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SUPERVISION OF TEAM COACHES: IN NEED OF A NEW METHOD

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Team coaching is a relatively new and emerging field, with always evolving ideas around what it is and how it differs from team facilitation and development (Hackman & Wageman, 2005). Team-coaching programs are in many ways still in their infancy, with different curricula being developed across different institutions and training providers, however with an overall agreement that they need to differ from the training of individual coaches. After all, individual coaching is about individual learning and development and the psychology of the dyad, while team coaching is about team reflection, team development, and group dynamics, which can be very different from dynamics in a dyad. But what about the supervision of team coaches? What do current supervision models have to offer team coaches and their practice? Over the last 9 years, we have been experimenting, in the context of a team-coaching program, with a new group supervision method that specifically benefits team coaches and consultants who work regularly with intact teams. In this article, we want to initially share some thoughts on the role of the parallel process in supervision and how it has shaped our approach to team-coaching supervision. We will then describe our method, looking at the impact we have noticed and exploring the benefits and drawbacks of using it in an open or closed supervision group. Some reflections on the role of the supervisor will be offered, and we will conclude with some thoughts on the implications for supervision.

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What's It Mean? Implications for Consulting Psychology

It is important that coaching or consulting with an intact team is recognized as separate as compared with individual or group coaching with its own phenomena, methodology, and standards. This article shows that group supervision of team coaches needs to adapt to the specificities of team coaching, to create the right circumstances for learning and quality review. This means allowing relevant (team) parallel processes to emerge during the supervision session.

Keywords: executive team coaching, team coaching, coaching supervision, methodology, parallel process

Traditionally, members of the helping professions monitor and improve the quality of their work by reviewing case material from their practice in supervision. On a regular basis, these professionals bring "traces" from their practice to supervision by storytelling, being interviewed, submitting recordings or transcripts, or even allowing the supervisor to witness sessions or episodes with clients directly. These stories and transcripts are reviewed to draw out new insights on the work, develop new skills and approaches, and assess the quality of the work under the leadership of an experienced and qualified supervisor (Hawkins & Shohet, 1989). Supervision has been defined as disciplined reflection-in-relationship wherein case history and principles are transformed into new potential for action and skills (after Rapoport, 1954).

In providing the learning during supervision, supervisors have long recognized the importance of the supervision session itself and of drawing out learning from what is happening here and now in the session, between supervisee and supervisor. By paying close attention to the detail of reports and the way things are (re-)presented, one can study (first) the effects of memory on the "traces" from supervision and how memory is already a first reworking of the material from experience (Goodman et al., 2006) and (second) the supervisee in action and therefore a possible *parallel process* to the original event (Searles, 1955). Searles offered a key observation about parallel process, namely, that it is especially when the supervisee is unsure or confused, in other words: on the cusp of learning something new, that the behavior of the client or patient can break through in the supervisee's behavior, through confusion, clumsiness, or inadequacy of the supervisee, even when she/he is otherwise a very capable practitioner. Searles also observed that in such a parallel process, supervisees might behave as their client, and they might equally behave as themselves in the original session, responding to their client. So, they can "take on" the pattern of interaction in the here and now in two different ways, which are essentially opposite: parallel or inverse parallel. At the same time as Harold Searles worked and wrote in Washington, D.C. another psychoanalyst, Balint (1957), was experimenting in London with "here and now" steps in the supervision of general practitioners.

Nowadays, the parallel process and accompanying affect (counter-/transference feelings) in the here and now (within supervisor and supervisee) are universally recognized as powerful tools in supervision. There is one thorough study that shows that parallel processes are indeed passed on between the supervision space and client space and that the more they get passed on, the more the client reports positive outcomes (Tracey et al., 2012). Tracey et al. (2012) studied only parallel processes where the supervisee "becomes" or "behaves like" the client. Nowadays, we talk about a *relational* approach to supervision (De Haan, 2012), where the relationship in the room, including interactions and feelings, is seen as the main vehicle for insight and change. Relational supervisors are constantly on the lookout for patterns and events in the here-and-now supervisory relationship, in both group and individual supervision. Supervisory methods have been devised to take best advantage of the here and now by allowing a here-and-now review of the supervision itself; see, for example, the *Balint method* by De Haan (2005) or the *group consultation method* by De Haan (2012). Using the *Balint* or *group consultation* methods seems to work well in the supervision of most professionals, across a variety of clinical and pastoral roles within the wider helping professions, in both individual and group supervision.

