Group and Team Coaching

The Essential Guide

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E ESSENTIAL COACHING SKILLS AND KNOWLEDGE

6

Team coaching

This chapter contains:

This chapter

More than half of all group coaching assignments are with intact teams.[102] In Chapter 5 we considered teams as 'nested systems', and described ways of thinking that allow us to engage with the complexity of team and larger-system interventions.

This chapter tackles team coaching from a different perspective, familiar to most team coaches: where the client is looking for specific outcomes with a specific team. In these circumstances, most team coaches design a pragmatic and goal-driven intervention to achieve the client's desired outcomes.

The wary coach does not, however, lose sight of the broader landscape. S/he pays attention to how the dynamics of the broader system are played out within the team, and in particular how the dynamics relate to any obstacles to the team achieving its outcomes. S/he is willing to raise these systemic issues with the team and the sponsor. This is in fact no different to the responsibility of the coach working with an individual, though team coaching requires a wider range of skills (see 'What are the characteristics of an effective group coach?' in Chapter 4). Chapters 2 to 5 illustrate the complexity of what might be happening in a particular team at any time, and underpin this more practically oriented chapter.

The chapter therefore opens by considering the goals of team coaching, and addresses the thoughtful practitioner about the essentials of the process. It discusses how to use tools (models or conceptual frameworks) with teams. It goes on to review some of the intricate issues and unspoken expectations arising in contracting and in managing client relationships, and discusses the timing of team interventions for maximum leverage. The discussion of team dynamics is continued in Chapter 10.

So much of the material in other chapters is relevant to teams that it is not all cross-referenced. In the box is a summary of the relevant major areas in other chapters.

Topic	Chapter
What is going on beneath the surface?	2, 3, 4
Systems theory of organizations	5
Difficult individuals and conflict	9
Difficult teams	10
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What is a team?

Here is a typical definition of a team.

> A group of people who are interdependent with respect to information, resources and skills, and who seek to combine their efforts to achieve a common goal.[103]

Notice the similarities and differences with the systems view of teams described in 'Systems and teams' in Chapter 5. The idea of interdependence *within* the team is here, but little sense of how the team relates to the broader organization. The notion of goal or intention is also central, whereas in systems thinking it coexists in a complex web with how things *are*, as well as how the client would like them to be. This is what Argyris highlights in his contrast between 'theory-in-use' and 'espoused theory' (see the 'Mr Team' box later in this chapter). Most writing about teams concentrates on the latter too much, at the expense of the former.

The effective team coach always bears in mind that the team's explicit shared goal exists in a broader organizational context. A team also exists over time, so it usually has a history before the coaching intervention begins, with established communication patterns and a network of relationships. The coach reviews how functional these relationships are in achieving the goal(s).

The goals of team interventions

Team interventions are directed to the relationship between the team's goal and the team's capacity to carry it out. There are therefore three possible areas of focus.

1 *The team's goal.* For example: defining the goal, redefining it, breaking the goal into smaller steps, working out a strategy, planning implementation of part of the strategy, planning communication and negotiation of the strategy with other parts of the system, updating the strategy, assessing the longevity of the strategy, evaluating the success and/or impact of the strategy, refining or redefining the strategy . . .
2 *The team's capacity to collaborate to achieve the goal.* For example: listening to others' views carefully, sharing opinions frankly, enquiry and dialogue skills, asking the questions behind the questions, ability to tolerate uncertainty and not knowing the answer, learning to reflect together, ability to reorder priorities and work flexibly, ability to disagree constructively, building mutual trust, managing

interdependent tasks, influencing skills, mutual accountability, giving and receiving feedback, overcoming barriers to communication, understanding each other, respect for others' viewpoints, ability to reach timely decisions together, commitment to and cooperation on decisions once made . . .

3 *The team members' skills in doing its work.* Skills that are necessary for individuals' work tasks; for example, using a new accounting package, interviewing, understanding colleagues from different cultural backgrounds, influencing skills, monitoring remotely, performance management, using the video-conferencing package . . .

The effective team coach always keeps in mind the possibility that the root of a team's incapacity lies elsewhere, in some other part of the broader system.

Which of these goals are best met through team coaching?

Team coaching is not the only kind of intervention teams seek to meet these goals, but for a high proportion of them, its framework offers the best prospect of success. This is due to four factors: the timeframe of the coaching relationship; its sensitivity in negotiating with clients; its attention to the individual; and the possibility of enhancing performance by improving communication skills.

A team exists over time as a 'nested system' connected to many intersecting systems, which means that it is constantly subject to changes small and large, affecting either what it should be doing, or how members work on it together. In this ever-shifting environment, rigid or simplistic models are not very useful.

Working on the goal

The development of business strategy is a subtle and complex process, which needs to be designed for constant refining and improvement as new information and new opportunities come to light. General Eisenhower commented that 'plans are nothing. Planning is everything.' It is the embedding of planning as a habitual and regular team process that is important. Team coaching is uniquely well suited to help senior teams embed the habits of planning, and design planning processes that are responsive to the particular industry. For middle management, the sharing of intelligence about implementation issues, and tackling problems together rather than reinventing the wheel, can offer the company significant design improvements and savings.

Working on team collaboration

In the area of team collaboration, team coaching has clear advantages over other methods, since it tackles communication issues directly and affords opportunity for practice. Careful thought and a light hand are needed to nurture a team's capacity for effective collaboration. In coaching, the team can work directly on its communication and interaction in real time, with a skilled coach to help it understand and overcome obstacles, and bring to light the 'undiscussables' (see 'Working with conflicting messages' in Chapter 10). It can agree goals for behaviour and processes, and can monitor these regularly through the coaching process. This can be particularly helpful when the team hits a stressful period. Under pressure good habits are easily lost, but coaching can help the team retain the gains it has made.

Team coaching assignments often have elements of both the first two foci – working together on the team's goal, and working on working towards it more effectively.

Skills development

The third group of interventions are simpler, on the face of it, and for some of them training is the right solution. Even with skills development, however, follow-up group coaching can offer a better efficacy rate if the skills are complex and interpersonal, and if it is critical that everyone acquire them to a good standard. Performance management is a good example of this. Group coaching following training can help people embed the skills, tackle problems, and share good practice, thus improving confidence and establishing a habit of reflecting together.

What is team coaching?

Team coaching is coaching a team to achieve a common goal, paying attention both to individual performance and to group collaboration and performance.

To be able to be coached, the team must be small enough (three to ten) for all the individuals to be actively involved when they are in one group (though you may still divide them into smaller groups at times). Working with a large team, a division or a whole small organization will require different methodology adapted to the needs of people in larger groups (discussed in Chapter 5). Team coaching, like all coaching, must also take place over time, and should involve some face time.

In team coaching, unlike learning group coaching, it is important that learning goals are shared. In most assignments a good deal of work is needed to arrive at this point, particularly if the client has done little preparation with team members. It is important for the coach to understand how individual goals might differ, and so, prudent to interview all members of a team individually before embarking on working with them together.

Creating team coaching opportunities through other invitations

Coaches are sometimes invited to help organizations with activities that are not team coaching, such as one-off team events.

A vast array of one-off activities are sold to companies as 'teambuilding', everything from rappelling up the north face of K2 to relaxing stress management days involving massage, visualization and herbal tea. The premise underlying them is that if the team shares a challenging or pleasant experience, it will always translate into stronger bonds when they get back to work. Sadly it is a premise for which there is little evidence, though there is nothing intrinsically

wrong with giving staff a 'jolly' together or encouraging them to be kinder to each other. From our point of view as coaches, the problem is that as a result some clients have unrealistic expectations of what can be achieved in one event.

When invited to design and run one-off team events over one, two or three days, make enquiry into the client's goals. What outcomes do they hope for? While negotiating the contract, be scrupulous in limiting the agreed outcomes to what you know can be delivered within the time-frame. The 'away day' puts the question of transfer of learning – and the longevity of the good intentions expressed then – squarely in the frame. It is an unwary coach who promises lasting change to be delivered solely through this format. We are coaches precisely because we recognize that change is best supported through a relationship over time.

A one-off event can however be a useful kick-start to a coaching process, allowing the team to establish what problems it would like to solve, and its opening thoughts about what contributions its members can make. Negotiate for the event to be seen as the start of a process, and help the client define realistic intermediate outcomes for the event. If the focus is on the team's functioning or its communication, it is important to have individual conversations with the team members beforehand.

Contracting for shorter, non-coaching team interventions

- Be especially rigorous in clarifying and limiting the objectives so that you can deliver what you promise
- Inform the client clearly of the limits of what can be achieved
- If the goals of the intervention suggest that they might get better value from coaching, say so
- Make it clear that the event is a first step, and raise with the client the question of what further help might be needed.

If the outcomes are to do with improving the team's ability to communicate and work together, or to develop strategy in a complex environment, discuss with the client whether they wouldn't be better served by having a series of shorter sessions over time; in the first case so that they can then monitor and maintain any improvements, and in the second so that detailed analysis can be carried out between sessions and strategy refined in the light of new information.

Working with a senior team on larger events, such as whole-organization reviews or staff conferences, can also be an opportunity to help them think about how to embed the review/planning process, or desired changes. Structure the assignment as a mini-coaching process, with a review and debrief as well as preparation time. Chapter 5 describes some methods that can be used for this kind of event.

Using team tools and models in coaching

There are many, many books about teams: why some teams work, while others do not, has preoccupied writers for a hundred years. I do not seek to compete in this crowded market: this chapter is not about teams, but about *team coaching*. An understanding of teams as coaching groups helps the *reader* evaluate what might work best in various situations. In addition, this section includes advice about the uses of some long-established, well-known tools, likely to be familiar to most team coaches.

Thousands of conceptual models explain elements of team working, usually in terms of how an ideal team *should* work. There is a seemingly insatiable market for these 'team tools', and many seek, and not a few seek to create, the Holy Grail, the model of team working that will explain all complexities and prove the key to all difficulties.

I may as well begin by acknowledging my lack of belief in the Holy Grail. In twenty years of assisting teams to greater effectiveness and more robust communication, I have found value in many of the conceptual frameworks and tools that other practitioners have created, and have created not a few of my own. I have yet to find one that is good at all times and in all places.

In coaching teams, all tools require an artisan, or perhaps at times an artist. It is good to have a well-loaded toolbox, but this is not simply a process of attending as many seminars as possible on new approaches. Acquiring new tools can become a preoccupation at the expense of learning to wield the ones we already own with masterly skill, as all artisans must. In the end it is our judgement and our experience-honed instincts that lead us to pick up a particular instrument.

Common mistakes in using tools

The measure of a team coaching session is not how correctly we used a particular instrument, it is whether the team managed to talk to each other in a meaningful way about their work and how they work together. Did they reach any useful conclusions? Did they reach new insight or decide on courses of action to correct problems? If they did, you have earned your shilling. If they have thought about how to take their enquiry forward and maintain any improvements in collaboration, you have earned your bonus.

The bottom line is that in any team situation, there are several tools that may work. The search for the perfect tool is more often a sign of coach anxiety than anything else. Even when very experienced, it is perfectly normal to feel uncertain before a team coaching engagement. Every team is different, and no group entirely predictable, so we are entering the unknown, even if we do so with a lot of experience under our belt.

True preparation puts us in touch again with our own competence and confidence. For some, getting the performance anxiety over early by over-preparation beforehand is a means to calm. For others, it is a hiding to nothing. We must know, and trust, ourselves. In general, in an especially challenging situation it is better to use a tool we are familiar and confident with. Our own confidence in the team coaching process is of more value to the client team than a finely tuned but unfamiliar widget.

