

Coaching at Work

Bath Consultancy Group

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By Kate Hilpern



The BBC's respected supervision programme promotes consistency and allows its community of coaches to support each other and share ideas

WATCH WITH AUNTIE

Perhaps the greatest irony of the coaching supervision programme at the BBC is that the broadcaster doesn't even like the term "supervisor". "It just isn't a comfortable word in a creative organisation. It smacks of keeping an eye on people," explains Liz Macann, head of executive, leadership and management coaching.

For some, the word can also conjure up images of therapeutic professions, where supervision has long been prevalent. Supervisors – aptly renamed "lead coaches" at the BBC, with terms such as "meta coaches" used elsewhere – are now also becoming established in the newer discipline of coaching

Key features: the BBC model

- Coaching supervision is compulsory. No supervision, no clients.
- BBC coaches have two types of supervision, each of which is provided in alternate months: one-to-one supervision and group supervision.
- BBC supervisors (called lead coaches) are trained in the Bath Consultancy Group's seven-eyed model, or an adaptation of it, which lead coaches then adapt.
- The BBC's coaching supervision programme has three clear purposes: qualitative, development and resourcing.

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but there is still some way to go. Although 86 per cent of coaches responding to a survey by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development last June believe coaches should have coaching supervision, only 44 per cent actually do so. The gap is even wider for those who organise coaching services. In all, 88 per cent said they believe coaches should have supervision, yet only 23 per cent report that they provide it.

Compulsory programme

The BBC paints a very different picture. Coaching supervision is actually compulsory for its network of 60 (soon to be 70) trained volunteer internal coaches, who provide coaching for senior and executive managers.

“People who don't attend supervision cease to be given clients,” confirms Macann. Although this rarely happens in practice, she says some

coaches have had to take “time out” from coaching while they are too busy with other projects to give their attention to supervision.

“Our aim as a coaching service was to provide executive coaching at the same standard or better than could be bought in at great cost from unknown external providers,” she says.

Supervision, remarks Macann, although it was not called that at the time, was seen initially as a way of embedding the learning from the Coach Foundation Course – the internal training course for the coaches.

“It was only around 2003 that we realised this thing called supervision was emerging in coaching. So we started to recognise it as such and also to develop the purpose of having it.”

Today, she says, the supervision programme has a clear three-fold purpose. “First, it ensures consistent and high standards across our network of coaches, which is appropriate to the BBC. Second, it develops the coaches further from their original training, and lastly, it offers internal coaches a much-needed restorative place – a safe place of their own to go and offload.”

This fits neatly with the three main functions (qualitative, development and resourcing) of effective coaching supervision, as defined by Hawkins and Smith in 2006. The qualitative function provides quality control in working with people. The rationale is that high-quality coaching can't be maintained by a coach acting in isolation, that any risk of unprofessional practice can be minimised and that coaching needs to be aligned with organisational objectives. Meanwhile, the developmental function addresses the skills, understanding and capabilities of the supervisee through the reflection and exploration of their work with their clients. Lastly, the resourcing function provides emotional support, enabling the coach to deal with the intensity of client work.

Some of the BBC lead coaches trained as supervisors with Dr Peter Hawkins and his organisation, the Bath Consultancy Group.

Macann explains: “Initially, we weren't trained in supervision because we knew what we wanted to provide ourselves. But as our programme evolved I remember thinking, ‘OK, I'm supervising, but I'm not sure if I'm doing it right.’”

“I wanted to explore a process with someone who was known for being good and Peter was the obvious choice because he'd written extensively on

the subject of supervision within the helping professions. His use of the seven-eyed model fascinated me."

This supervision model in the fields of counselling and psychotherapy was originally published in 1985, Hawkins says.

"I realised back then that supervisees had no way of negotiating with their supervisor on what they needed. I felt it was important to change this because what supervisors were providing in the name of supervision was very variable. For example, some would treat it like a case review of the client, whereas others would focus purely on the coach. What my model does is map out the various places one can focus within the relationship between the two so that the supervision has a greater impact."

As its name suggests, the seven-eyed model focuses on seven areas:

- the client and the content of the session;
- the interventions for the coach;
- what's going on in the relationship between coach and client;
- the feelings and reactions being stirred up in the coach;
- what is happening live in the relationship between coach and client;
- what kinds of things are being stimulated in the supervisor;
- and the wider context of, in this case, the BBC and its specific organisational culture.

Hawkins believes supervisors should tackle all seven areas, whereas most supervisors are strong in only one, two or three. The supervision training consists of four three-day modules, alongside 10 sessions of supervision on their supervision sessions and some tutorials.

