

Australian Coaches' Views on Coaching Supervision: A Study with Implications for Australian Coach Education, Training and Practice

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Abstract

In the first study to examine Australian coaches' views on supervision, 174 experienced professional Australian coaches completed an on-line survey; 82.7% of participants were receiving some form of supervision. There was overwhelming support for supervision, but 30% reported having a negative experience with supervision with complaints about peer group supervision and unskilled supervisors being most common. Coach supervision was seen as a complex skill set that has significant value in terms of delivering an opportunity for reflective practice, the development of insights and new perspectives, and assuring the delivery of good quality coaching, particularly in dealing with difficult cases. Recommendations are made for teaching, training and practice.

Key Words: Coaching practice, supervision, evidence-based coaching,

Introduction

As the coaching industry has matured and developed, more sophisticated models of practice have emerged over the years. These practices emerge partly in response to professional coaches' own quests for increasing professionalism, and partly in order to meet the increasing expectations from the buyers of coaching services.

Supervision is an example of an emerging, and potentially sophisticated development in coaching practice. Supervision in coaching can be broadly understood as being as a structured process for coaches designed to help coaches attend to improving the quality of the coaching, to grow their coaching capabilities and support themselves and their practice with the help of a coaching supervisor (adapted from Hawkins & Schwenk, 2006). Supervision is extremely common and, indeed, is frequently mandatory in a range of helping professions including social work (Noble & Irwin, 2009), counselling and psychotherapy (West, 2003). It is less common in professional coaching practice (Moyes, 2009), although it is attracting increasing interest in the coaching industry worldwide (Hawkins, 2008).

Although professional coaching is a global industry its rate of development varies considerably from country to country. For example, the literature and research into coach supervision in the UK has developed substantially over the past five years. In the UK a number of theoretically-grounded books presenting a wide range of issues related to supervision have been published (e.g., Bachkirova, Jackson, & Clutterbuck, 2011; Hawkins & Smith, 2006; Passmore, 2011), and there has been an emergent European and UK literature on coaching supervision in the peer-reviewed press (e.g.,

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Butwell, 2006; Carroll, 2006; Donaldson-Feilder & Bush, 2009; Fengler, 2006; Gray, 2010; Hawkins, 2008; Passmore & McGoldrick, 2009; Turner, 2010), including a number of useful reviews (e.g., Moyes, 2009).

Further, UK and European coaching organisations such as the Association for Coaching (AC), the British Psychological Society Special Group in Coaching Psychology (BPS, SGCP) and the European Mentoring and Coaching Council (EMCC) are actively involved in the development and promotion of coaching supervision guidelines (e.g., SGCP, 2007). There is also increasing academic interest within the UK in coaching supervision. For example, a number of UK universities and coach training organisations offer theoretically-grounded post-graduate training in coach supervision, and the First International Conference on Coaching Supervision was held in 2011 at Oxford Brookes University.

In contrast, there has been little research or academic activity to date in coach supervision in Australia. This is despite the fact that there has been a longstanding Australian involvement in coaching research (e.g., Grant, 2003) and there is a vibrant Australian coaching industry (Grant & O'Hara, 2008). Although supervision has been a part of some coach training organisations' offerings since the early 2000's, the Australian research in this area has been predominantly limited to reports of the development of supervision practices within coach training organisations (e.g., Armstrong & Geddes, 2009), or the development of theoretical frameworks for operationalising supervisory relationships and facilitating coaches' process of introspection and continuous development (e.g., Kemp, 2008). Extending the important foundational work of Armstrong and Geddes (2009) and Kemp (2008), the present research is the first study specifically examining coach supervision using Australian coaches and explore Australian coaches' attitudes towards, and engagement in supervision.

If supervision is truly important in the development of coaches and, by extension the development of the coaching industry (Moyes, 2009; Salter, 2008), then it is important that we have a good understanding of coaches' views on supervision. The aim of the present research was to explore Australian professional coaches' views on supervision, their experience of supervision as a supervisee and as a supervisor, and in doing so establish some foundational knowledge about supervision in Australia that may then be useful in making recommendations for Australian coach education, training and practice. It should be noted that this study was primarily examining Australian professional coaches' attitudes towards supervision and their engagement in supervision, rather than examining which models or theories informed their supervision.