Another common mistake is to bombard the team with different tools or 'lenses' for viewing their situation, perhaps in the mistaken hope of giving them 'good value'. Closely allied to this is planning a packed agenda for the coaching session, particularly the first one. Don't. Conversations need time and you need to build this in. If there is no time to pursue the discussions they need to pursue, whatever is the point? If they seem unwilling to use the opportunities provided, you can pursue with them your own curiosities, such as, what isn't being said? Or, what led them to spend so much money and time in order *not* to talk?

Seven rules to help us choose among tools for working with teams

First, we need to keep in mind that all tools are simply a means of starting a conversation that the team need to have with each other. The conversations that teams hire a coach to facilitate are typically conversations that, for one reason or another, they are not keen on beginning. Reducing anxiety is therefore an important factor in tool selection. What tool uses language or concepts that are somewhat familiar to this particular team in this particular industry? Or if you want to shake up their thinking, what would be accessible enough that they will be provoked but not turned off? Whatever tool you choose, keep the objectives of the coaching firmly in mind.

Second, tools help mainly by giving a structure to the conversation that helps people feel safer at the beginning, to equalize the risk and the discomfort, to depersonalize any difficult feedback, and to give the team a sense of working together towards a goal. This is particularly important where the team is likely to be anxious, such as a collaboration-focused assignment with a team that is normally highly goal-focused. The more anxious the situation, the more highly structured and boundaried the coaching should be, and the more authoritative and containing the coach's demeanour. Manfred Kets de Vries has written an interesting article about the coach's role in a challenging, successful team feedback assignment,[104] which also demonstrates the importance of timing and leverage for change within the system.

Fourth, any model is ultimately a way of simplifying (over-simplifying, really) complex realities so that we can grasp them and talk about them. So choose a tool that is simple enough to be grasped and used by the team. Aim to understand the limitations as well as the strengths of the models you choose. Remember the pitfalls you have observed in using this particular tool before.

Related to this is the question of language. Simple language is best most of the time, and particularly where collaboration is the focus. Simple language speaks to the human in us as well as the professional. Language used in highly idiosyncratic ways can be off-putting to non-specialists. If you think the language used in a model may be a barrier, change it, or allow the group to change it, to something more usable.

Fifth, think about the likely effect of the tool on this team's situation. Are its concepts precise enough to open the necessary conversations? There are many tools that describe 'the ideal team' or identify the characteristics of dysfunctional teams. Is the tool general in its language – 'communication', 'trust', 'conflict' – which may simply lead the team to re-identify problems they already know they have, or does it provide routes into a more useful, specific discussion about what they want from, and are prepared to do for, each other?

Sixth, be eclectic in your sources, and scan sources that bring together many models, such as the books in the reading list by Gareth Morgan and Charles Handy. But look more widely than the management literature. Don't neglect conceptual models from other areas of life. For instance, I

Focus of the team coaching	Example of possible tool
Here's what I am like – what are you like? What does this mean for working together?	Myers-Briggs Type Indicator[105]
Feeling anxious or angry in our team	Tuckman model[106]
Change is a process including discomfort, not an announcement	Change curve[107]
Need to value skills of enquiry and dialogue (especially for a highly task-focused group)	Senge dialogue model[108]
Conflict and hostility	Drama triangle[109] (see also Chapter 10)
What skills do we each bring to the table? What skills are we strongest and weakest on? How do we fit together?	Belbin[110]
What style of relating do my individual reports/team members need?	Situational leadership[111]
Blaming culture or 'caring' organizations	Drama triangle
Planning change	Systems analysis tools such as fishbone diagram,[112] mind mapping[113]
Bringing a group together by focusing on shared purpose	SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats) analysis[114]
Getting to grips with the realities of the business environment	PEST (political, environmental, social, technical) analysis[115]

use a model of influencing strategy that originally derives from the seventies peace movement. Have a magpie eye for what might be useful, and remember the power of the internet search engine in cross-checking tools.

Seventh, build your own library of favoured tools. Actually, this is a more non-conscious process than that sentence suggests. Certain tools and concepts come more readily to mind and hand than others, because you find them serviceable. Over time, the use and adaptation of favoured tools will give you an internal resource that sits alongside the planned use of a limited number of tools. When a new way of viewing something may be genuinely useful to the team you are working with, it will come to mind, arising from your mental index. Sit with it for a few minutes before introducing it, to assess whether it is truly helpful, or whether introducing it might relate more to your need to prove your usefulness.

Choosing tools for working with teams

- Remember the tool is a means to an end
- Choose and use a tool and a style in using it, to reduce anxiety
- Choose a tool that is fit for its purpose
- Don't overcomplicate things
- Be eclectic in looking for tools
- If *you* feel anxious, prefer a familiar and proven tool
- Stick to a small number of tools, don't bombard
- Don't identify yourself with the tool, just use it
- Notice and promote important team conversations that the tool provokes.

The contracting process: clarifying goals at the start

The goals of team coaching must be sufficiently precise that a view can be taken about whether or not they have been reached. 'Improving communication' is a field of activity, not a coaching goal. What communications are difficult? How would improvement be recognized? Imprecise goals deny the coach a sense of achievement, since their accomplishment cannot be tested.

Contracting is not simply a matter of the coaching sponsor arriving at a form of words about *their* goal with which the coach is comfortable. To be successful, the goals of team coaching must be owned by the team members, requiring a process of negotiation with the team. How much of this negotiation remains to be done as the coaching begins varies greatly, depending on the quality of the preparation, by both client and coach. The absolute minimum at the outset of coaching is a re-examination of the 'draft' goals and a checking out of agreement, or at least consent.

One useful way of checking how far consent and understanding reach is to ask team members to give intermediate steps that would indicate movement towards the goals, or to ask about the contribution of the coaching to achieving the goals. This last can be a starting point in the group refining its goals and defining the ground rules it wishes to establish for the coaching.

Contracting is therefore a critical part of the team coaching process, and acts as a benchmark for all further interactions between coach and team. The contract is more than the written statement about the assignment, important touchstone though that is. In Chapter 8 there is a checklist for contracting in group supervision, which could also be used as a basis for a team coaching contract, ignoring the headings that do not apply.

Contracting is a subtle process, and cannot be reduced to words on a page. During the process the team coach may sense that more is being asked than the words suggest. It is important to pursue these feelings and encourage the client or sponsor to make explicit their unspoken hopes, so that they can be discussed and their feasibility assessed. See also below 'Dealing with unspoken expectations and dynamics'.

Vignette: Contracting for a change programme

Ali is approached by Janet, VP of the UK division of a service-based company with whom she has worked before. Janet wants Ali to work with middle managers on a change programme to introduce tighter performance management. The middle managers are cynical because they feel that the 'top' has a different view every month of what will help the business. This time Janet knows it's different – the new global performance management standards will ultimately see these managers out of a job if they don't comply.

The contract is to coach the middle managers individually at first, and then to bring them together as a group to work on managing the change. Ali is not sure at what point to do this, though timing seems to be under her control; she has a budget and *carte blanche* about how to carry out the coaching assignment.

Janet also has to develop implementation systems for the new standards – an area in which Ali is expert. Janet is keen to seek her advice.

As Ali struggles to shape the contract from initial meetings with Janet and her managers, she realizes that Janet has not laid out what specific changes she wishes to see.

Issues

There is a difference of view about facts. Janet and Ali know that financial conditions compel the company to be serious about change this time, but the managers have not taken this reality on board.

There is no clarity about the indicators if the change were successfully implemented; the sponsor hasn't refined her objectives much beyond 'they have to change'. It is therefore impossible to define clear outcomes for the coaching. Nor have the individual performance issues been articulated clearly.

There is flattery in the invitation to the coach: in the approach, in the '*carte blanche*', in the invitation to consult on implementation systems. This could seduce Ali into being less rigorous than usual.

Analysis

A greater degree of clarity about objectives is essential.

A commonly understood set of business facts is essential. This is Janet's responsibility.

The invitation to consult is flattering, but it is a different role from coaching. How would it impact on the coaching assignment? The impact isn't necessarily negative – maybe the room for manoeuvre on implementation represents an opportunity to involve the managers in design. Ali would have to remain clear which role she was occupying at each point in the process.

Next steps

Ali meets Janet again to refine the objectives of the change programme and the coaching. They agree it is essential for the group of managers to get to grips with the new reality in the company, and that this is best done in a group. Ali coaches Janet to handle the meeting and accompanies her.

At the meeting, Janet spells out the company's change of policy and the economic conditions that drive it; by the end of an uncomfortable meeting, most of the managers have 'got it'. Ali convenes a follow-up meeting a week later to help the managers work on *their* objectives. This leads to agreement on a series of meetings to manage the change and some clarification between the goals of the team coaching and the individual coaching.

Janet discusses individual targets with each manager, and then each has a three-way meeting with Janet and Ali, to discuss these in line with the programme.

Comments

Since the challenge of this new situation is shared, primarily group-based coaching is likely to be most effective, augmented by individual coaching as needed. Tackling

the challenge as a group, including acknowledging cynical as well as positive feelings, will result in a team that has common understandings and shared tasks – as fellow-sufferers at worst, and as partners when more positive feelings can be galvanized.

Ali's first achievements are the clarification of goals and the managers' realization of the inevitability of the change. Once this idea is viewed 'in the most serviceable light – first as a settled, and second, as a good'[116] thing, Ali uses every opportunity to engage the managers in thinking about how to implement. Some of the questions she asks are:

- How could you gain from the change?
- How could the service improve from the change?
- How could staff gain from the change?
- What do you value about the service as it is?
- How could that be preserved in the change?
- How could it be strengthened?

The quality of the prior relationship means that Ali starts the assignment with a good deal of trust 'in the bank'. This enables her to get further, faster than she might have at the start of a new coaching relationship.

The box below sets out possible stages in a team coaching assignment.

Team coaching checklist

The initial contact – who made it? What was the route to you?

↓

Contracting – discussing goals with sponsor, team leader and team, and agreeing broad goals

↓

Individual interviews to explore issues in more depth

↓

Presenting the findings to the sponsor, team leader and team, and discussing to refine goals and outcomes

↓

Agreeing outcome and processes, group and individual

↓

Beginning the coaching process

↓

Reviewing the coaching process

↓

Refining and recontracting, or completing the coaching process

Client relationship risks in team coaching

In team coaching there are always at least two clients. There is the sponsor – the budget-holder who commissions the work, often the team leader – and there is the team with whom you will be working. If the sponsor is not the same person as the leader of the team in question, you have three clients, each potentially with their own ideas about what is needed. And one of them consists of several people. The coach must have the tact to make it clear to the sponsor and the team leader that success in the coaching relies on the team having ownership of its goals, which requires a measure of flexibility and negotiation in determining them. This is the first step the coach takes onto the tightrope of balancing the needs of several stakeholders.

Where the person commissioning the coaching is not the most senior member of the team, it is prudent to meet that senior colleague before the coaching commences, to

ensure that they are in agreement with the goals, and support coaching as a method.

There is always a risk in team coaching of being caught between competing or conflicting objectives. When such conflicts develop, the coach should minimize the risk by being honest with all parties, and referring back to them the question of the true goals of the coaching assignment. You may often have to help them negotiate these with each other. See 'Dealing with unspoken expectations and dynamics' in this chapter, and 'Working with unconscious and unspoken conflicts' and 'Working with conflicting messages' in Chapter 10. You have to be rigorous too, in differentiating their desired outcomes from the contribution that the coaching will make towards achieving them.

Where the focus of the coaching is strategic, it may be adequate to meet the team together to prepare for the work, or to build an initial preparation period into the coaching. For any assignment where improvements in communication are desired, it is wise to speak to the team members individually before embarking on facilitating an exchange of views. In longer assignments, when it is time to review the work, it can be useful to re-interview individuals to see how far perspectives have changed.