However, there is a problem with these methods when it comes to the supervision of team coaches. Team coaches and other team consultants work with existing, mostly intact, teams, and the traces they bring from their practice will be about situations in teams where team members have established preexisting relationships with one another. We have found that if we review team-coaching work in group supervision, there is not enough similarity for the parallel process to emerge. This is mainly because now, instead of a coach working with a team, we have individuals focusing on the individual coach (i.e., supervising the coach).

So, what is the problem? We believe, where participants mainly work with groups and teams, supervision should at least for some of the time also take part in groups as the dynamics the supervisees are experiencing in their work are most likely to also play out in the supervision group (De Haan & Regouin, 2023). If you have a team coach or organizational consultant in individual or group supervision, you have much less of a chance that parallel process emerges. The individual cannot represent group dynamics, nor will the supervision group members be able to express or resonate with those dynamics as they are constrained by the supervision task that focuses on an individual talking about a team. Equally, while often individual coaches have the chance to practice their coaching skills on each other during group supervision by supporting each other in their practice, it is difficult to create the same practice environment for team coaches in supervision, mainly because a supervision group is not "teamlike" enough. The method also offers different team coaches an opportunity to practice their team coaching skills in a supervised way.

This is why in 2015 we designed a new supervision method in the context of a team-coaching program, focusing much more on the here-and-now group situation. We use this method now, both as part of our program, which has closed supervision groups, and in our open supervision groups, in slightly different ways. We believe that the method allows more team parallel process to emerge that team coaches can take back to their teams to enhance their team-coaching outcomes (Tracey et al., 2012).

The Team-Coaching Supervision Method

At a high level, although quite close to a *peer supervision model* (Proctor, 2008), the unique feature of the *team-coaching supervision method* is the idea that one supervisee at a time steps out and acts as a team coach for the group while the group discusses a team-coaching case that one of its members brings. This has a dual purpose, in so far that it allows participants to both practice their team-coaching skills and receive some feedback on them, and it also allows the group to continuously work on its group process while attending to the task of jointly making sense of their casework and allowing the parallel process to emerge. A supervisor is also present to observe the session and then lead the feedback for the team coach, as well as further sense-making of the case work in the last 20–30 mins of the session.

We have used the last 9 years to trial this method in countless group supervision sessions and to improve on it without making it needlessly complex or controlled by the supervisor. We learned that a staged, step-by-step, or otherwise supervisor-led process would work against the emergence of useful parallel process. That is why it is so important for supervisors to listen and wait in supervision and to allow the case and the case bringer (supervisee) to unfold and work on you.

Only after various iterations, and hundreds of hours of trials, do we feel that we now have a satisfactory process for team-coaching supervision, and we want to let other supervisors benefit from what we have learned. We have first spoken about this method at a keynote for the supervision conference Supervision for the Americas in May 2023 where one of us also did a public demonstration of the method. We have found that the method was really powerful for team coaches and that it can easily be integrated into mixed groups, where not just team coaches but also individual coaches and consultants are being supervised.

The team-coaching supervision method is particularly useful for supervising specific experiences when coaching teams, for example, when the team coach wants to bring a particular situation, event, session, or team that they are working with. The method is not advised when the team coach brings broader issues such as characteristics of their practice, of their career, or of an abstract set of teams that

they are working with. Although we have often facilitated this method with inexperienced team coaches, it can be helpful if supervision group members have some experience in receiving supervision and/or in peer supervising. Then the task of helping their peers make sense of their team-coaching work without a supervisor directly managing the process will be less challenging for them. The method cannot be implemented in individual supervision because one cannot recreate the team-coaching environment there.

Here is a brief description of our new method for team-coaching supervision: We start by telling the supervision group that for the next hour (or so) they will be a temporary *team* that is going to help the case bringer/supervisee with the case. The following roles are key in this method:

- The case bringer: the group member who brings a piece of their team-coaching work for discussion (also called the supervisee).
- The temporary team coach: the group member who steps out of the discussion of the case and temporarily coaches the supervision group as it works on the case.
- The supervision group member who starts off the case discussion: they are the first ones to intervene and start the supervision of the case (this role does not need to be formalized; there is always someone who begins).
- The remaining supervision group members: their role is to contribute to the sense-making of the case in the same capacity as the one who starts it off.
- The supervisor, who stays out of the team during team coaching: their role is to remain silent and observe the team coach and the team for 40–50 mins and then lead a feedback process.