Method

In order to get an accurate understanding of supervision in Australia, it was important that participants in this study themselves had a good understanding of the Australian coaching industry. Hence key individuals within the Australian coaching industry were identified through existing Australian coaching organisations and networks and invited to participate in a survey on Australian attitudes towards and engagement in supervision in the coaching industry. Each respondent was asked in turn to invite other coaches to participate, in essence using a snowball sampling or respondent-driven sample methodology (Salganik & Heckathorn, 2004).

Participants completed an on-line questionnaire. Drawing on the main features of coach supervision as represented in the contemporary coaching supervision literature (e.g., Bachkirova, Jackson, & Clutterbuck, 2011; Butwell, 2006; Carroll, 2006; Donaldson-Feilder & Bush, 2009; Fengler, 2006; Gray, 2010; Hawkins, 2008; Hawkins & Smith, 2006; Moyes, 2009; Passmore, 2011; Passmore & McGoldrick, 2009; Turner, 2010), a series of questions about supervision was developed (these questions are detailed in the following sections). In order to encourage frank and open

responses participants took the survey completely anonymously. Once the survey was completed participants then had the option of giving their name and contact (email) details (137 chose to give their name and contact details).

Results and General Discussion

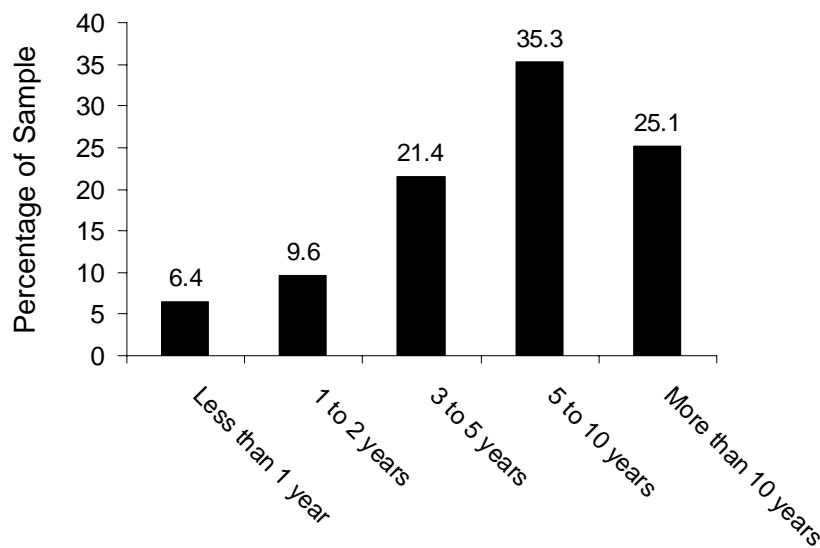
Of the total 187 participants who began the survey, 174 completed the survey, giving an overall completion rate of 93%. Personal demographic details such as age and gender were not recorded. Not all respondents answered all questions.

Overall Profile of Respondents

The vast majority of respondents were external coaches (n = 152; 83%), 24 were internal coaches (13.8%) 17 categorised themselves as a “manager-coach” (9.1%) and five stated that the above categories did not apply (2.7%). In addition to their coaching role, a minority also organised the purchase of coaching services (n = 52; 27.8%). The majority were not psychologists or trained mental health counsellors (non-psychologists: n = 122; 67.8% vs. psychologists/counsellors: n = 58; 32.3%).

Overall this was a very experienced group of coaches (see Figure 1); 60.4% of the group had five years or more coaching experience and 25.1% of the group had more than 10 years coaching experience (note that four respondents did not indicate their coaching experience).

Figure 1: Years of Coaching Experience of Participants



Supervision Experience: Receiving Supervision

Most respondents (82.7%) were receiving supervision in some form or other. When asked the question “Do you have a formal supervisor yourself, or do you receive supervision informally for example through peer consultation or peer supervision?”, of the 179 participants who responded to the question, only 31 (17.3%) did not have any kind of supervision; whereas 46 (25.7%) had a formal supervisor; 32 (17.9%) had an informal supervisor, and 70 (39.1%) used peer supervision.

Formal supervision was defined as supervision that takes place within the boundaries of a clearly designated and defined supervision with another individual whose primary role in that

relationship was to provide supervision. Informal supervision was understood as supervision that takes place informally without a clearly designated and defined supervision agreement with another individual whose primary role in that relationship was to provide supervision. Peer supervision can be understood as supervision with a colleague or peer who is not a designated or expert supervisor. Peer supervision can take place on a one-to-one or group basis (for discussion on these points see Bachkirova, et al., 2011).