Interviewing individual members of a team

Interviewing individual members of a team prior to a team coaching assignment is invaluable where any of the goals of the coaching are in the second area of collaborative skills, or where the team has been 'stuck' for some time. It will help you not only to discover how each person sees the coaching and what goals they have for it, but to uncover the unspoken conflicts or other hidden obstacles to better collaboration and performance. There are two purposes to these meetings: to inform yourself, and to prepare the team members; like any two-way conversation, both parties can gain.

The interviews can reinforce the goals of the group coaching and prepare each person to engage as fully as possible. For example, if to disagree constructively is a goal of the team coaching, interviews will allow you to explore in advance with each member their habitual responses, and the desired ones. For example, some people equate disagreement with aggression, and are scared of it (for more on this issue, see 'Dealing with anger in a group' in Chapter 9).

Set up these individual interviews explicitly and carefully with each person as having the overall goal of assisting the team's communication to be more forthright and respectful. Commit only to a degree of confidentiality consistent with that goal. Always have in mind how what you hear will affect the team sessions.

A sweeping commitment to total confidentiality is a hostage to fortune. If someone tells you a troubling or toxic secret, take up with them immediately the question of how to handle it in the group. Would they be willing to raise it? What would help them do so? Would they be willing for you to raise it? What about first informing the team leader (if s/he is not an actor in the story) or raising it with her/him (if s/he is)?

If a team member tells you something important that s/he is not willing to have discussed in the group, consider why. There are sometimes good personal reasons for keeping a secret, but secrets are rarely good for teams. Why has the team member told you if they do not wish the matter aired? So you will feel sympathy, or let them off the hook? To sabotage the process? Because the secret is too troubling to keep? Who else knows this secret? Find out, and consider with the team member the impact, on herself/himself and others, of continuing to keep the secret.

Working with the team's leader

Team coaches have to preserve a dual loyalty to the team and to its leader. If the coach cannot form an effective working alliance with the most powerful member of the team, and command the respect and trust of both team and leader, the long-term impact of the assignment will always be in question. In order to maintain the alliance and manage this tension, it is wise to arrange individual sessions with the team leader alongside the group sessions. At times there will be tensions because the roles, and therefore the needs, of team and leader are different.

Systems thinking helps us understand this. The leader's role is the most exposed and the loneliest in the team. S/he typically represents the team/subsystem upwards and outwards in critical negotiations with other subsystems. S/he is most responsible for feedback from and to other systems. Constantly at the boundary of the team subsystem, the leader is more subject to the pressures for the team to change; at times this may create a distance with other team members. Further, the leader's role requires her/him to address performance shortfalls with individuals. Finally, in working upwards with other systems or subsystems, the leader has less direct power, and must rely more heavily on influencing skills. S/he cannot always 'succeed'.

These problems are exacerbated in senior teams, where it can be difficult to bring everyone together, and all too easy to focus on managing downwards to avoid facing harder realities together. If the team leader is also the CEO of the organization, the issues of isolation and risk are redoubled. There may be no one but the coach with whom the CEO can be completely honest and so find a neutral reflective space.

The effective team coach forges an alliance with the team's leader so that they are partners in the work, and at the same time retains the trust of team members. At times s/he will need to help leader and team bridge a gap, or provide private feedback to the leader on how s/he is relating to the rest of the team. This 'live' in-team coaching offers leaders a unique opportunity to extend their leadership skills. For all these reasons regular sessions with the team leader are needed in any team coaching assignment. If the team leader is also the client commissioning the work, you need clear lines of communication with her/him in that distinct role, which may be best approached in separate meetings. If the sponsor is a different individual, the coach's reporting arrangement there should also be transparent.

In order to preserve transparency and trust, the coach must make it clear to the team that s/he is also meeting the leader individually, and encourage them to air their feelings and ideas about this. In a tense team, prompting may be

Vignette: Preparing for lean times

The CEO of a not-for-profit organization housing people with disabilities was gifted, and cursed, with foresight. His company had expanded rapidly by securing funding to develop innovative new services, and it had an enviable reputation for high quality, far beyond the minima set in contract specifications. While still expanding, and long before his not-for-profit competitors, he understood not only that the period of growth was ending, but that in future the survival of services and the companies themselves would be under severe threat. New Government tendering criteria favoured competition from private companies relatively unfettered by concern for service standards, and so able to undercut costs.

For the CEO and subsequently for his senior managers, this was agonizing. Not-for-profit executives characteristically feel passionate commitment to the company's goals, and here the 'double bottom line' of meeting the goals while balancing the books seemed impossible in the new circumstances. How could the funding now available secure the excellent services they had always striven to deliver?

During a long-term monthly coaching assignment, the coach assisted the CEO in clarifying the implications of his insight. In his sessions and the team coaching sessions alike, an important task was coming to terms with the new realities. The time lag between this happening for the CEO and the rest of his team was a tension addressed in the team sessions, as were their own fears about the future, painful feelings about the cuts they had to make to reduce costs, and about the anger directed towards them by the staff. At times tensions between them ran high, but by the end of the assignment they had reduced costs by 20% while refining service specifications to protect essential components, equipping themselves to compete in the new tendering environment.

necessary, though many people will understand why the difference in the leader's role makes it essential. Ask the team members to consider and name what the benefits and risks to them might be.

Dealing with unspoken expectations and dynamics

All coaching is about helping the team gain or achieve something: something they do not have or cannot manage at present. Even where the coaching is to make a good performance excellent, the aim is to reach or recover a desired

Vignette: Stuck

Carolyn had been working with the top team of a financial services company for nine months. The focus was developing a five-year strategic plan. At first they had responded well, but as time went on several of the team failed to do agreed work and gradually the process was grinding to a halt. Carolyn felt less and less interested in the project, and had to force herself to make contact.

In supervision it became clear that under her boredom lay frustration and anger. She had tried many tactics to get the team moving again, and nothing had worked. She did not know what to do next, felt anxious, and had a strong impulse to 'sack' the client.

The supervision group explored how Carolyn's stuckness and anger mirrored the team's. The assignment had left her with indigestible feelings of anxiety and futility. Feeling somewhat relieved, Carolyn concluded that she should carefully monitor her feelings at the next session, and use them to shape questions to the team about the gap between what they said and what they did. She prepared a few questions in advance: How it happened that no progress was made despite everyone's apparent wish that it should? What frustrated them in the work? What worried them about the future? What did the team gain from the absence of a plan? What else was more important than the plan?

standard of work. The contract represents coach's and client's best and latest understanding about desired team outcomes.

Any experienced team coach has at times had a non-rational sense of more being expected than they had signed up for, a reality gap between explicit, acknowledged coaching goals and the felt, unspoken experience of being asked for something different. (Chapter 2 explains how this kind of unconscious expectation is communicated.)

It is critical that the coach gain some understanding of these unspoken expectations or 'felt realities'; the risk of ignoring them is to proceed with work that fits the written contract, but is experienced by the team as irrelevant. The risk of trying to meet the expectations without acknowledging them is worse, since it usually means trying to meet conflicting expectations, and therefore setting oneself up to fail.

We may be caught in unconscious team or organizational conflicts when:

- the felt expectations do not match what is written in the contract
- there is an unspoken sense that the coaching is 'beside the point'
- there is a sense of dissatisfaction with the coaching
- agreed actions are consistently not acted upon
- the feeling doesn't match what is said
- we feel discomfort or dissatisfaction we cannot quite put our finger on
- there is a sense of being invited to play a part for which we have not auditioned.

There are many, many possible unconscious communications in team coaching work. It is an area where skilled and psychologically informed supervision is invaluable to all coaches, however experienced. Understanding and working with the unconscious dynamics of organizations is not an

area for self-help or 'going it alone'. Further, many coaches do not want to specialize in working in depth with these dynamics, they simply want help to deal with specific obstacles in their team coaching assignments. Here too supervision can help.

Some books devoted to these issues, and some educational opportunities, are suggested in Part 6. While training to specialize on group dynamics is lengthy, expensive and personally demanding, there are shorter workshops and programmes designed to extend the understanding of non-specialists.

For most coaches, using supervision to recognize when this kind of situation has arisen, and to consider the most promising courses of action, is the most practicable course. Group supervision is especially helpful for coaches working with teams, because the complex dynamics of the team situation can be mirrored and worked with live in the supervision group.

When working with conflicting expectations

If we sense that all is not as it seems, a practical first step is to check out whether what we are feeling mirrors some feeling in the team or organization. Look for clues in what is said that might indicate this, and follow them up. Are they expecting from you what others expect of them? Are they communicating some feelings about the work or the state of their industry? Ask team members what is not being said, what they are holding back on, or what the unwritten rules are. By pursuing these questions, at the very least you will gain some material that can be considered in supervision.

In the following box are some questions to help the team coach begin to clarify the nature of this kind of gap.

Understanding unspoken expectations

- Is there any conflict between the expectations of the team and the expectations of the budget-holder commissioning the work?
- Who/what am I invited to be at a feeling level? (Give your imagination free rein – left-of-field non-rational intuition is your friend)
- Is there any parallel in this organization to the experience I am having? (For example, does it reflect what customers/service users expect, or mirror a threat in the organization or its environment?)

Chris Argyris describes the difference between conscious and unconscious expectations as a conflict between 'espoused theory' (what I say) and 'theory-in-use' (deduced from actions). Here is an example[117] (see also 'Argyris' theory of organizational defences' in Chapter 10).

Mr Team

Espoused theory	Theory-in-use
We must learn to work as a team. The era of the loner has gone.	I will decide by myself to reject the ideas I do not like, even if everyone else wishes to discuss them.
We are all in control of the family jewels.	I will be in control, and you will give up the control whenever the discussion is not to my liking.
We must learn not to hold back and hedge when in a crunch.	I can hold back and hedge when in a crunch.
The culture has taught individuals not to be effective team members.	When my cabinet acts as an effective team in designing a workshop on team building with which I disagree, I will act as an individual and ignore the team.
Maybe executives like myself have been too soft on our subordinates.	I will be soft on myself and deny that this is what I am doing.
We must examine all the factors that inhibit the building of the team.	I will not permit discussion of my fancy footwork.

Once through reflection and supervision we have arrived at some working hypotheses about the conflicting communications, we can consider our next steps. In coaching teams, we need to bring some of the 'felt reality' into the light of day, since it is the unrecognized conflicts that frustrate change. The specifics of how much, and how it should be framed, must be thought about on a case-by-case basis. There is further material about unconscious team dynamics in Chapter 10.

Working with team difficulties: importance of timing

In working with teams, you do not begin with a clean page. Relationship and communication patterns, including damaging ones, are already established in teams before coaching begins, except in new teams. Members do not have equal power; and the distribution of power only matches the organizational chart to some degree.

'Family' is a useful analogy in understanding how teams differ from other kinds of group. Human individuals begin their learning in a group, usually that of their birth family. Some families are better than others at enabling learning, and all families have their strengths and weaknesses in this regard. Similarly in a team, a more or less functional compromise for learning has been arrived at between the various needs and predilections of the team's members, particularly of the senior or most influential members.

Hence for a team to learn and change, some existing processes usually need to be dismantled and put together in a more functional way – which will involve discomfort, at the least. The 'undiscussables' must be discussed (see 'Working with conflicting messages' in Chapter 10). It is in this process of clarifying communication and interpersonal learning to help the team achieve its goals, that group coaching can make its uniquely powerful contribution.

Systems thinking shows us that the felt need for team coaching will be balanced by resistance to change, within both the team and the wider organization. Failure to recognize and work with this is why so many short-term team interventions fail to make a lasting difference.

