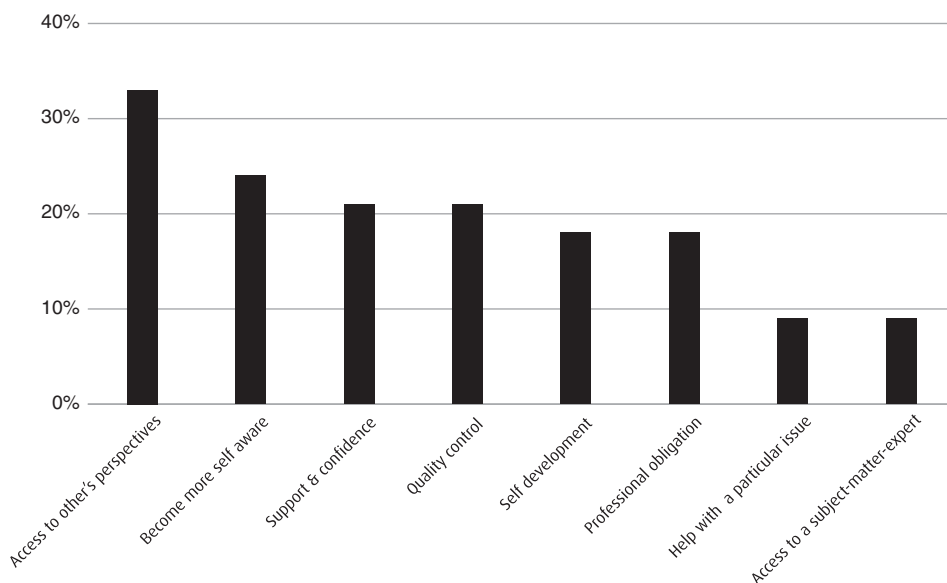


Figure 1. Why coaches undertake supervision.

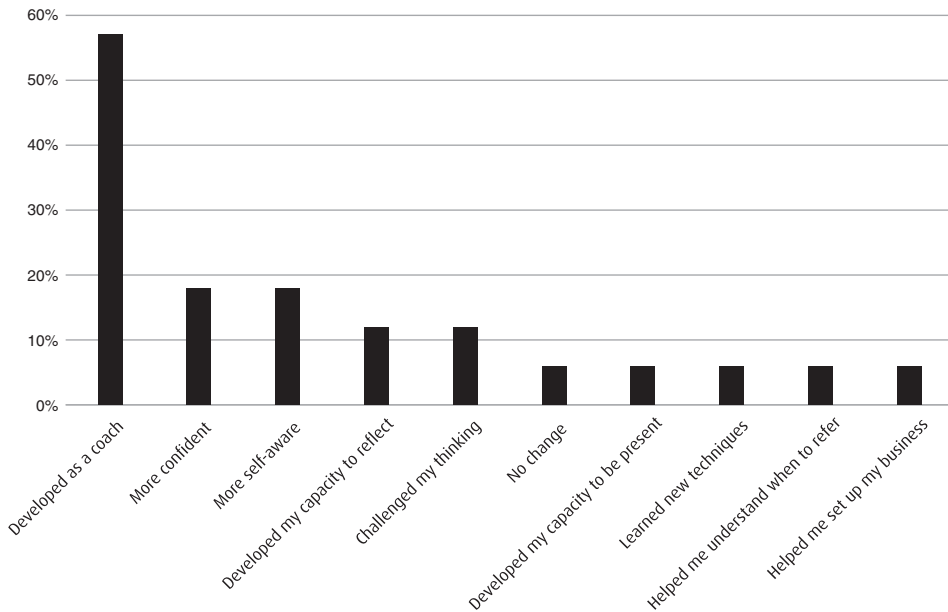


Figure 2. How supervision has changed coaches' practices.

in which the coach established expectations session by session. Three coaches referred to a clear pre-defined process; one brought to the relationship by a supervisor with a counselling background, and one derived from a protocol obtained from the University of Sydney coaching masters course (Figure 3).