This means that all of the supervision group will get involved in some way, but three roles stand out: the group member who starts off the supervision, the case bringer, and the temporary "team coach" for the group for the whole session. This team coach practices team coaching, and it intervenes on the collaboration between all team members, that is, case bringer and the team. This may include contracting upfront with the group and case bringer about what they might need from each other. They may stop the group at certain time points to check how things are going and offer patterns and dynamics they are noticing. The team coach may also decide to bring other team members in, they can offer the case bringer and/or team their support, and they can obviously also use their own sense-making (here-and-now experiences) as input. We are usually clear with the team coach upfront that it is not their responsibility to facilitate the supervision of the case nor is it their role to offer content on the case; however, if this does happen, it tends to be useful data either in regard to the parallel process or indeed the roles (Reddy, 1994) and valencies (Bion, 1961) of the team coach and their practice development. From when the roles are allocated, a time is agreed with the team coach for the "session," which can be anywhere between 40–50 min. During this agreed time slot, we, as the group supervisor, do not get involved, unless invited in by the team coach. In other words, for the first three quarters of the supervision, the agreed session, there are three members of the wider group that have a special role: the "case bringer," "team coach," and the "group member who starts the supervision off." However, the rest of the group will also be active in supporting the sense-making of the case. After this "session-within-the-session," there is another 10–20 min for reviewing what was happening during the team coaching. This time slot is led by the group's supervisor and again has a dual purpose: The supervisor will encourage the group to give feedback to the temporary team coach related to the team coaching and also review the parallel process during the "team-coaching session," drawing attention to what happened in the team—for example, using the repeated question: "Could there be parallels between this team and the client work?" What we usually find is that to some degree the case bringer unwittingly "becomes like" the main client in the here-and-now dynamics, usually the team leader, while the team coach echoes some of the dynamics between team and coach as described (inverse parallel process), but the opposite is also possible. However, as with all team dynamics, the parallels could also be more complex, such as when one of the members of the group who is supervising displays some of the dynamics of one of the team members or important parties (such as commissioner) in the reported team-coaching work.

Case example: This example is from a recent open supervision group of seven members and a supervisor. One supervisee brought her own personal difficulties with ending and in particular the apparent ending of work with a leadership team that had been extensive, spreading over numerous subteams, and had lasted 8 years ("the largest account in my practice"). After a very successful new intervention some 8 months ago, the main client had become very quiet and had recently asked her to "tender" for new work, something she had not done for many years, and a tender which she had subsequently lost. Despite the long-running, positive relationship full of mutual understanding and depth, there had barely been any conversation about the work over the last year and no explicit talk about ending. By this stage, she had concluded that her client wanted to move on and had herself become ambivalent about the work. She noticed how she had put more energy in winning new assignments, which by now had largely replaced this account. The team coach in the supervision group managed to initially invite different speakers and devise a process, but this process was not completed at the end of the allocated 20 min. The group member who had started the supervision off felt that she was not doing much (except long listening in the beginning) and was rather quickly overtaken by the team coach and other members of the group, who each asked questions and put forward hypotheses according to the process. Much insight was drawn from the fact that this group member felt slightly rejected by the group—did the case bringer perhaps feel rejected too? Out of the consideration of the process came an awareness of this profound feeling of rejection that had also contributed to the lack of contact in recent months and another awareness about the process of this mega-assignment being somewhat disorganized or frayed both at the beginning and the end. Similar to the supervision group, the group member who started off the supervision did not get time to form a reliable contract with the supervisee—and at the end of the session everything came to an early (but some thought, overdue) end by the team coach handing back over to me as the supervisor. This fraying of the ending, the mutual absence of attention for the ending, was something worth contemplating for the team coach and led her to look at her own contribution through feelings of rejection and fragmentation. Her getting so activated into facilitating a process was also a rich ground for learning about her tendencies as a team coach.

Benefits and Drawbacks of the Team-Coaching Supervision Method

The *team-coaching supervision method* is very similar to the *group consultation method* (De Haan, 2012) with one major difference being that a "team coach" is invited to coach the group during supervision, which switches on an emphasis on the group of supervisees and the group's patterns and relationships with their team coach. This in our experience is much more appropriate and essential for relevant parallel process to emerge and strengthen during team-coaching supervision.