At challenging times, however, there are significant risks and equally great potential rewards from team coaching. In response to stress, complexity and differentiation are lost, and anxiety and ineffectiveness can predominate. On the other hand, to survive, the system has, in any event, to change. A skilful team coaching intervention at this point can harness the forces for change, and team members can seize the moment to learn a more adaptive way of functioning together.

Timing is therefore critical in team coaching; it is of most value when the system is undergoing change. Even the most challenging business circumstances create a promising opportunity for real change, if handled capably; other pressures provide leverage making a positive outcome from team coaching more likely.

Coaching virtual teams

In many corporations teams now exist that do not routinely meet face to face at all, working through email, data transfer, live messaging, telephone conferencing, video-conferencing and other distance technologies. In circumstances where there is no possibility of a team meeting face to face, as

with global multinational teams, team coaching is probably best approached through the team's normal communication methods, and in particular through video-conferencing, which offers participants more information and relational possibilities than telephone or written communications.

Technological advances in video-conferencing seem likely to lead to its far greater use over the next decades. It will be interesting to learn, as video-conferencing sophistication increases, how that measures up to being physically together in the same room. A common use is among multinational teams, which raises a further set of questions. Although video-conferencing gives access to more non-conscious information than the telephone, the ability to interpret it across cultures may not be well developed, whether in the same room or on different continents and a variety of time zones. Global teams have become a reality through advances in communication technology, but will a comparable investment be made in developing the human parts of the interaction?

Some research suggests that virtual teams experience common workplace relationship problems at much higher rates of frequency than normal.[118] Without attention to a broader and more conscious education in interpreting non-conscious communications, including the differences between cultures, technology may deliver only the illusion of communication, with greater ease in avoiding the discomfort (felt in the room) that can push us to learn about each other.

Experience suggests that web- and telephone-based groups work more effectively if they have also met in person. The coach to a virtual team should insist on the necessity of at least one face-to-face encounter, to build a sense of common purpose and mutual relationship, and to begin to tackle communication barriers rooted in cross-cultural misunderstanding. If the client cannot agree to this, be as precise as possible about the limitations this places on the coaching outcomes. See also 'Group telephone coaching' in Chapter 7.

When working with teams:

- be rigorous in clarifying their goals
- test what is happening against goals
- have attention to how the power relations affect the coaching
- form a working alliance with the team's leader
- practise transparency in your interactions with leader and team
- pay attention to anything contradicting explicit goals, and bring it into the light of day
- pay attention to shared values and assumptions
- be willing to ask the 'stupid' question
- be willing to ask the discomforting question.

Finally

The next chapter turns to learning groups. There is more material about teams in Chapter 10.

7

Learning group coaching

This chapter

In the last chapter we focused on teams. Most people have an idea what a team is, but what are learning groups, and what are their uses in organizations?

Learning groups are specially convened to work on learning tasks, focusing on the needs of the individual members rather than the group as a whole. In this chapter we consider four variants and their contribution to individual learning:

- action learning
- Balint groups
- group telephone coaching
- coaching sessions within training and management development programmes.

This chapter contains:

Although supervision groups are also learning groups, they are not discussed here, as the next chapter is devoted to them.

Learning group coaching versus team coaching

Learning groups are groups brought together specifically for the purposes of learning, and their members are not part of the same intact team. Their functioning follows the same basic group laws set out in Chapters 2, 3 and 4.

One key difference for the coach practitioner lies in the goals. Whereas team coaching has shared goals relating to team performance, learning group members each have individual goals, and this diversity is itself central to the richness of the learning experience. The purpose of a learning group is the individual learning of its members.

When coaching a team, the coach starts with a good deal of learning to do about 'how things are done around here'. When beginning work with a learning group of relative strangers, such as an action learning set, these constraints are less powerful, particularly if the members are from different organizations. The members' 'how things are done around here' beliefs differ from each other, giving new points of comparison and learning.

There are different challenges at the start of a learning group: a group of strangers may initially be wary of each other, and will be evaluating the skill and authority of the coach. On the other hand, it is easier for the coach to influence the culture of the group, since no previous culture exists, and because at first s/he will tend to be seen as the leader. Further, a group of people who are not immediate colleagues have relatively few hidden agendas, because their *only* major working relationship is in starting together as fellow and mutual learners.

The group coach therefore has far more influence in setting the tone of the group as a positive learning environment. The successful group coach melds her/his new learning group into a 'project team with the purpose of learning', and working relationships can develop that are at once profoundly supportive and profoundly challenging. We are going to examine four types of learning group: the first is action learning.

What is action learning?

Although there is a common-knowledge idea that we learn from experience, a brief survey of human history confirms that we do not always learn, and that there is no guarantee that lessons learned by one generation will be remembered by the next. All coaches know that people vary greatly in how well they use the lessons of their experience.

Action learning is a means of structuring an individual's learning from experience, using the resources of other individuals in a group, to enable fuller, more effective learning. It is a rigorous method with benefits in:

- seeing the bigger picture
- understanding complex situations more fully
- reviewing and exploring options for action.

Action learning is valuable in learning to deal with situations where there is no clear 'right answer' and the individual must choose between several possible courses of action. The action learning process results in a broader range of options being thoroughly explored; chosen strategies are then put into action, revisited and evaluated over time, in order to be refined and progressed.

Action learning groups are traditionally called 'sets'.

The origins and development of action learning

Action learning is perhaps the mostly widely known form of learning group coaching in the UK, with a sufficiently long history to produce research and a literature.[119] Elements of the approach are routinely incorporated into leadership development programmes and postgraduate study. Action learning was invented in the middle of the last century by Reg Revans, a scientist, athlete and iconoclastic management educator who concluded that most management education was ineffective. Here is Revans' own definition of action learning:

> Learning . . . is . . . the more appropriate use, by reinterpretation, of the subject's existing knowledge,

> including his recollection of past lived experiences. This reinterpretation is a social process carried on among two or more learners, who, by the apparent incongruity of their exchanges, frequently cause each other to examine afresh many ideas that they would otherwise have continued to take for granted, however false or misconceived.
>
> (Revans 1982, p. 627)

Revans was frustrated by the lack of applicability of what management schools taught, and wanted to enable managers to apply their learning to work problems they had personal responsibility for resolving, and on which they would have to take action. For Revans, the two key elements of learning were questioning, which can produce insight, and 'programmed' or theoretical knowledge. Combined, the two can produce learning, as expressed in Revans' formula $P + Q = L$.

Action learning ideas have great flexibility, and over time practitioners have used, interpreted and modified Revans in a variety of ways. As a result there are significant variations in methodology, but research suggests that 75% of UK practitioners agreed on some core elements:[120]

- sets of about six people
- action on real tasks or problems at work, with learning from reflection on actions taken
- tasks/problems are individual rather than collective and chosen by individuals
- questioning as the main way to help participants proceed with their tasks/problems
- group coaches are used.

In itself this unanimity is a tribute to the robustness of the method; I would add these further elements to round out a picture of action learning:

- a contract to meet regularly for mutual aid in learning
- turn-taking so focus is shared between group members
- a fundamentally open approach to the 'problem'
- a reflective stance expressed in a pace that allows 'time to think'.

What happens in an action learning set?

A group of about six meet regularly with a coach, usually for a day a month. Some groups are time-limited, for example to a six- or twelve-month period; some are open-ended or tied to the completion of a programme. The group members are normally relative strangers to each other, not rivals or close colleagues.

Action learning introduces regular reflection into the work process, with the focus on individuals' current needs and concerns rather than having a fixed content (as in traditional training courses). At the outset, each member chooses a learning objective on which s/he will work in the set. Learning objectives *must* relate to real work for which the member is currently responsible, though the focus may be as broadly strategic, or as tightly focused on managing particular people, projects or issues, as the individual wishes.

At each meeting, each member of the set has a turn in which to report back on the action they have taken since the previous meeting, to reflect on successes and failures, and to plan their next steps in taking things forward. During the turn, the rest of the group must assist the turn-taker *only* through *listening* and *questioning*. Each member must use their own reactions to what they hear to frame open questions to help the turn-taker understand their situation more fully.

This is a demanding and rigorous process that both makes the experience of the whole group available to each member *and* requires each member to think carefully about how best to frame a question for the person to whom it is addressed; thus interpersonal skills are developed as a by-product of the process, even in people who have good levels of skill at the start. Another side-benefit is in the development of questioning or enquiry skills, of great value in understanding complex problems in any modern business context.

The multiple perspectives of all the group members enrich the reflection process so that many more perspectives, and therefore options, are considered than is possible in individual coaching, and in a more rigorous and thought-provoking way than ordinary group discussion. Further, each member of the group gains profound insight into the challenges of other members, broadening their understanding of the leadership role.

What is the structure of an action learning set?

Despite the unanimity of practitioners about the core elements, there is no standardized structure for action learning. The one described here is my own practitioner version, developed through more than fifteen years of practice and enriched by an emphasis on the group interaction element and its value for learning. It is in line with the core elements described above.

The timings require about one hour per member, so a group of six takes a full day, adding some time for breaks; timings can be adjusted slightly where time is more limited, but the easy pace of action learning is an important feature, so they cannot, for example, be halved. The total time allocated in this turn is 55 minutes, which gives the group coach five minutes' leeway per hour, making it possible to keep the group to time, allow for comfort breaks, etc.

Structure of an action learning 'turn': guide for the group coach

5 minutes	**Presenter outlines the issue**, problem or topic as they see it.
30 minutes	**Exploration of the issue.** Listening and questioning. Pace gentle enough to allow space for thought, 'open' questions that can offer the presenter a different perspective.
5 minutes	**Summing up.** Encourage the presenter to take a lead here in saying what the most useful lines of questioning have been, what their thinking is now, whether there have been any shifts in how they see the issue. Discourage major new questions (though you may have to live with one or two at the start of this section).
15 minutes	**Review the turn together: 'thoughts unuttered, feelings unexpressed'.** • What were the 'thoughts unuttered, feelings unexpressed'? • What were the things you were bursting to say but couldn't translate to a question? • Did you feel a strong urge to give advice (and how well did you resist)? • What feelings did you experience? • How does the presenter think those feelings might relate to the situation? • How did you feel using the action learning protocols? • How could you improve in using the action learning protocols? • Resist problem-solving during this section – it is a debrief for everyone, though it may help further the presenter's understanding.

The 'thoughts unuttered, feelings unexpressed' review of each turn allows not only for debriefing but also for a freer exchange, which usually augments the learning about the topic and always develops members' sensitivity to their interpersonal interactions. Over time, knowing that this review is coming makes it easier for set members to conform to the rigour of the listening and questioning section.

Setting up action learning protocols

At the outset every action learning set needs to acclimatize itself to the discipline of interacting only through listening and questioning within the turns. Here is an example of the kind of advice the group coach may offer new set members at the outset.

> **When listening and questioning**
>
> Do:
>
> - listen carefully for content and meaning
> - put up with uncertainty
> - ask open questions.
>
> Don't:
>
> - ask too many questions – make a couple of good ones really count
> - ask lots of questions to understand every detail of the situation. It doesn't matter if you don't, you are not being asked for an 'expert opinion'!
> - ask questions that are thinly veiled advice, such as 'had you thought of . . .?'
> - create 'rush', such as by asking a question when the turn-taker hasn't had a chance to think about the previous one.

Similarly every set needs to develop its own version of the protocols or ground rules, which builds on the core elements outlined above. This is best done as a collaboration between coach and members. Here is a typical set of ground rules generated in that way.

> **Action learning protocols**
>
> - Mutual respect
> - Problems without right answers
> - Learning from experience
> - Action-related
> - Listening and questioning
> - Process as important as content
> - Thinking and feeling are equally important
> - Turn-taker in charge of own learning
> - Easy pace.

What is action learning used for?