Purchasing clients

Twenty-one per cent of clients said that they asked potential coaches if they undertook supervision as part of the coach selection process. In discussing the value, or potential value of coaching supervision, clients were focused on supervision as a means by which the quality of the coach's work could be assured by others, and by which coaches were focused on ensuring they were up to date with the latest models and techniques. Seventy-nine per cent of clients said they did not insist on coaches being supervised. Forty-one per cent said this was because other factors were more important (e.g. coaching qualifications, coaching experience, frameworks used, evident integrity). Fourteen per cent said they assumed that the relevant coaching organisation supervised their coaches on clients' behalf. Seven per cent assumed that coaches undertook supervision as part of their early or ongoing development. Ten per cent of respondents said they did not know what coaching supervision was. Within this group we found evidence of different attitudes to supervision. Some saw it as essentially reflective practice, not very different to coaching. Others placed more emphasis on the evaluative function of supervision:

I would want to know the coach was being supervised, by the ICF or by their organisation, every 6 months with a senior coach. I want to know they're getting objective feedback from a more experienced coach and not using the same old models and questions. The senior coach should have 10–15 years experience and a master level qualification in psychology and/or coaching, and should be certified with a registered body.

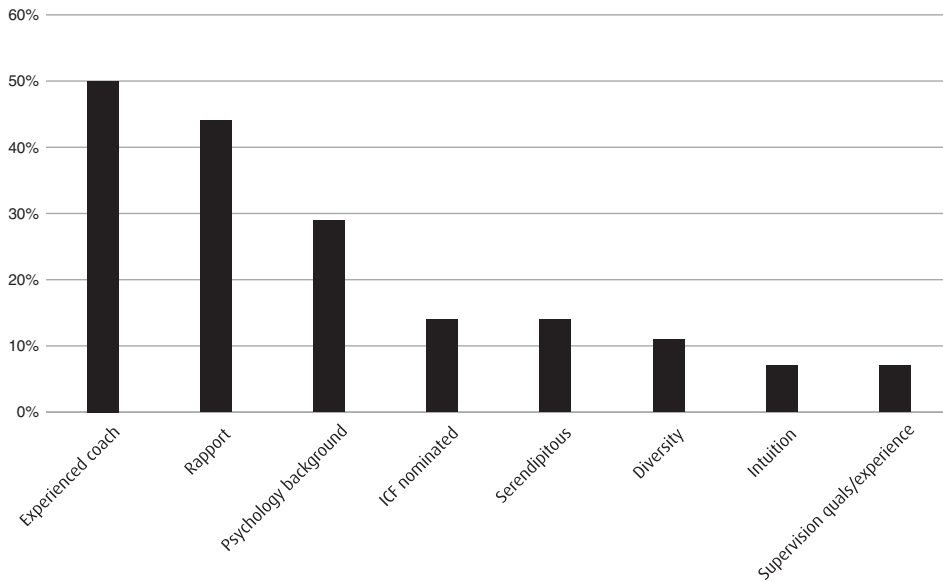


Figure 3. How coaches chose their supervisors.

Few clients were so specific however. Most were focused on outcomes and coaching efficacy, and few felt they understood supervision well enough to be able to make judgements as to a coach's ability based on whether they undertook supervision.

Discussion

Eighty-five per cent of the coaches we spoke to undertook some form of 'formal' supervision (as defined here). Thirty-three per cent undertook formal, regular, paid, one-to-one supervision. These numbers appear broadly consistent with those reported by Grant (2012) and Passmore and McGoldrick (2009).

The resourcing function

On the face of it our data might be seen as supporting the idea that resourcing is an important function for coaching supervision, since 76% of coaches named supervision as their primary intervention when feeling the need for support. However, few coaches appear to feel the need for this kind of support very often. Coaches with a clinical or therapeutic background were more likely to seek out supervision in this context, with a few seeing it as essential practice, for example:

I got cross with one coach who didn't address the emotional abuse that the coachee evidently needed help with. To suggest coaches don't need supervision is a nonsense! We are involved in the psychology of the people we coach, and I get frustrated at the glib approach of some untrained coaches.