Another benefit of this method is that team coaches have a chance to practice their team-coaching skills with a real team (albeit a temporary one) and get feedback soon after the moment. This is very unique as it is much more difficult to create opportunities for team coaches to practice in supervision than for individual coaches. We have found that supervisees really value this aspect of the method.

Much reflection on our part has gone into the way we use this method in open and closed supervision groups. First, open supervision group sessions are rarely populated with only team coaches or only team-coaching cases, and that is a good thing. It becomes a little too rich if many different teams are mapped into the same open supervision group. One would need at least a break in between, to "shake off" some of the dynamics and the roles of the previous case. A single team-coaching case in open supervision is very welcome though (and even two team cases can be incorporated into a half-day open supervision group). The team-coaching method then provides a bit of welcome variety in a series of same-format individual cases. We would usually plan the "team-coaching case" in open supervision as much as possible toward the end of the session, as it provides a whole-group collaboration after having done mostly one-on-one work.

In a closed group, we often do not assign the role of the group member who starts the supervisory conversation off, as the group tends to know each other well and often feel able to devise a process in collaboration with each other and with the case bringer, to make sense of the case. In open groups, allocating the starter role can offer some more containment for the group and might mirror the leader of the team. In closed groups, there is also more of an opportunity for the team coach to work with emerging dynamics as the members know each other well, so this can be a rich learning ground. However, at times, it can become tricky for the supervisor to discern which bit of the emerging team

dynamics might be related to the parallel process of the case and which bit is more intrinsic to this particular group. We have found that naming this challenge in the review has been helpful. This allows the supervision group itself to distill what they feel belongs to the case and which aspects belong more to the dynamics of their group. Again, this can enrich everyone's learning about the complexity of team coaching, where team coaches often have to discern what dynamics relate to the primary task of the team and which are emerging interpersonal dynamics or whether indeed these two are linked. We have found in open supervision groups that group dynamics are much more likely to be a representation of the parallel process, simply because group members are not at all team colleagues and generally not very well known to each other.

Another clear benefit for the use of this method is that as the group becomes a temporary team and receives team coaching, members can start noticing and exploring what roles they step into in teams and what valencies they have. This can create helpful knowledge and insights for practitioners who work as team coaches as these roles and valencies will most likely also be activated in their work as team coaches.

We are conscious that this way of orchestrating team-coaching group supervision can be a little overwhelming for all involved and in particular for the temporary team coach and the case bringer. If this is the case, we then reiterate that the role of the team coach is not to supervise or be responsible for process and outcome. We would argue it may become overwhelming in this way because the subject matter is also overwhelming: Team coaches are outnumbered and outmanaged by their clients—they have very few powers being just supportive outsiders, and they often feel like there is so much more to work with, so many more individuals to hear or help, as well as agendas to take on board, which can make them feel inadequate, insecure, doubtful, and tentative. This is not to say experiences with individuals cannot be overwhelming and multifaceted and complex, just that in team coaching the multiperspective and overwhelm are much more baked into the work. The team-coaching supervision process can really help team coaches notice where they might be taking up too much responsibility in their work and where they could let go more.

> *Another case example*, again an open supervision group: The case bringer brought an assignment with a team where the team leader had recently changed such that the team became more aligned and the initial reasons for the team coaching were no longer so apparent. This was a positive change for the team, the case bringer thought, yet the team leader soon became very central to the team coaching, often speaking on behalf of the whole team and speaking at length. The supervision group's members asked the supervisee questions about the team and new leadership, and the supervisee was very keen to answer. "And another example … , and another example … , and now this … ." The coach noticed explicitly how the group strayed from consultation and hypothesis, as the supervisee was reluctant to move on and said he just wanted to finish this story "because it was very telling." In the review, the group agreed that this moment of friction between the team coach and supervisee was the "hottest" moment of the supervision, and something was definitely "going on" between the two. To his great embarrassment, the case bringer realized that he had become very much like the new team leader here and now, and that although he only intended to be helpful, he had dominated the session to such an extent that he had not learned very much. At that time he also realized that he had been triggered by the new leader very much in the same way as the team coach had been triggered by him and his keenness to offer ever more examples. He decided he would step back a little bit and allow the leader to speak more with the team and perhaps realize they did not need the team coaching as much as before.