Action learning was originally developed as a means of enabling powerful individual learning through a highly structured group process. Its focus is on making use of all available information and insight in tackling complex problems, developing thinking and the practical application of insight. It provides a reference group that helps maintain motivation for taking action over time.

Action learning allows executives the regular opportunity to reflect, and through questioning, speculation, deduction and exploration within the group, to arrive at new working hypotheses about achieving goals. New ideas are tested against reality, and plans refined in the light of trials and further experience. Rather than a 'quick fix', learning becomes a continuous experience, more fruitful and more profound. Versions of action learning are used in many leadership and management development programmes.

A significant body of anecdotal evidence and a growing body of research[121] suggests that action learning has many unanticipated benefits, such as the refining of skills in the participating individuals. Research into how group membership develops confidence and competence underpins the themes of Chapter 4.[122]

Skills gains from action learning

- Interpersonal sensitivity and skill
- Reflective capacity and the development of habits of reflecting with others
- Skills of enquiry that allow more data to be used in problem-solving
- Improved meeting skills through greater use of enquiry[123]
- Greater capacity to deal with uncertainty and change
- Over time, the development of greater flexibility through internalizing multiple viewpoints.

Action learning is a flexible technique and can be adapted to many different circumstances. This is not without risk, since departure from the core elements will dilute the method and rob it of some of its power. Nevertheless it can be used in many ways, for example by project teams and intact teams to progress collective goals; in coaching sessions within longer training programmes to allow participants to reflect on how to apply what they have learned. In larger organizations, action learning is used cross-departmentally as a vehicle for culture change or to implement a change in management strategy.

Action learning is primarily an investment in individuals, and its value to individuals who have experienced it is not in much doubt. For organizations seeking change through investment in key individuals this is not problematic. Measuring outcomes at an organizational level is, however, not straightforward, since it leads us to the long-vexed question of how far individual learning becomes organizational learning.[124]

Balint groups

Like action learning, Balint groups are a structured way of reflecting with others in a group. They are named after their originators, psychoanalysts Enid and Michael Balint. Balint

groups were originally developed in the 1950s as a means of educating doctors in managing the doctor–patient relationship, emphasizing the importance of emotional and personal understanding and aiming at a more successful therapeutic alliance between doctor and patient. Today they are still most widely used within Health Services across the world. They deserve a wider audience because, like action learning, they offer a simple methodology for reflecting in groups, provided that the protocols are rigorously followed.

Balint group protocols

- Respectful behaviour, presenter owns her/his own learning
- Problems without right answers
- Practising detachment, silence, listening and waiting
- Learning from each other's perspectives
- Thinking and feeling are equally important
- Easy pace.

As in action learning, Balint groups use a turn-taking methodology, with a focus on one particular member presenting their learning issue at any given moment, for assistance from the group. Unlike action learning sets, not every member presents their work at each meeting; instead there is a rolling programme that spreads the turns evenly over time.

Unlike action learning, there is relatively little interaction between the presenter (or problem-owner) and the rest of the group about the issue or problem under discussion.

Structure of a 'turn' in a Balint group	
10 minutes	**Presenter outlines the issue**, problem or topic as s/he sees it. Reflection group listens.
20–25 minutes	**Reflection group explores the issue as though it were their own issue. Presenter sits 'outside' the group and observes the others exploring the issue.** The aim of the reflection group is to understand the issue as fully as possible and to explore their own associations to it. There is no requirement to 'solve' the problem or 'resolve' the issue.
5–10 minutes	**Presenter sums up.** The presenter comes back 'into' the group and presents her/his thinking about the issue following the discussion, commenting if s/he wishes on parts of the discussion that forwarded her/his thinking. Reflection group listens carefully without comment. The presenter does not need to evaluate every aspect of the discussion – s/he need only pick up on what has furthered her/his own thinking.
15 minutes	**Review the experience together.** Was there a strong urge? What feelings did you experience? Did the presenter, or someone else in the story, appear to have similar feelings? How might those feelings relate to the situation? How did you find using the Balint protocols? How could you improve in using the protocols? Resist further discussion – this section is a debrief for everyone, even though it may also further the presenter's understanding.

Instead the presenter and the rest of the group take it in turns to speak, requiring careful listening. Like action learning, the coach must ensure that the review does not become a discussion extending the turn.

It is interesting to look at Balint groups alongside action learning sets. Both are methods of reflective practice, but the Balint method is simpler and less interactive, particularly in a classic form that doesn't include the review of each turn. Its origins in the medical profession suggest that it might have value for those whose work allows very little time for reflection; it enforces silent reflection on the problem-owner, and careful listening on the group as a whole. These factors alone give it value for time-poor professions and professionals.

Group telephone coaching

Telephone and even email/live messaging coaching is on the increase, reflecting the growing pressure on time and staff development budgets in working life. In team coaching it can be a helpful adjunct to face-to-face meetings, and for some global teams, the most readily accessible way of communicating live. See also 'Coaching virtual teams' in Chapter 6

Time-poor modern executives can find it easier to slot in a telephone than a face-to-face session, and so individual telephone coaching is growing. Also, many companies impose travel restrictions during lean times. Telephone coaching is not equivalent to face-to-face, but has value, especially where the face-to-face version is not available. In one-to-one coaching where coach and client have established a good alliance face-to-face, and the coach is sensitive to verbal and vocal nuance, the value of an occasional phone session may be close to that of a session in person; further, the client's skills at discerning aural clues may be enhanced over time, because it is so central to telephone coaching.

The issues for *group* telephone coaching are more complex: much of the interactive value of the group is lost on the phone, because so much of our non-conscious communication relies on visual clues and cues; see 'Communication' in Chapter 3. The relational context of all learning relies greatly on the non-conscious communication outlined in chapter two and three, much of which is visual or kinaesthetic. On the telephone, we have only the audible components of a vast array of data; the degree of mutual understanding is limited by what is necessarily excluded, however skilled the coach. Further, the number of relationships involved, and varying degrees of aural skill on the part of the participants, affect coaching results.

It is not that nothing useful can be done by phone, particularly if there is no alternative, it is that so much is missing, particularly for visually oriented learners. As with individual telephone work, group telephone coaching or supervision works best where it is a supplement or alternative to regular face-to-face coaching. The participants and the coach/ supervisor can then use their fuller knowledge of each other to imagine (and then articulate and check out) the meanings of the vocal cues. Although this takes longer and flows less freely, it is valuable in itself.

Group telephone coaching

- Relies on audible components of communication
- Meaning should be checked out more explicitly than in face-to-face work
- Best when following face-to-face work
- Allows the coach to make use of 'live' note-taking to assist observation
- A useful supplement when meeting is impossible
- Best in smaller groups already well established.

Size of group is important. Four or five people in a telephone supervision group, working over time, develop some sense of each other's contributions, especially if they sometimes meet face-to-face. A telephone group with twenty members, and/or a shifting population, that has never met, will struggle to interact beyond superficial levels. Where there has been no face to face contact, reticence about taking risks, when unable to assess quickly and non-verbally what the reactions are, is simply too great for many people, who then 'play safe' and thus limit their own learning and contributions, thus also limiting other peoples'. Sensitive group coaches may be able to deduce a good deal from the voice, but group members may be less skilled, and their rate of learning is slower than in a face-to-face group.

Telephone coaching can develop members' sensitivity to aural clues, provided the group is small and regular enough to enable genuine interaction. Supervision groups perhaps most commonly use the telephone as a supplement to group meetings, and maybe this is no accident. These groups tend to be at the smaller end of the spectrum, typically three or four members with a supervisor. Smaller groups which already have established relationships do best on the phone, because their prior knowledge of each other is greater, and the relationships are fewer and so easier to 'read' from aural data alone.

For the group coach, working on the telephone offers one significant advantage over face-to-face coaching: you can use drawing and note-taking 'live' to assist your observation. Making a diagram or drawing of the group, say as a circle with a point for each member, helps the visually-oriented coach hold the group in mind. You can then note who is talking or silent, what emotions you sense and from whom, any 'pairing' (see 'The basic assumptions' in chapter 10) or recurring themes, and conversation flow, such as who typically follows whom, or who usually affirms or contradicts whom.

In the course of writing this book I googled 'group coaching'. I was intrigued to discover that what mostly came up was a series of teleconference opportunities, more or less baldly presented as a way of boosting the coach's income by 'coaching' large numbers of people remotely and in modest amounts of time. Such groups cannot meet the basic criterion for coaching, which is attention to the learning needs of individuals, since groups of 25–30 people who have never met and whose membership is constantly changing, cannot work at much depth in the space of 1–2 hours on the phone. These tele-rallies may generate learning and perhaps motivation or belief, but I do not believe that they are group telephone coaching.

Coaching sessions within management development programmes and other ongoing training groups

Coaching is not training. Longer training programmes can however incorporate group coaching sessions within their structure, providing an opportunity for the participants to take ownership of what they have learned. The coaching sessions should take place at every meeting of the training group, and should be set up as carefully as any other group coaching exercise. Ideally the trainers should not act as group coaches, to decrease the risk of role confusion.

- Have group coaching sessions at each meeting of the training group.
- Confidentiality – group coaches ideally not same people as trainers.
- Each person works on something that is their interpretation of the training material, not directed by coach or trainers (but open to challenge from the group).
- Continuity in coaching is easier if the training context provides in-depth exploration of material rather than 'a quilt of many tools', since the material in the taught sessions will often influence the coaching sessions.
- Small enough groups to allow each person to update on progress and think about overcoming obstacles each time – use 'turns'.
- Enough time.
- Methodology – can vary, but use something rigorous to keep the conversation focused.
- Agreed mechanism to feed back 'themes' or shared difficulties that have structural or organizational origins, without betraying individual confidentiality.

It is important for the coach to be scrupulous in ensuring that the members of the coaching groups retain individual control over their learning goals. The aim is to achieve an individual interpretation of what has been learned through the training. To get the benefit of the learning group method, individuals must be free to work on learning goals that are truly important to them.

Finally on learning groups: users' views of the interpersonal skill gains

I have recently (2006–2008) had the privilege of researching learning group processes,[125] where members were training as group coaches for action learning sets. They were eloquent about their gains:

- use of open questioning in work and life habits
- growth of self-awareness
- growth of understanding, confidence and skills as a group facilitator
- learning to ask better questions
- learning to challenge performance deficits such as poor questioning
- letting go of anxious control in a group situation
- self-restraint and pace: waiting and thinking before speaking
- managing the beginning of the group
- learning to say what hasn't been said.

In this chapter we have described four types of learning group. In the next, we focus on a fifth type, the supervision group. The material in that chapter, particularly about the reflection process (also known as parallel process), is also relevant to *all* learning groups.

8

Supervision groups

This chapter contains:

This chapter

In the last chapter we introduced learning groups, and in this chapter we focus on a particular kind of learning group, the supervision group. This chapter presents a deeper insight into their dynamics, with particular attention to the 'reflection process' or 'parallel process', a powerful tool for understanding the coaching work presented. It discusses the dynamics of learning, how to handle competition, how to open and structure supervision groups, some common supervisor errors, and the characteristics of the effective supervisor; it considers presentation styles in supervision.

The origins of coaching supervision, and group supervision theory

Supervision is a mechanism for safeguarding quality of work, and developing professional skill and competence, adopted into coaching from the analogous professions of counselling, psychotherapy and social work. The most widely used models in supervising one-to-one coaching are adapted from the counselling field.[126] These books offer useful checklists and methods for managing the complexities of supervision, such as the 'seven-eye' model[127] and the 'helping/hindering' and 'structured group supervision model'[128] (which is similar to the Balint method described in the previous chapter). This chapter extends these discussions by focusing on the group dynamic dimension of supervision groups, and introducing ideas from a group-specific supervision literature.