With regard to length of time respondents had been receiving supervision, of those who responded to the question “How long have you been having supervision for?” 27.9% have been receiving supervision for over five years, 15.6% for four to five years, 22.4% for two to three years, 21% for one to two years, and 21% for less than one year. As could be expected, length of time in supervision was strongly related to the total time respondents had been a coach; 42.6% of those who had been in supervision for more than five years had been coaching for more than 10 years. 66% of those with 10 years or more coaching experience have been in supervision for at least two years, and only 14.9% of those with 10 years or more coaching experience did not have any kind of supervision.

Flexibility in Receiving Supervision

The majority of those who had one-to-one supervision received it face-to-face basis (42%) compared to those who had one-to-one supervision by phone (21.1%). However, many people used different types of supervision depending on their needs at any particular time. One respondent commented that: “*I have one-to-one supervision which I pay for and group supervision every two months paid for by the organisation*”. Another commented that “*I have mostly phone supervision but I also have some support in-person once every few months*”.

Another coach wrote that “*I have had group peer supervision in the past - during first two years of coaching practice. Now more irregular and informal and approximately every fortnight by phone or as the need arises*”.

One participant encapsulated the flexible approach to supervision implicit in many other responses:

I would like to add that I have three types of supervision. The first one mentioned above is an information arrangement with a very experienced executive coach with 27 years experience dealing with C level engagement. Our sessions focus mainly on challenging clients. The second is with a very experienced psychologist (PhD) our informal time together focus mainly on the psychological aspect of the relationships I have with clients. Aspects such transference or checking on clients that could be showing high level of anxiety or distress to make sure coaching is still appropriate. This supervisor I also use in case of referral requirements. The third kind of supervision I use is informal peer supervision with two executive coaches. The aim is to share our experiences with clients to broaden our knowledge and potentially skills.

In brief, the participants as a whole showed a mature, flexible approach to receiving supervision, varying the regularity or modality in line with their needs at any point in time.

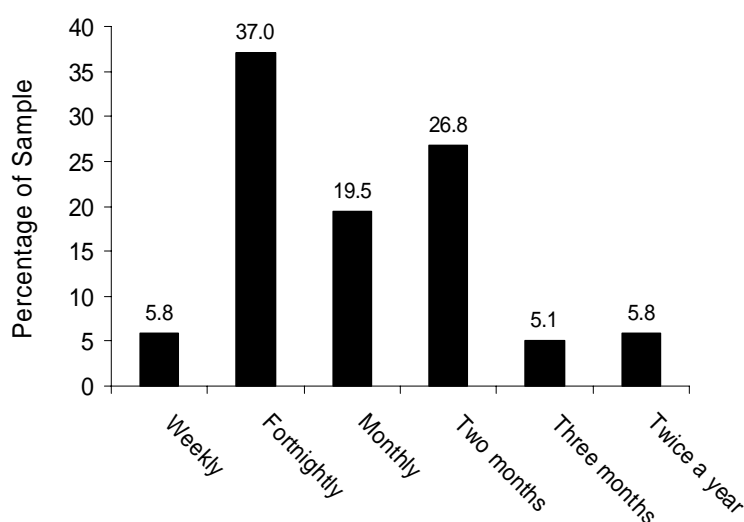
Frequency of Supervision

Very few respondents had supervision weekly (5.8%). For most respondents supervision occurred at time periods between two weeks and two months (83.3%). The single most common time frame was fortnightly (37%). It would appear that, in general, these coaches were committed to having regular supervision sessions.

Assuming that these supervision sessions were at least one hour in length, the majority of the coaches in this study were receiving supervision at a level generally recommended for therapists or counsellors. For example, the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy recommends 1.5 hours of supervision per month (<http://www.bacphealthcare.org.uk/faq.php>), the Australian Psychological Society recommends a minimum of 1.5 hours every four to six weeks for peer supervision (APS, 2012) and 62.3% of respondents meet or exceed these guidelines.

However it should be born in mind that many respondents adjusted the frequency of their supervision in line with their needs at any point in time. For example, one respondent stated that *“they normally receive supervision formally once a month, but I informally use peer conversations as a form of supervision more frequently.”* Similarly another reported that they received supervision *“monthly and as when needed (e.g. when the work volume is high or when the cases are very challenging)”*.

Figure 2: Frequency of Supervision Sessions



Perceived Value of Receiving Supervision

In order to explore the perceived value of receiving supervision, participants were asked to respond to the question “If you receive supervision, what do you find most valuable about it?” A total of 137 participants provided a written response. These quantitative responses were systematically classified and grouped according to thematic content. As recommended by Spector (1984), the validity of the emerging categories was established by asking the questions: Do the categories fit and work? Are they clearly indicated by the data? Are they congruent with other responses? In addition a text analysis was conducted which identified the most frequently used word or phrase in each qualitative response.

