

Insider's Guide

By Eileen Arney

Professional supervision can help coaches to raise their game and do a better job. But what happens to client confidentiality when coaches open up their work to scrutiny?

Few service providers would set their employees loose on the public without careful supervision. Nor would any self-respecting manufacturer sell goods that hadn't gone through some kind of quality assurance process. Yet many organisations fail to provide any supervision for the coaches who support and develop their current or future leaders.

That's now beginning to change. CIPD research published this month, entitled *Coaching Supervision – Maximising the Potential of Coaching*, shows that nearly a quarter of organisations who use the services of coaches provide them with regular supervision, while close to half (44 per cent) of coaches have regular supervision.

Supervision in this context refers to a structured process designed to help coaches reflect on their practice – normally with the help of a more experienced practitioner. The CIPD study, carried out by Peter Hawkins and Gil Schwenk of the Bath Consultancy Group, shows that although most organisations and coaches do not yet use supervision, those that do tend to be firmly committed to it. The Centre for Excellence in Leadership, for example, provides supervision for all the coaches it trains, as well as those delivering the training. Shaun Lincoln, the company's director of coaching the mentoring, says, "It is the most important single factor in safeguarding the quality of the coaching being delivered."

That could be why the use of supervision is growing fast. Certainly, more and more coaches are viewing supervision as essential to their practice, with the overwhelming majority of those who said they use supervision believing it developed their coaching capability and assured the quality of their work. "Fundamentally, supervision is about improving and evaluating the service to the client. I find it unthinkable to coach without it," noted one survey respondent. Many coaches also see supervision as a valuable source of support in what can be a draining and isolated role.

Supervision can have equally significant benefits for organisations, especially those using a mix of individual and group sessions. Individual supervision allows coaches to explore the dynamics of their relationships with clients, while group sessions promote consistency and reduce the risk of poor or unethical practice. Group supervision also gives many coaches the chance to share insights gained during one-to-on sessions with clients. Common themes often emerge during these sessions – for example, about responses to change initiatives or business strategies – and these can be used to inform thinking about organisational development.

However, any attempt to share what has come out of coaching sessions raises questions about confidentiality. Coaching is, after all, supposed to provide individuals with a safe place in which to explore difficult issues – and failure to keep what they say confidential will compromise the whole process. As Lincoln says: “If you want to put an end to coaching in the organisation, then break confidentiality.”

“There are far fewer coaches currently under supervision than those recognising that they need it.”

There are ways of protecting clients’ confidentiality during supervision sessions. It is common practice, for example, to avoid giving names and personal details when discussing cases. All information that comes out of coaching must also be handled sensitively and should never be used to make decisions about individual clients’ careers.

The best protection is probably the coaches’ own commitment to ethical behaviour. They should be expected to contract with clients and sponsors about what can and cannot be disclosed. There should also be clear agreement about confidentiality between coaches who share supervision.

Even more fundamentally, those who employ coaches need to be satisfied that they understand the importance of contracting with clients and will behave ethically. Sam Humphrey, former head of global coaching for Unilever, says that she has tested this out when assessing coaches. “It wasn’t merely a case of asking about ethics,” she recalls. “I wanted to see their ethics screaming all over the contracting phase.”

The CIPD’s research into coaching supervision drew on two online surveys of coaches and those who bought their services, which produced 528 and 128 responses respectively. In addition, the researchers set up four focus groups and held in-depth interviews in six organisations. The picture emerging from those sources is one of wide variations in practice, with coaching supervision taking the form of one-to-one or group sessions, delivered either face-to-face or remotely. There were similar variations in the frequency of sessions, the background and level of supervisors, and the models they used.

Such variation is not surprising in a field as new as coaching supervision. “There is always a lag between establishing a profession and establishing good quality support and supervision processes,” says Peter Hawkins.