In psychotherapy, supervision is sometimes wryly described as 'a practice in search of a theory',[129] and indeed the basic model is one of apprenticeship with little attention to individual learning styles. The models developed are practice-oriented; Bernard and Goodyear[130] give a good account. The development of supervision theory has been slow, the single and outstanding exception being Searles' discovery of the reflection process.[131] In the past fifteen years, as supervision has been understood to be a distinct professional activity, the body of analytic theory has begun to grow.[132]

While group supervision is common, it is 'widely practiced but little understood'.[133] Group analysis offers a literature of elaborated group supervision practice, but this literature is not widely known among individually qualified practitioners, and development of theory has also been slow. We need supervision theory and group theory to be melded into a properly elaborated theory of group supervision. The approach described in this chapter is primarily from a group-analytic supervision perspective.

Supervision and supervision groups

Here is a definition of supervision.

Supervision is a relationship in which the practitioner can reflect on and develop her/his practice and understanding in her/his client work.

Supervision benefits the client and the coach, or, more exactly, the client through the greater integration of the coach's knowledge and practice skills: in supervision, coaches can integrate theory with practice.

Supervision *groups* offer multiple relationships in which the practitioner can undertake this reflection. Their primary purpose is to help the coach members with their client work, and so contribute to their development as reflective professionals. Supervision groups are particularly valuable in supervising group and team coaching, because their dynamics can more fully mirror the dynamics in the work.

In a supervision group, each member has the experience of being supervised, and of supervising as a member of the group, with the capacity of the supervisor to understand augmented by the capacities of all the others, who participate in both ways. The supervisor also has a triple role, nurturing the individual members, and the group's capacity to work effectively, while attending to the work presented. The fluidity of role makes supervision groups more effective than individual supervision at developing confidence and independence alongside competence.

Supervision groups are in essence learning groups, and all the advantages that accrue from ongoing learning groups apply to them: they broaden and enrich learning, by engaging in depth with others' work, strengthen interpersonal sensitivity and provide a multiple sounding board generating a range of alternative strategies and styles of feedback. They are fundamentally more egalitarian than one-to-one supervision, particularly when the coaches in the group are themselves experienced. The supervisor is part of the group too, a kind of 'first among equals' bringing greater experience and training to the table. The supervisor's ability to 'hold' the group's learning is central.[134] See Chapter 2 for a full discussion of holding.

The conscious wish to collaborate and learn through supervision is balanced, and sometimes frustrated, by the

unconscious wish to avoid the discomfort of learning. All supervision poses some challenge for the supervisee, because of the inherent risk of exposure. In describing the difficulties we find in our professional work, we risk feeling ashamed; we can fear that others will criticize or think less well of us if we relate the things of which we are least sure about ourselves.

This underlying dynamic influences whether we choose individual or group supervision, though the decision cuts both ways. Some prefer the privacy of individual supervision since it limits to one the number of other people who might be critical, albeit one in a more hierarchical position. Others prefer the group, since most of the time the spotlight is on others so one can quietly learn, and since any impasse with the supervisor can be mediated by the other group members.[135] In either setting, the supervisee must find adequate holding to enable the possibility of learning.

Like action learning sets and Balint groups, supervision groups usually rely on turn-taking. The superficial process may seem deceptively simple, as each member in turn presents an aspect of their work for collective reflection, but these are groups with a peculiar complexity of underlying process. The coach supervisor is attending to the needs of the supervisee presenting, of the group, and to the piece of work being presented. S/he is holding the focus of the group, assisting each member with the client work presented, to the forefront, in the face of many fascinating alternatives.

Some ideas about supervision

- 'The slightest thing – a remark, an image, an attitude, a word – is a possible golden opportunity'[136]
- Features of the coaching relationship are likely to enter the supervisory relationship
- Group reverie reaches deeper levels of meaning to facilitate change
- New ways of thinking and working are best introduced in a practical, practice-oriented way.

If s/he is analytically trained, her/his attention is hovering between the conscious and unconscious communications presented in the work, and to be deduced in the group, so as to surface the fullest possible picture of 'what is really going on'.

Advantages and limitations of group supervision

Bernard and Goodyear (2009) list nine advantages of group supervision compiled from various sources: economies of time, costs and expertise; opportunities for vicarious learning; breadth of client exposure; more diverse feedback; more understandable feedback (because supervisees speak each other's language better than does the 'expert' supervisor); a more rounded supervisor picture of each supervisee (through observation in different interactions); learning supervision skills; normalizing experiences; and the particular value of the reflection process in supervising work with teams and groups.

The limitations are charted by Carroll,[137] and include the possibility of supervisees receiving insufficient time and attention; disruption of work through rivalry and competition; overload; inappropriate use of supervision time. The supervisor can address and minimize all these through astute and assertive leadership. An active stance is needed, in structuring the group, setting the right tone, articulating what is needed, and challenging departures from desired group norms.

In addition to these, the usefulness of supervision can be limited by a failure to engage with the implications of diversity in the group; for example, if a mainly female coach supervision group contains one man, or a white european supervisor works with a group entirely composed of coaches from other cultures. In these circumstances, to hold the group effectively and be sensitive to the impact of seen and felt differences, the coach supervisor must be aware of the broader implications of her/his position, and curious, willing to question and learn across cultures and other difference divides. See further 'Exchange' in Chapter 2.

Managing competition and rivalry in the supervision group

Managing time effectively (see 'Structuring a supervision group' below) and managing feelings of competition and rivalry are two critical supervisor skills. Supervision groups naturally stir up feelings of competition, as members compare themselves to each other and ask such questions as 'Who is the best coach?', 'Who cares most about their clients?', 'Who has the most difficult cases?', 'Who is most insightful?'.[138] This is normal enough, and can lead to an atmosphere of healthy competition if handled well. The first and most important step is for the supervisor to let members know that s/he has noticed it. The aim is to bring these dynamics into conscious awareness. It is also important for the supervisor to comment early on signs of over-rivalrous behaviour, such as putting other members down. Inhibition in presentation may indicate fear of being attacked, and the supervisor does well to enquire (gently), particularly if an individual's ability to present seems weaker than usual. See also 'Competition, envy and admiration' in Chapter 4.

If one or more members are competing with the supervisor, perhaps to show how much better they are at supervising, it is important that the supervisor does not enter the competition. It is also important that s/he does not let the challenge pass unmarked. A good route can be to summarize the comments made and invite other perspectives alongside: this underlines the importance of the multiple perspectives of the group, and lets the challenger know that the challenge was noticed, without a put-down. If competitive contributions come too fast to allow time for thought, the supervisor should step in to restore the working norms of the group. Making the unconscious competition conscious is the aim of the supervisor here.

The reflection process[139]

Vignette: Reflection process 1

The coach presented a client's great perplexity about how to proceed. The client is founder CEO of a technical company, whose success is founded on innovation. Competition from companies manufacturing in Asia will reduce profitability steadily over the next five years, and he is faced with a dilemma: move manufacturing to a less expensive environment, which will not ensure growth, and will result in over 1000 redundancies locally, or risk persisting with local production in the hope that further innovation will retain the company's market-leading position.

The coach explains the contradictions faced by the client, gets confused and contradicts himself, all the while speaking faster and faster. The group feel confused and powerless, and at the same time greatly burdened with a need to help.

The supervisor asks how what is happening here and now in the group relates to what the coach is presenting, which helps the group members express their helplessness and bewilderment. Some discover that their feelings reflect the coach's feelings of being paralysed by the scale of the decision, and unable to help his client, which in turn reflect the client's feelings about his responsibilities to his staff.

One member expresses irritation at the coach's apparent panic. The coach comments that he felt angry with himself. Another, an entrepreneur with business failures as well as successes in her past, is attuned to the magnitude of the stakes – 'playing God with people's lives'. She sees how this had paralysed the coach as it paralysed the client, and in turn paralysed the supervision group. Once the feelings of impotence and the fear of power had been explored, the coach was able to re-establish the reflective relationship with his client.

This is a relatively simple example of how the reflection process – sometimes called parallel process – works in a supervision group. The client's feelings that paralyse him are communicated unconsciously to the coach, who then communicates them to the group, including the supervisor. Words are only a small part of the communication: tone, pace and gesture communicate the emotional content of the dilemma (see 'Communication' in Chapter 3). Different members of the group held different parts of the puzzle, according to their own predilections and experiences.

How is it that these competent professionals (all the way up the chain) were temporarily so gripped by these primitive emotions? It is because the strength of the feelings provoked and *unconsciously* communicated is mirrored and amplified in the experience of the hearers – they resonate in the group. All could feel some part of the emotion communicated. Used consciously, this amplification is a unique strength of group supervision. By fully experiencing the problem and then, in response to the supervisor's enquiry, regaining the capacity to reflect, the group was able to contain the coach's panic and so the client's. Group members also learned something about the impact of such apparently normal business decisions, and how to work with them, through the reflection process.

What would have happened if the link between the material and the feelings in the group had not been spotted? We can't know for certain, but it is likely that members and/or supervisor would have been left feeling frustrated, with a sense of 'unfinished business', and the presenting coach would not so soon have recovered his confidence.

In the example, some members identified with the coach's frozen state and some reacted against it. The identification was unconscious, and members responded according to their own normal patterns. In the face of powerlessness, some of us are paralysed by panic and some 'get busy' – whether or not the activity truly addresses the dilemma that raised the feelings of helplessness. We could present the reactions to the discomfort of helpless feelings on a scale.

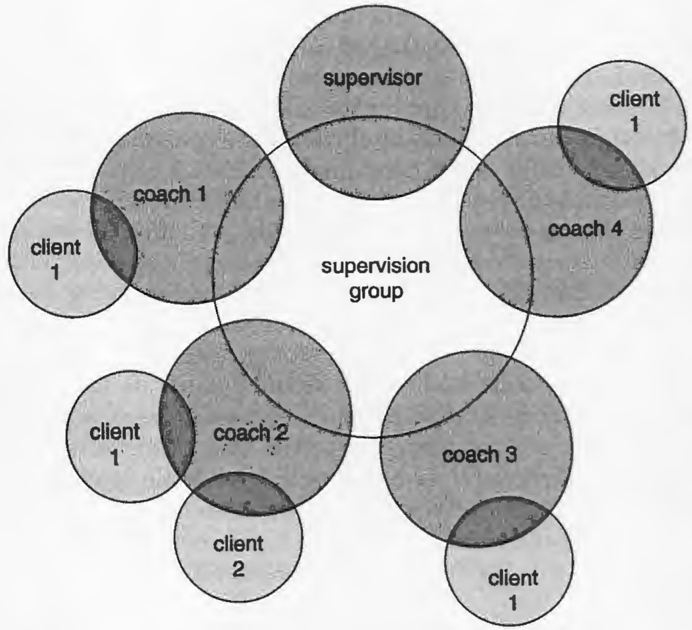
'There's nothing I can do' ⟷ 'I'm in charge, must act!'

The dilemma of dependence versus independence is brought sharply into focus in supervision groups,[140] as group members work to make sense of their relationship to the supervisor and to the others in the group. This is particularly true in a training situation.