Moyes (2009) suggests that the supportive aspect of supervision may be more important in therapy, or other scenarios in which coaches are typically working with the deprived or disturbed clients, than it is in coaching.

The qualitative function

When asked why they undertook supervision, 21% of coaches explicitly made reference to ensuring the quality of their work. This appeared to refer to the further development of their skills rather than managerial aspects of supervision or the protection of the client from unethical or unprofessional practice. This is consistent with Moyes' (2009) findings. The majority of clients referred to the primary function of supervision as being to assure the quality of the coach's work, yet relatively few insisted that coaches be undertaking supervision. Bachkirova et al. (2011) assert that there is growing pressure from client organisations for systems of ongoing quality assurance as opposed to one-off accreditation. The clients we spoke to were looking for direct evidence of the outcomes of such processes, and/or for supplier organisations to conduct these processes on their behalf.

The developmental function

The primary purpose of coaching supervision for coaches appears to be developmental. This definition of developmental is broader than a conversation around learning plans and activities. Most of the coaches we spoke to did not have formal learning plans, or else had formal plans only to satisfy the requirements of professional bodies. Hawkins (2006) suggests that what coaches most want from their supervisors is the capacity to facilitate change, or 'create a shift' when they are stuck. The coaches in this study seemed less focused on 'getting unstuck' and more focused on the underlying development of their capacity to coach. Though 79% of coaches said they sought supervision when they got stuck in an assignment, 21% of coaches said this rarely, or never, happened.

Developmental models of coaching supervision

Gray and Jackson (2011) reviewed developmental models of supervision in which the recipient of supervision progresses through a series of developmental stages. The results of this study tend to support some form of underlying developmental effect. The coaches we interviewed were experienced relative to the market (average 8.2 years). Within our population, however, those who undertook group supervision were less experienced (average coaching experience 6.3 years). Coaches undertaking regular, paid, individual supervision were more experienced (average experience 7.3 years). Coaches undertaking ad hoc, paid, individual supervision were more experienced still (9.8 years). Several of the coaches in the latter group were quite particular as to who they sought as a supervisor, often contracting with supervisors based overseas. This supports the suggestion that experienced practitioners may seek less regular support (Gray & Jackson, 2011), throwing into question again the assertion that all coaches should be undergoing regular supervision.

The coaching supervisor

Grant (2012) and Passmore and McGoldrick (2009) suggest that the availability of qualified supervisors may be barriers to coaches seeking to be supervised. Only 6% of the coaches in this study said that supervisory qualifications were a criterion for selecting a supervisor. Moreover, few coaches reported a highly structured approach to supervision, including the process of supervision itself and the nature of the contracting process. Gray and Jackson (2011) suggest that the purpose of contracting includes identifying and clarifying the supervisee's developmental needs, the supervisor's competencies,

opportunities provided by work settings and supervisory goals, methods and focus. The results of this study suggest that what contracting does take place in Australia/New Zealand is largely informal. That coaches tend to look for an experienced coach from whom to receive supervision, and that a minority are looking for someone from a psychological background suggests that some implicit contracting is taking place matching developmental need with supervisor competencies. This form of contracting does not appear to extend to particular methodologies. That coaches and supervisors in this study are not contracting around process is perhaps not surprising given that few supervisors appear to have been formally trained as such. We did not find evidence that coaches seek supervision from therapists because they are more available and cheaper (Farmer, 2012), given that none of the coaches seeking individual supervision specified cost as a primary criterion, and none said that they were looking for a counsellor to act as supervisor.