One consequence of this time lag has been a tendency to rely on supervisors from the fields of psychotherapy or counselling, where supervision is well established. But whatever the background of those providing coaching supervision, the process clearly has to meet the needs of the coach, the organisation and the coach’s client. Balancing the needs of these different stakeholders calls for an unusual blend of skills, including an understanding of the dynamics of the coaching relationship and of the business and organisational contexts. These skills cannot be acquired in a classroom – indeed, focus group participants stressed how important it was for coaching supervisors to have broad experience of coaching.

The research also highlights the need to accept supervision as something that happens regularly to all coaches. In other professions, there has only been a routine take-up of supervision once it has been accepted as a professional norm,” says Hawkins. “My experience elsewhere is that the quality of supervision that happens only when there is a problem isn’t nearly as effective as when it’s routine practice.”

“The research shows the need to accept supervision as something that happens regularly to all

Routine practice is currently far from being the case. There are far fewer coaches under supervision than those recognising that they need it. Even among those with access to supervision, there is wide variation in its frequency. An example of good practice is provided by the Oxford School of Coaching and Mentoring, which requires its coaches to have one hour of supervision for every 35 hours of coaching they do. Similarly, at the BBC, internal coaches must have a minimum of six individual supervision sessions and four group supervision sessions a year if they want to remain on the organisation’s register of coaches.

When external coaches are brought into an organisation, it is reasonable to expect that they will make their own arrangements for supervision. However, it is important that those buying their services know what questions to ask to make sure they are really receiving this form of professional development and support. Some suggested questions are set out in the panel on the below.

Questions	Positive Answers
How often do you meet your supervisor?	At least every two months, or a 1:35 ratio of supervision to coaching
Who is your supervisor?	An experienced coach with supervision training and/or experience
What are the benefits of the supervision you receive?	Can describe benefits for themselves, their clients and their client organisations.
How has supervision transformed your coaching practice?	Answer should demonstrate reflective ability to receive challenges positively and to apply learning.

There is scope to provide additional supervision for external coaches, both for quality assurance purposes and to gather organisational learning. This can be combined with group supervision for internal coaches

As with other aspects of coaching supervision, the challenge now is to agree what constitutes good practice and translate that into what actually happens in organisations. What is already clear is that, without adequate supervision, it is hard to tell if coaching standards are meeting expectations.

Group Supervision at PricewaterhouseCoopers

There is a long tradition of using group supervision to support internal coaches at PricewaterhouseCoopers. Monthly three-hour supervision sessions are led by an external facilitator, who is always an experienced coach with a psychology or psychotherapy background and experience of coaching supervision, if not necessarily with qualifications in this area.

Group members take an active part in the sessions, even when not presenting a case, by listening, observing and reflecting on what they have heard. As well as seeing the range of reactions to their own practice, members of the group learn what approaches others are using.

Barbara Picheta, leader of the firm's Coaching Centre of Excellence, says that coaching supervision at PricewaterhouseCoopers is about people continually learning and reflecting on their practice. It is also about risk management and quality assurance, and has both a supportive and corrective function. "To open one's work to scrutiny is important to best practice in any helping activity," she says.

Group supervision for internal coaches does, of course raise issues around confidentiality. For this reason, names are routinely changed during discussions of particular cases, and the focus is normally on the work of the coach and the coaching relationship rather than on the individual client. However, Picheta stresses that it is important to revisit the question of confidentiality regularly and to focus on ethical issues more generally.

Eileen Arney is CIPD adviser, learning training and development

Further info

Key points from the CIPD's research on coaching supervision are available as an event guide called *Coaching Supervision* www.cipd.co.uk/eventreports.

The full report of this research will be published by the end of November as a change agenda called *Coaching Supervision – Maximising the Potential of Coaching* www.cipd.co.uk/changeagendas.

Coaching at Work is the must-read publication for everyone involved in coaching. To preview the next magazine and sample the unique online resource, visit the CIPD website www.cipd.co.uk/coachingatwork.

To subscribe now, call the CIPD hotline 0870 428 7966