A number of themes emerged from the analysis. The three key themes were; 1) supervision as an opportunity for reflective practice; 2) the development of insights and new perspectives; and 3) helping maintain the delivery of good quality coaching, particularly in dealing with difficult cases.

Supervision as Reflection on Action

The dominant theme was that of “reflection” with 62% of responses having “reflection” as a key theme in the responses. For example one participant wrote that they valued:

A space to review my work, reflect on approaches, determine what is working, not working, what needs to be addressed. Given the solitary nature of coaching and being a sole trader, this is a critical avenue to gain another perspective, keep aware, be reminded, keep focused and be accountable to myself in a way, via another who is, in a sense, a facilitator in my performance in my role.

Insight and Perspective as Valued Outcomes

Many respondents (27%) explicitly linked the reflective process to the development of other perspectives. For example:

Supervision provides me a facilitated reflective space to explore client and coach-client-sponsor cases in a confidential, supportive approach that is tailored to my needs as a coach and for my coaching contexts/clients. I am now working with a supervisor who has co-created a partnership with me - we focus on evidence-based research and practice relevant to my practice. Psychology-based models including case conceptualisation have been useful in supporting my business background/context. This positive and supportive approach assists me to strengthen my capability and deepen my understanding and application of relevant concepts. I generally leave supervision inspired to continue to focus on developing my practice and research.

Not surprisingly the reflective practice inherent in the supervision experience, for many (27%), was also associated with the development of insight and ability to take new perspective on working with difficult issues or cases. For example, another respondent wrote that:

(It is) so valuable to have different kinds of supervision, particularly to provide different perspectives and allow you to think of things in ways you may not have otherwise. Also great for not only dealing with difficult issues (e.g. crossover with clinical issues) but also for discussing professional issues confronting coaches. Love being able to set aside the time to do this with valued colleagues and cultivate those helpful relationships for our benefit and the benefit of our clients.

Such comments are in accord with past research that has suggested that good supervision has the potential to help coaches deal constructively with the tensions and ambiguities' associated with critical moments in coaching practice, and in difficult or challenges cases (e.g., Day, de Haan, Sills, Bertie, & Blass, 2008; de Haan, 2008).

Supervision is Seen as an Important Opportunity

Respondents reported valuing supervision as an important opportunity for professional and personal development, suggesting that respondents were willing and engaged participants in the supervision process. Indeed the word "opportunity" appeared in 23% of the 137 responses. For example, one respondent explained:

(I value the) opportunity to reflect deeply on my practice and learn from my experience. Space to have my assumptions about my practice challenged. The opportunity to obtain alternative perspectives. A chance to 'talk out loud' about my practice. A safe place to be open about the aspects of my practice that I am struggling with or challenged by. A forum to discuss issues of ethics etc.

Another wrote that: *I find it provides me the opportunity to have a safe place to talk and discuss my experiences. I gain insight from my supervisor that otherwise would not be possible if I continued to*

work in isolation. And yet another wrote that they valued: “... the opportunity to check in about the approach I am taking with an individual, and the need to be honest with myself when things do not go the way I had hoped they would ...”