"You can do it within a year, but some people choose to take longer," he says.

Adaptable structure

The BBC lead coaches attended the basic training in the seven-eyed model. This provided an extremely useful structure, although Macann admits it is adapted by BBC supervisors as they see fit: "For example, the seven-eyed model, by the book, is too lengthy for our 10 lead coaches."

Each of them supervises about 10 coaches – who in turn coach anything from three clients upwards – for an hour every other month in sessions that are usually face to face.

The model doesn't leave time for the coach and supervisor to use the session for developmental

Key learning points

Be clear about your purpose

Liz Macann urges HR or coaching managers to consider what they want from supervision.

Design a framework that provides consistency and flexibility in your context

Although Macann uses an appropriate supervision model, she refuses to be straitjacketed by it, choosing instead to adapt it to the BBC's culture.

Develop trained supervisors

With the benefit of hindsight, Macann says: "I would introduce supervision training earlier if I were to do it again. After all, the training helps the supervisor to help the coach shift so the coaching becomes more transformational."

Maximise continued learning and development in the supervision process

BBC coaches are provided with both one-to-one and group supervision. The use of different supervisors for each means coaches receive different perspectives.

Maximise organisational learning while also protecting individual confidentiality

Group supervision sessions frequently raise organisational issues or trends worth noting. Themes are then fed into the leadership team of the leadership and development function and may also provide feedback to the leadership board. Client confidentiality is protected in individual and group supervision by a 'no names or grades' policy and, if necessary, by changing details.

or restorative purposes, but "maybe the supervisor knows of a tool or line of questioning that has brought rewards for them in the past".

Each year, besides six one-to-one supervisory sessions a year, all BBC coaches must participate in at least four group sessions to maintain their "right to practise" and contribute to the BBC's coach accreditation process. These usually take place in alternate months to the individual sessions and consist of 10-12 coaches meeting for a half-day. The group supervisor is a different person to the individual supervisor, which means that all coaches have two independent sources of supervision.

Typically, these sessions include a check-in regarding their coaching work; sharing new tools and techniques learnt from books and/or attending courses; co-supervision in threes; and coaching "book club" recommendations from group members.

"Organisationally, these sessions mean we get more capacity to provide supervision more often," says Macann. "It's also a great collective experience that enables networking and the added learning is particularly advantageous."

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Jane Saunders, a part-time internal coach at the BBC with 10-15 clients, adds: "The group sessions are excellent because you get a different perspective than in your one-to-one. Everyone always has so much to say that the sessions are fully utilised."

Behaviour monitor

Group supervision sessions frequently raise organisational issues or trends worth noting – for instance, if there is a lot of unrest around a high-level project or a cultural change among managers. In this way, group sessions provide an "emotional and behavioural monitor" for the organisation. Themes are then fed into the leadership team of the leadership and development function and may also be used as feedback to the leadership board.

Client confidentiality is protected in both individual and group supervision, says Saunders. "People work with a 'no names or grades' rule and if there's a risk that a client could be recognised, we camouflage details."

Asked why the BBC is committed to coaching supervision, Macann points to a number of positive outcomes. Among them are a sense of community and connectedness with other coaches; stimulating belief in the coaching process; ongoing personal development that informs coaching practice; more effective working with "sticky" clients; confident coaches who are better equipped to deliver high-calibre, time-effective coaching; and an organisational safety net to help coaches maintain boundaries and minimise any organisational risk.

Eileen Arney, the CIPD's adviser, learning, training and development, says the CIPD research, which she was involved in, found very

HRD 2007



Liz Macann will be speaking about the BBC at the CIPD's annual learning and development conference, HRD 2007, at London's ExCel on 17-19 April. www.cipd.co.uk/hrd

few organisations have developed such a coherent structure for providing coaching supervision to their internal coaches.

"What struck me was the BBC's determination to continually develop coaching services through the likes of supervision, with the ultimate aim of fully supporting employee development," she says.

She has also been impressed with the BBC's recognition of the fact that "you never really know what goes on in coaching unless the coach comes out and talks about what they do".

Alison Heighton, one of the BBC's lead coaches, believes this is particularly important for in-house coaches. "Without supervision, there wouldn't be anywhere you could really share your thoughts and feelings about the coaching sessions or to think through the techniques you use and reflect on how well they are working with the client. Surely that's bad practice and that's why I wholeheartedly believe in the compulsory supervision rule at the BBC.

"I've also found that the more you share coaching experiences, the more you learn and the better you coach." ■

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Group supervision sessions can raise important trends for the BBC, for example, concerns among managers around a big project

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