Coach and supervisor as systemic practitioners

Bachkirova et al. (2011), and in particular Hawkins and Schwenk (2011), suggest that the systemic perspective of the coaching supervisor is of primary importance, and is a critical difference between a coach and a coaching supervisor. Gray and Jackson (2011) suggest that the role of the coaching supervisor as opposed to a counselling supervisor is, specifically, to handle tensions between coach, coachee and organisation. This raises an interesting question relating to the definition of a coach, namely, if it is important for the coach to be aware of the importance of environmental factors in facilitating sustainable change (Bachkirova et al., 2011), why then is the systemic perspective flagged as an attribute of an effective coaching supervisor, but not a coach per se? The results of this study imply that the majority of coaches do not adopt a systemic perspective. Returning to the data in Table 1, only 6% of coaches sought supervision to help them navigate the potentially conflicting needs of coachee and client. The majority sought to achieve alignment around the parameters of a coaching assignment upfront. Fewer talked about monitoring alignment during the assignment, and only 19% talked about conducting a review at the end. These were the only strategies mentioned by more than 15% of coaches. In one sense this is not surprising. The ICF core competencies, for example, refer mainly to the coach's skills in the 1:1 domain. The Standards Australia Guidelines for Coaching in Organisations (2010) also emphasise contracting upfront without explicitly referring to the ongoing relationship. However, this appears to us to be an insufficient approach to managing the needs of organisation and coachee. With reference to complexity theory, in which change is described as emergent and unpredictable (e.g. Beech, Kajzer-Mitchell, Oswick, & Saren, 2011; Boyatzis, 2008; Jabri, Adrian, & Boje, 2008; Stacey, 2012), checking in with key stakeholders once, at the beginning of an assignment, seems to be a very linear and simplistic approach to managing expectations over the course of an assignment that might last a year or more. However, just as not all coaches work from a psychological perspective, and not all coaches undergo supervision to provide assurance to clients as to the quality of their work, so not all coaches may agree that the primary purpose of coaching supervision is to help them work from a systemic perspective. It is difficult to define coaching supervision without agreeing first what is coaching.

Conclusions

For the majority of coaches the most important function of supervision appears to be developmental (Carroll, 2010). Coaches in this study referred to supervision's resourcing function but said they rarely called upon supervision for that purpose. Purchasing clients understood supervision for its qualitative function, but most did not appear to believe that quality of coaching would be significantly improved by insisting that coaches undertake supervision. Clients focused on other factors, such as coach experience and qualifications.

Rather than ask why some coaches *don't* undertake supervision, it may be more insightful to ask why coaches *do* undertake supervision as opposed to other developmental interventions. The results of this study suggest there are at least three reasons. First, the functional background of the coach may play a role. As Childs, Woods, Willcock, and Man (2011) point out, the boundaries for coaching are not universally agreed. Some suggest coaching should focus solely on behaviour change and performance, while others argue that to get to the bottom of behavioural issues necessitates working with deeper psychological and emotional issues. Coaching psychologists then, or coaches with a background in counselling/psychotherapy, might be more likely to seek out supervision specifically to attend to psychological aspects of coaching. Second, coaches from professional backgrounds generally may be pre-disposed to the importance of supervision. Gray (2011) points out that while supervision is not a training intervention in all professions, it is regarded as essential by professions close to coaching – counselling and psychotherapy. Could it be that the drive for highly formalised and effectively mandatory forms of supervision emanate from a sub-group of coaches who are used to working in a domain where supervision forms part of an established quality assurance process? If this is the factor underlying the drive for mandatory regular supervision, then it does not appear to be coming from clients, at least in Australia/New Zealand. Clients do require an assurance that coaches know how to do their job, but do not currently see supervision as a primary means by which to achieve this assurance. Third, there may be a developmental effect that makes supervision particularly impactful at certain stages of a coach's growth. Some group supervision groups, for example, appear to add value through broadening the coach's exposure to new tools and techniques. Some individual supervision appears to work by facilitating the coach's development of an enhanced level of self-awareness. Both these processes may be particularly relevant to the coach's development at different times in their career/life. By examining why coaches *do* seek supervision it becomes more apparent why some coaches may not understand why other coaches regard supervision as being so important (Passmore & McGoldrick, 2009). With reference to the above rationale, for example, an experienced coach who is neither a coaching psychologist, nor a member of a professional body may believe they can continue to develop without recourse to supervision.