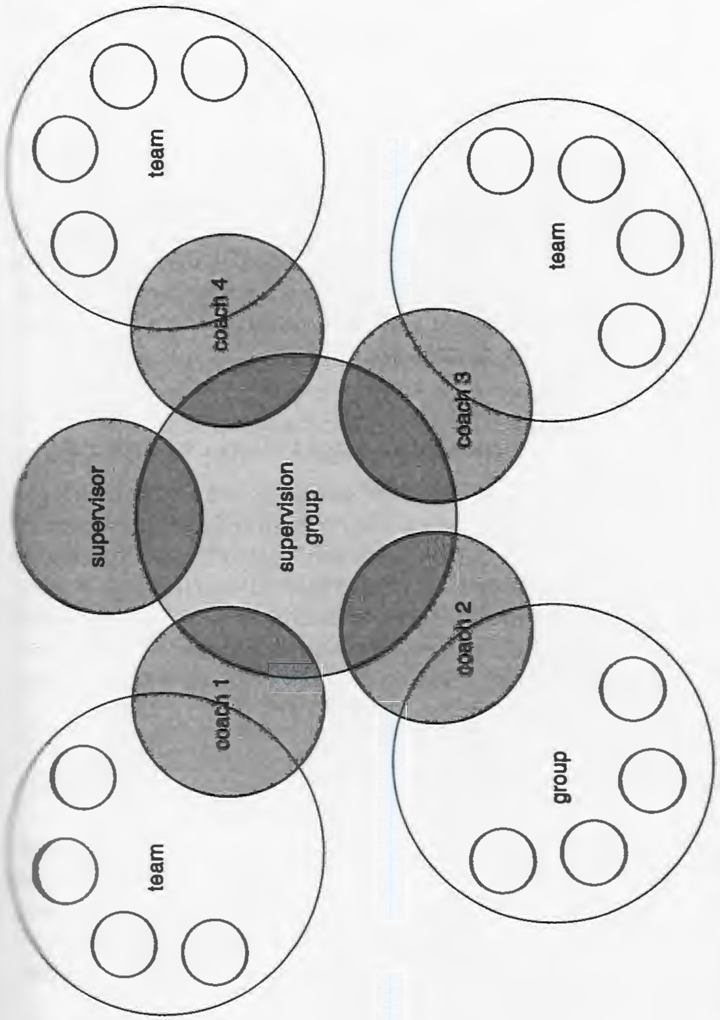
The example illustrates the working of the reflection process, where the emotional dynamics experienced in the work presented are reflected among those present as the work is recounted. This is also sometimes called 'parallel process'.

Individual supervision is a complex undertaking with twelve possible axes of communication (taking account of the conscious and unconscious parts of the three people involved, client, coach and supervisor, gives the twelve axes).[141] The reflection process operates through the medium of the coach's relationships with both client and supervisor.

The diagrams below represent a supervision group of



Supervision group supervising individual coaching



Supervision group supervising team and group coaching

one supervisor and four coaches. Where one client each is presented, we could add an overlapping circle to each of the four coach's circles. In the first diagram, three coaches present one client each and one coach (Coach 2) presents two clients.

Where the supervision is in a group, the possibilities for communication, conscious and unconscious, increase by a factor for each additional person in the group, and where the work supervised is *with* a team or a group, it multiplies again. Its complexity can be seen in the second diagram, where each coach presents a team or group of four. It is the power of the reflection process that helps us first surface the dynamics, and then, through use of careful reflection on our responses, select the most relevant and develop a hypothesis to guide the coach's next steps.

The reflection process and supervision of groups

Although this sounds highly complicated in theory, the reflection process offers an extraordinarily fine degree of focus on the issues. As each coach presents, the dynamics of the group presented are experienced in the supervision group. As this is articulated, it becomes possible for what was previously unconscious to come into consciousness and be thought about, so that conscious choices can be made about focus and strategies.

The reflection process: beware

When first working with the reflection process, it is not uncommon to be captivated by its remarkable power to illuminate previously unthought of aspects of a situation. Supervisors can easily be seduced into assuming an unwarranted degree of certainty about their interpretations. Beware.

The reflection process needs to be used thoughtfully. The process twists and turns through the psyches of many people on its route to the supervision group; its expression in the supervision group will include distortions arising

from the perspectives of each member of the group, including the supervisor.[142]

While it sheds strong light on the problem presented, the mirroring is not exact, as the vignette below shows. What it does reflect accurately is the underlying *feeling* that is unable to be thought about, the obstacle to progress.

Vignette: Reflection process 2

Frank was working with a college English Department, whose Head, Aggie, was very anxious. The department had gone through a very bad patch and pupils were consistently achieving lower grades than they should, based on their previous performance. As the team coaching progressed, Aggie became increasingly agitated and spent a good proportion of her one-to-one sessions asking Frank whether there was something he could do to move things along faster. Frank felt irritated and undermined. The Head Teacher, a calm man who had commissioned the work, withdrew once it began. 'No wonder, to get away from Aggie!' commented one of the supervision group. Everyone laughed, including Frank and the supervisor.

The supervisor found himself thinking about the laughter, and its contrast with the serious consequences of the team's failures for its pupils. Aggie's distress seemed more understandable. The men in the group had laughed the hardest, and he found himself wondering whether gender was part of the issue. He asked the men what Frank's tale had stirred in them. With some reticence, one spoke of his fear of powerful women, and another agreed.

Frank leaned forward. He spoke of his discomfort working with the mainly female English team, and of his fantasy of running away from Aggie. Thinking out loud, it became clear to Frank that his anger was interfering with his ability to coach Aggie and engage with her concerns. Although her anxiety was annoying, it arose from her frustration. Aggie had gone into teaching out of a sense that she had got her life chances through education, and wanted to 'give something back' to students from poor backgrounds like her own. She had a sense of the urgency of the problem that the rest of the team had not fully 'got'. Frank had not got it either, till now, as he reflected on the long-term impact for students of poor results in English. Frank had been over-identified with the team, at the expense of Aggie's genuine concern for the students.

To aid the fluent use of parallel process, the supervisor can encourage a kind of group reverie[143] or free association to the material presented. Group members are encouraged to listen quietly to the presenter, paying attention to their internal responses – fantasies, memories and thoughts – and then to choose something to share. Group members' comments have the purpose neither of supporting nor criticizing the presenter, but simply of opening up a new angle. Group reverie has some common ground with the Balint method described in the previous chapter. The impact of each person sharing their responses without judgement can illuminate previously unnoticed aspects of the case, and, as the group matures, builds a common language and way of working together.

The reflection process affects all supervision groups to some degree, and it is helpful for supervisors to bear it in mind, even where it is not used as a primary tool in supervision. Where ignored, it can disrupt and undermine supervision. To work with it, the supervisor needs training in working with awareness of unconscious dynamics. It will often take some time for a new supervision group to develop skill in working at this level, even if some of the coaches are similarly trained. The reflection process will be at work, but a new group needs to become accustomed to working with

each other on the irrational and inexplicable. The power to illuminate coaching dilemmas of this way of working provides the motivation, but the capacity can only develop through use.

For very anxious groups or for less experienced practitioners, the method has some pitfalls. Using personal reactions in this way requires members to have a personal maturity, and an ability to distinguish between exploration in the service of improving client work (supervision) and of personal growth (therapy). Having had some experience of personal therapy certainly helps members keep the boundaries clear, but it is the supervisor's role to help the group stay within them.

Beginning a supervision group

Any supervision group begins with the contact between the supervisor and potential group members, when it is important to discuss what the supervisee's goals are from supervision, and what s/he expects it to be like. Each person should meet the supervisor individually before the first group session. The supervisor should select members with enough homogeneity as regards length of experience to create a reasonably balanced group, and enough heterogeneity of experience to make a wide variety of viewpoints available to the group. Since irregular attendance disrupts the work of the group, the supervisor should emphasize the importance of regularly being there.

The first meeting of a supervision group has much in common with the first meeting of any other group in terms of what members need (see 'Setting a new group up right – the first meeting' in Chapter 11). It is important for the supervisor to establish conditions conducive to openness and learning, so that the group can become a secure base to tackle the theoretical and ethical dilemmas of client work. S/he should state what s/he hopes the group to achieve, model the kind of behaviour s/he wishes to see, and encourage the group members to express their goals.

As with coaching, there should be an explicit, preferably written contract, discussed beforehand with prospective members of the group and confirmed at the first meeting.[5] The text box shows headings to consider for a group supervision contract.

Checklist for group supervision contracts

- What is the purpose of the group?
- How many people are involved?
- When, how frequent and how long are the sessions?
- What is the structure of the sessions and what are the presentation guidelines?
- What are the expectations about attendance and arrangements for setting dates?
- What happens about cancelled, missed or late sessions?
- What are the fees?
- What does this way of working require of group members?
- What are the confidentiality requirements?
- How to deal with emergencies?
- What are the expectations about insurance or communicating with others besides the client, including the sponsoring organization?
- How might material from supervision be used, and how will consent be sought?
- What records are kept?
- What notice is expected of termination?

Structuring a supervision group

In the counselling and therapeutic contexts from which coaching supervision is derived, supervision happens relatively frequently, particularly during training and the early years of practice, with the interval lengthening as experience grows. It is not uncommon for supervision groups to meet weekly. This is relatively uncommon among coaches, where monthly meeting is more usual. The longer interval results in a longer lead-in time to achieve the cohesion and

group confidence that create an effective working group, and challenges the supervisor to create a climate and structures promoting both.

In structuring a monthly supervision group, it is important to ensure that everyone has some opportunity to speak about their work on each occasion. It is simplest to do this by allocating everyone a slot of equal length, as in other kinds of learning groups. Some groups, particularly of newer coaches, also keep some time in reserve for emergencies. In groups meeting more frequently, such as weekly groups, an equal time slot is less important, but the supervisor must keep an eye on the distribution of time to ensure equity.

Some groups negotiate time at each meeting, but in a monthly group this is a tricky undertaking, because of the competitive feelings it can stir up, and the symbolic meaning of some getting more than others. It requires an alert and tenacious supervisor. There is a risk too that such a process merely confirms some members' subjective sense that theirs is a really big problem (or for some people, really small, not deserving of time).

In many years conducting and participating in supervision groups, I have observed that given equal time slots and a rigorously observed time limit, progress can be made in most cases. It is as though members internalize the length of time they have, and manage to get what they need within it.

When members do not get what they need, extending the time will not necessarily alter that fact; the (uncomfortable) function of supervision on these occasions is to confirm the stuckness the coach has brought. Rather than extend the slot, it is better to review it, in the manner of the 'thoughts unuttered, feelings unexpressed' check described in Chapter 7. This allows the issue to be faced, allows the presenter to get some further feedback that may be useful in unsticking things, and the group to process its feelings of frustration, etc. The stuckness can be worked on, rather than extending its re-enactment in the original slot, or confirming a sense that this is a 'special' problem.

Monthly supervision groups are usually smaller groups, with around four members. The reasons for this are generally pragmatic, to do with the time available divided by the time needed for each person to have a substantial 'turn'. Supervision groups are therefore properly limited to a size that allows each member a reasonable amount of time in which to focus on their work. Half an hour per person is a good rule of thumb, though I like to add an extra half-hour (so that a four member + supervisor group meets for 2.5 hours) for collective reflection, and to allow the group to finish comfortably on time.

Common supervisor errors

- Being too silent or too talkative
- Being too solemn or too inattentive to real points beneath flippancy
- Not balancing attention to the work with attention to the individuals
- Not balancing attention to the work with attention to the group
- Agreeing to be 'the expert on all things'
- Allowing the focus of the group to be skewed
- Ignoring differences in response to individual members
- Failing to balance appreciation and criticism
- Suppressing the group's involvement in supervising.

Being too silent or too talkative

Like the reactions to powerlessness shown in the scale in 'The reflection process' above, anxiety is the common source of these two apparently opposing supervisor errors. Supervisors may say too little out of a desire to appear wise (or at least, in common with supervisees, out of a desire not to appear foolish!). This can be particularly unhelpful early in the life of a supervision group, when the members are observing the supervisor's behaviour closely to see how they are expected to act. The supervisor should be modelling the

calm and thoughtful curiosity that s/he wishes members to display, while also actively promoting the group members' learning. It may also be unhelpful to be silent at anxious moments in the group, when things feel fraught. This is a matter of degree and of the group's maturity. It is good to let members struggle with the discomforts of uncertainty, but not good to let them drown in unreasoning panic.