The Task of the Supervisor in Supervising Team Coaches

Although it might appear so, the supervisor is not entirely passive during the first part of the session, while the team coach is working with the case bringer and the team supporting him/her. It requires careful tracking of all interactions as well as following the content of the case to fulfill the dual purpose of the last 20–30 min: to both attend to the dynamics and parallel process that has emerged and give the team coach feedback on their skills. In the last circa 20 min as supervisors, we usually start with the team coach and then the group, inviting them to share anything they noticed: first about the session, the team dynamics, and the team coach's interventions, linking that increasingly to the case. Often in this

part of the supervision, the team coach makes acute and helpful observations that they could have brought in during the session, and team members build on this with other aspects that are relevant to the case. It takes patience and skill by the supervisor to work with all the different parties to make sense of the layers of learning:

- the case (mainly, but not exclusively, through the parallel process)
- team-coaching skills (specific feedback for the team coach)
- the supervision group as a temporary team, its dynamics and what roles and valencies emerge for different members

The last aspect might be more pertinent for closed groups but may also appear and be relevant in open supervision groups. In the feedback session, the supervisor can at times take the role of a second team coach, looking and working with the dynamics of the supervision group as a temporary team. This can also bring challenges as sometimes the dynamics in the team and the need to attend to them, whether relating to the case or not, can take away from giving the group member who acted as the team coach formative feedback.

> *Case example*: One of us was working with a closed supervision group that had been meeting four times already. In the fifth session, the case bringer brought a case, in which she described a painful and difficult team-coaching situation with a senior team, which left her feeling de-skilled and questioning herself. During the work with the case, two members were disagreeing, frequently knocking each other's ideas down and taking polar opposite views. This was a dynamic that was not new to this group, and indeed the two group members frequently took opposing views, and there was often a sense of conflict bubbling underneath the surface. This had been raised and discussed with the group by the supervisor on numerous occasions, but the group had not managed to move beyond this pattern. In this particular session, the member who had stepped into the team-coaching role intervened very much on the content and process level. Her work was more akin to action-learning facilitation than team coaching. Was this due to her unconsciously wanting to "stay safe" and not open up the difficult dynamic that was so well known to the group? Was this on some level a parallel process that gave data about the case? Or was this a skill issue and a personal pattern of the team coach, who frequently got drawn into facilitating processes for teams and taking responsibility for outcomes? These were all questions that needed to be unpicked in the debrief of the team coaching. Overlaying this was a choice the supervisor had to make in balancing the importance of feedback for the individual team coach and not allowing the conflict of the two group members to dominate the last 20–30 min. Openly sharing these dilemmas with the supervision group was helpful. The group agreed to prioritize the feedback to the team coach, which then led to further insights into the case and the group dynamics.

If a major aspect of the case has been missed by the group, the supervisor would also bring this into the last part of the supervision session and be curious about it, offering it as data—what might it say about the team-coaching work? What might the case bringer do with this new data?

One of the advantages of using this method over time is that supervisors will develop a good sense of the team-coaching skills of their supervisees because in each session some of the group use their team-coaching skills. This chance to take a view on a practitioner's skills is extremely rare in team coaching unless a supervisee brings recorded material to supervision or the supervisor shadows their work. Considering this, our method also fulfills the normative function of supervision for team coaches rather well (Proctor, 2008).

Conclusion: What Are We Learning About Supervision?

Supervision often starts at the beginning of one's career in the helping professions, during qualification programs. Later in the professional's career, it becomes the main vehicle for both quality assurance and for personal development. Supervision is unique as a developmental practice in that it does not use any teaching and nearly no transfer of knowledge but is exclusively geared at learning from your own

practice. Supervisees are invited to just "sit" at the feet of their own experience, taking time to unpack, reflect, and inquire into recent practice, including their own decisions, intentions, and future plans. Supervision is very different from school but does go back to the old root of the word, *scholè*: leisure, ease, free time, a place we go to recharge and reflect.

Supervision is now almost 150 years old (De Haan, 2012), and for about half of this time, ever since the important contributions of Harold Searles (1955), we know that learning from practice means learning from the here and now of being in practice during supervision. Just like the relational turn in the helping professions (Mills, 2005) has taught us to make use of the here-and-now relationship in the room, the parallel process in supervision has taught us that what happens *during* supervision may well be the prime key to unlock relevant, mutative reflections (Tracey et al., 2012). It is for this reason that we believe it is so important that supervision can adapt to helping professionals working with intact teams and provide a here-and-now experience for them that consists of an intact team with a helping professional working together to review the case material. The team-coaching supervision method is the first tool to make this happen and deserves special consideration by team coaches and supervisors alike.

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