Some workers believe the value of supervision lies in adopting a systemic perspective. If we ground that belief in a theory of complex adaptive systems (e.g. Cavanagh & Lane, 2012) and its emphasis on the unpredictable and emerging nature of change, and consider it alongside the proposition that supervision should be undertaken on a regular, formal, basis with a qualified practitioner, it seems quite paradoxical to suggest that such a linear solution is likely to lead to the development of newly systemic practitioners.

None of this is to suggest that supervision is not a great example of a reflective process that holds great potential in the world of coaching (Carroll, 2010). Moyes (2009) cites Lane (2006), who sees coaching as 'borrowing' ideas from a range of disciplines, which coaches then adapt to suit the needs of their clients, and ultimately concludes also that it would be

foolhardy to throw out therapeutic models only because they did not originate in coaching. However, advocating a mandatory edict that all coaches should engage in professional supervision may be unhelpful, and serve only to create further tensions (Bachkirova et al., 2011). More useful may be a focus on development more broadly. For example the Standards Australia Guidelines for Coaching in Organizations (2010) propose:

Coaches should be able to articulate to their clients the nature and extent of their training and the evidence underpinning their practice. Similarly, coaches should include regular reflective processes to assist in the formulation of their ongoing professional development.

Further research

Whilst the sampling design deployed ensured some degree of heterogeneity, given the low overall sample size it cannot be said with a surety that the chosen sample population represents the general population of coaches working across Australia and New Zealand. Given that Grant (2012) specifically sought out coaches with a 'good understanding of the Australian coaching industry' (p. 18), more work remains to be done to generate a more complete picture of diversity of practice among active coaches. Second, this study pursued a line of enquiry based around four existing espoused purposes of coaching supervision. Future qualitative research may adopt a more open-ended enquiry to the broader subject of coaching practices and personal and professional development, as a means by which to locate the purpose, or potential purpose of supervision for the individual coach. Third, more work remains to be done in studying the perspective of the purchasing client. What are the most effective and efficient means by which to assure the quality of executive coaching in a complex environment where the practice of the coach may not be directly observable, and the impact of coaching indirect? Are organisations best advised to adopt simple criteria (e.g. does the coach undertake supervision?) or would they be better off investing more energies in more formative, ongoing, forms of evaluation?

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Appendix 1. Questions to coaches

Development

- (1) Do you have a learning plan/ objectives of some sort specific to coaching?
- (2) What activities are you planning to undertake over the next 12 months or so?

Getting unstuck

- (3) If you find yourself stuck in a coaching assignment, how do you go about becoming unstuck?

Support

- (4) Who do you look to for support if you experience unwelcome emotional experiences in a session or assignment?

Client protection

- (5) What coaching ethics do you ascribe to?
- (6) How do you monitor your practice with reference to those ethics?
- (7) How do you monitor the extent to which you are acting in service of your coachee's goals, vs. client/organizational goals?
- (8) Do you undertake supervision?

If yes:

- (9) Why do you undertake supervision?
- (10) How did you choose your supervisor?
- (11) What happens in a typical supervision session?
- (12) Do you have a clear contract in place with your supervisor as to what you want to get from coaching and how you will work together?
- (13) How has your practice changed as a consequence of having undergone supervision?

Appendix 2. Questions to purchasing clients

(1) In screening coaches, do you have any requirements with regard to supervision?

If yes:

(2) What are your requirements?

(3) What is the purpose of requiring that coaches are undertaking supervision?

(4) What is the process you use to find out if coaches are undertaking supervision?

If no:

(5) On what basis do you not feel the need to require that coaches are undertaking supervision?