Talking too much is a more obviously anxious response, often related to the supervisor lacking confidence in the group's capacity and feeling that s/he needs to 'make it work', or to control things. S/he may feel that s/he needs personally to 'give value' by offering the most profound insights, and may fail to see the competitiveness of needing always to be 'the expert'. Working effectively in a group depends on faith in the group to pursue its task competently, given a little light guidance.

Being too solemn or too inattentive to real points beneath flippancy

Because something is serious business is no reason not to laugh about it. We do not need to be solemn in order to be serious about our work, and seeing the funny side puts us in touch with our common humanity, sometimes in the face of what is truly tragic. We need humour to aid our learning and to make connections with each other.

On the other hand, we have all had group experiences where humour is defensive, where something very difficult is discounted – not-quite-faced – through an appeal to humour. The competent supervisor draws attention to the 'true words spoken in jest' and helps the group to work with the real dilemma.

Not balancing attention to the work with attention to the individuals

As the group matures and uses its emotional and intellectual intelligence with greater and greater precision in the service of the work, the desire to use those resources to solve more personal problems may be strong. There is always a tension between focusing on the work and focusing on the coach doing the work. Sometimes a supervision group needs to help a member see through a personal blind spot, but if it *always* focuses there, it has probably crossed a line into becoming a surreptitious therapy group. On the other hand, if the focus on the work is so tight that the person in the role is *never* considered, the work will be impoverished and will sometimes entirely miss critical learning points.

Not balancing attention to the work with attention to the group

Although the focus of the work is on the coaching, at times the communications about the work will also have direct relevance to the group. It is a mistake to ignore this; often a simple acknowledgement of the parallels will be enough to free up communication. For example, a charismatic supervisor on a training programme left suddenly, and was replaced in the group by a supervisor whom none of the group knew. The very first case presented was about a client who experienced his boss as a wicked stepmother.

Agreeing to be 'the expert on all things'

Some coaches are prone to idealize their supervisors, seeing them as the fount of all knowledge, wisdom and experience, in contrast to their own sense of confusion and 'not knowing how to do it'. This is a particular issue on training courses, and particularly in the early stages.

For some supervisors, this can be a seductive experience. Who would not want to be so important and full of expertise? Well, the wise and experienced supervisor would not. Even where the skills gap is genuinely great, the role of the supervisor is gently to nurture confidence and independence in group members. To stay in a permanently superior position robs supervisees of part of their own competence, and fails in the supervisory role of nurturing independence and the development of the 'internal supervisor'.[144]

The kind of split described, where the supervisees' self-denigration is counterbalanced by an overestimate of the

supervisor's abilities, is a kind of projection. Supervisees, at the outset of a new learning experience, are necessarily very focused on what they *don't* know, and often lose sight of their own abilities and project or 'give' them all to the supervisor. Their task is to regain them, so as to become confident in their own abilities. The supervisor's task is to encourage this process. The group is a splendid medium for this process, because (when it works well) the psychological concept moves from 'good supervisor' to 'good-group-of-which-I-am-a-part' to 'I am a good coach'. The disowned confidence (sense of having abilities) is recovered through the medium of the group (see 'Connectedness and belonging' in Chapter 4).

Allowing the focus of the group to be skewed

It can be difficult at times for supervision groups to retain a clear focus. Their work sits on various boundaries, between the client's interests and the coach's, between the coaches' work and their blind spots, between theory and practice, between training and achieving qualified status.

In supervision groups on a training course, fear may inhibit what members present – 'if I say that, I will fail the course' – or supervisees may have an exaggerated deference (or rebelliousness) towards the supervisor as an authority figure.

The focus of the group needs to be fluid in order to be creative, moving from what is presented to what is going on in the group to the individual presenting, and back again. Members will become caught up in discussing the presenter's client as though s/he were their client. If the client is not 'handed back' to the presenter s/he may feel robbed or denigrated by this process.

This is just one of the ways in which the process can become skewed, with the gratification of individuals interfering with the work. Others include focusing on the client work and never considering the individuals carrying out the work, focusing on individual 'therapy', or becoming so fascinated by the group dynamics that the group's task gets lost. It is the supervisor's role to keep the group task in mind at all times, and to refocus group members on that when necessary. This will often require the supervisor to intervene actively.

Ignoring differences in response to individual members

The members of a supervision group are individuals, as is the supervisor. S/he will warm to some characteristics and to some people, and dislike aspects of others. The supervisor must maintain a self-disciplined awareness of these responses, and be thoughtful about how to use these responses in the work. If s/he fails to do so, s/he for example may 'play favourites', focus on some people more than others, be harsher with some supervisees than others, or handle time boundaries unfairly.

Failing to balance appreciation and criticism

We have seen from Chapter 2 that to learn, we need to have a balance between feeling secure and the opportunity for exploration. The supervisor should neither over-use nor neglect to express appreciation. It must be sincere and well targeted. See 'Encouragement' in Chapter 4. If a supervisor is feeling critical of a supervisee's work, the safest line to pursue is one of enquiry. This gives the supervisee the opportunity to self-correct, and the group to offer alternative strategies. Reasoning about the best styles of intervention can be encouraged.

Vignette: Anxiety and irritation

As Helena presented her session with Anna, the supervisor felt irritated by how mechanical the work seemed. Helena described how hard she had had to work to stay 'in "coaching" mode' in the face of Anna's rising irritation; since Anna had asked for direct feedback, the supervisor could understand her feelings. The rest of the group was silent, and the supervisor struggled for a useful question to ask Helena. 'What did her irritation make you feel?' allowed Helena to acknowledge a panicky feeling that the session was going wrong and she didn't know what to do. This had led her to stick even tighter to a 'non-directive' style. Anna had commented at the end of the session that she hadn't made progress, and had cancelled the next session. Another group member commented that when she was nervous she also became rather rigid and so she felt for Helena.

'How else might we handle that?' produced a discussion ranging from options for managing anxious internal states to different ways of engaging with the client. Helena commented that she had gained much food for thought about what coaching really was.

The pattern of anxiety and irritation from the coaching session reappeared in supervision, with the supervisor experiencing the client's feelings. An enquiring approach enabled Helena to learn without further loss of face.

Suppressing the group's involvement in supervising

As the group supervisor, beware of always having the first, or the last, word. The purpose of the supervisor is to make the group containing and safe enough for the *group* to supervise the members. At times your greater experience will be of great use to members, but it will not be in every single presentation. The value of the group is in the rich picture developed through members' diverse responses; further, for the development of supervisees, the experience of helping others is at least as important as being helped.

What helps the supervision group work effectively?

In a paper written jointly by a training supervisor and supervisees,[145] it was found that a fundamentally open and supportive style on the part of the group supervisor, as a 'colleague in a leadership role', together with a firm focus on the task of learning from the work:

- reduced the impact of negative and fearful transferences about authority
- enabled students to relate more openly to each other as colleagues
- created a culture of working together openly and supportively on the task
- reduced the tendency to project all expertise into the supervisor
- kept the focus on the client work.

It is noteworthy that this successful supervision group was conducted by a supervisor experienced not only in supervision, but in working with groups. Some supervision courses require trainees to supervise in groups, without providing the needed training or support in group skills. A training in individual supervision is valuable in understanding what is happening in a group, but it is not sufficient to equip the supervisor for the range of challenges s/he will face in 'using the group in all its interactive complexity as it resonates in a myriad ways to aspects of a case'.[146]

The supervision style described in this chapter is most achievable by the experienced and group-trained supervisor working with relatively experienced coaches.[147] Less experienced coaches – or supervisors – may need a firmer style of leadership at first, before experiencing sufficient safety to take up this more creative style of working. It can nevertheless be achieved to some degree with most groups, by a supervisor who is willing to be curious, fallible and responsive to the need of her/his group.

Presentation and its vicissitudes

Presenting in supervision is an important skill in itself, and our natural style will reflect our personalities. Some are anxious, halting speakers; some are natural raconteurs, telling the story with wit and style; some present painstaking blow-by-blow accounts, based on meticulous process notes; some work around key moments or interactions. Whatever the natural style, we can all improve our presentation, and the supervisor can make a contribution by encouraging experimentation.

Presentation of work in supervision is a memory and representation of the work done, not the work actually done. This is true even when we use audiovisual recording, since although there is an accurate record of content, this cannot reproduce the internal experiences of coach and client. Bernard and Goodyear[148] offer a valuable review of the issues in using technological, observational and interventionist methods of supervision.

Most supervision still relies on the memory and records kept by the supervisee, and 'works best if [we] remain aware that what [we] are jointly imagining is not true'.[149] That is, it is one perspective on what is true, and at a remove. A painting of a field of poppies is not the same thing as a field of poppies, but paint on canvas.[150] This is exactly analogous to supervision, where the client describes her/his experiences to the coach who describes in supervision her/his experience of hearing these disclosures, with the aim of understanding them better and working with them more effectively. Remembering that the experience in supervision is somewhat removed from the client's experience, notwithstanding the power of parallel process in recreating some elements, keeps us humble in our ideas about 'what really happened'.

Helping coaches to present better is nevertheless a worthwhile endeavour, because it also helps them to remember better what they have heard and observed during their coaching sessions. Good observation is a prerequisite of good understanding, even if what is observed does not immediately fit any available theory. Recordings alongside memory are helpful in highlighting the 'forgotten' aspects of an interaction, which may hold important clues. Where recordings are not used, there are many ways of remembering, and a group session is more difficult to remember than an individual session.

Ways of remembering a group coaching session[151]

- *Visual/pictorial.* Who sat where in the group supervised, how people looked; strong images from the session
- *Aural.* The kinds of language used, the intonation and volume of speech; other sounds
- *Kinetic.* Communications through physical movement, orientation or gesture
- *Emotional/relational.* How group members related to each other, feelings in the room, how they changed during the session
- *Thematic.* An account of main themes in the session and how group members related to them
- *Critical incidents.* Key events in the session, particularly disturbing the boundaries of the session, reactions to them
- *Chronology.* A blow-by-blow account of what happened.

The better coaches remember their coaching work, the more likely the supervision session is to get close to the important issues. For coaches without perfect memories, therefore, some form of recording or note-taking is essential.

Once coaches have begun to experiment with ways of remembering the work, it is useful also to experiment with different ways of presenting the work in supervision. This allows the group to offer something accessible to coaches with a variety of learning styles, and helps everyone diversify their options. Here are some possibilities.

Ways of presenting in supervision

- *Process account.* A blow-by-blow chronological account of what happened, with feelings/visuals/movements, etc. recorded in the margin alongside
- *Single issue.* Focusing on all the examples of one behaviour, such as lateness
- *Spontaneous report.* For more confident and experienced coaches – setting all notes aside and reporting from memory. Can be compared with notes later. Good for training memory
- *Focusing on an individual.* Useful when one member of the coaching group or team presented is stuck, or may drop out. Reviewing all available data about that person to achieve a fuller understanding of her/his position
- *Role-play.* An account of the group session and members of the supervision group role-play it, while the presenting coach sits outside and observes; discussion follows. Useful with larger supervision groups. Can be varied by stopping the action for discussion at key points
- *Theoretical analysis.* The presenter focuses on a particular theoretical concept s/he wishes to understand more fully, such as transference or resonance, and presents material from the coaching session in the light of the concept
- *Brainstorming.* A problem is presented and everyone offers spontaneous associations and ideas, without trying to guide or judge the presenter.

This completes our review of learning groups and Part 4 of the book. Part 5 offers practical advice on running groups, beginning in the next chapter by reviewing strategies for dealing with members' problematic behaviour.