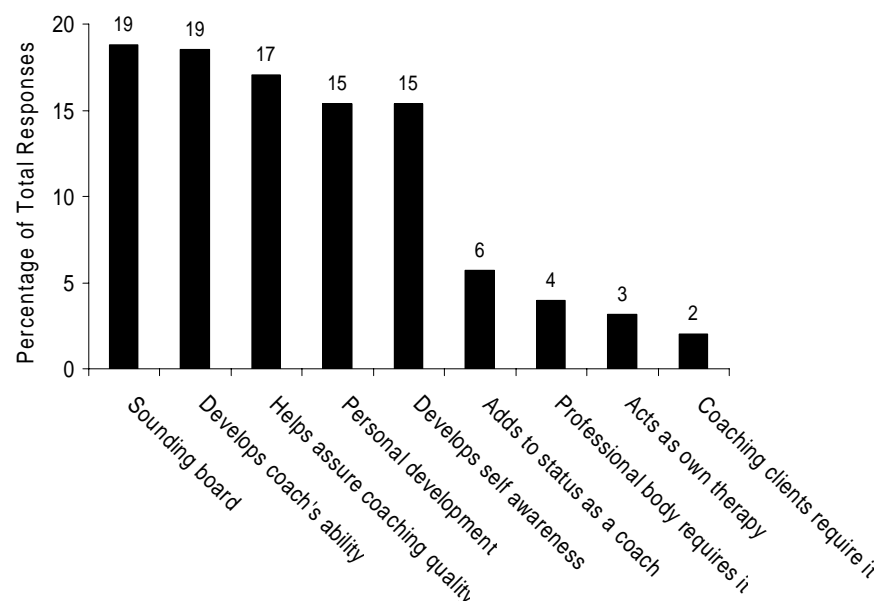
Reasons for Seeking Supervision

When asked to identify a range of reasons that coaches seek supervision, nine key responses were identified by participants. Responses are given below as a percentage of the total number of responses (see Figure 3) and are ranked in order of frequency of response. The reasons identified by participants in order of ranking were; to have a sounding board; to develop my coaching capacity and capability; helps to ensure quality of coaching; personal development; develops self-awareness; adds to status as a professional coach; professional body requires it; acts as own therapy and because coaching clients require it.

Interestingly the majority of reasons that coaches seek supervision were intrinsic rather than extrinsically motivated. This further suggests that supervision for these coaches is an activity that is personally valued and experienced as meaningful and rewarding. It appears that these coaches did not need to be dragged to supervision – rather they were proactively engaged in a personal learning process (See de Haan, 2008 for further discussion of these issues in supervision).

The most frequently endorsed reasons were that supervision acts as a sounding board, develops abilities and coaching quality. Requirements to have supervision from external agents such as professional bodies or clients ranked very lowly on the list. Some respondents used supervision as personal therapy, although many commentators strongly recommend keeping clear boundaries between personal therapy and professional supervision (e.g., Bachkirova, et al., 2011). Echoing this position one participant wrote: “I tried combining therapy with supervision ... silly me”.

Figure 3: Reasons That Coaches Seek Supervision



Perceived Barriers and Downsides to Receiving Supervision

Participants were asked to identify some of the reasons why coaches do not seek supervision. The two main perceived barriers were, difficulty in finding a good supervisor and the cost of supervision. The qualitative responses to this topic appeared to demonstrate some strong feelings that

this question provoked. Many respondents were adamant that supervision was an essential part of professional practice. For example one respondent wrote: “... *I don't think there is any excuse. Good supervision leads to excellent work and cost becomes not an issue*”. Another wrote: “*coaches who don't invest in supervision will not learn at the level required and will not be able to build their own self awareness and therefore their clients ...*” and “*all coaches should have supervision ... no exceptions!*”

However a common theme as a barrier to supervision was the difficulty in finding a good supervisor. One respondent wrote: “ *I just don't know where to start to identify finding a capable supervisor that will be a good fit for me; too busy to explore and seek out including an additional regular commitment to already huge juggling load (however worthy the reason is i.e., supervision).*”

Big Fish – Small Pond!

Others mentioned that because Australia has a relatively small coaching community a major problem was “*finding a quality impartial supervisor who's not also a competitor!*” and “*Australia is a small pond ... finding quality, evidence based supervisors can be challenging - I'm lucky!*” Along similar lines, another wrote:

The industry is still developing and evolving and it's not always easy to assess the calibre of someone or an organisation offering supervision. There is a risk that peak bodies could use it as another way to grow their revenues (or their members' revenues) and offer up relatively inexperienced coaches as supervisors so that you do not get value for money or sufficient benefit from the process. There is also a risk that it could become a significant expense and a drain on time depending on where the supervision takes place. It's tough, because an excellent supervisor could really stretch and develop you and build your capacity as a coach while a poor supervisor could just cost you time, energy and maybe even money.

Business vs. Behavioural Science

The old tension between business and behavioural science surfaced here. Psychologists and clinicians were not always seen as having the right background to be good supervisors. For example one respondent wrote:

I sought a supervisor who was a psychologist that I really admired - they really didn't know how to supervise me. They focused on the tools and processes I was using rather than the meta level.

One participant commented on the difficulty of finding the right balance between a supervisor with a business and a behavioural science background:

The major drawback in supervision is the difficulty in finding a good supervisor - for me a good supervisor is one who has had experience in business and a behavioural science background. I do not see clinical psychologists as being good supervisors as they do not understand the language of business and conversely I do not see that "business only" supervisors have enough behavioural science training.

On the other hand another wrote: ... *my supervisor of now two years is not a coach but comes from the counselling profession but did a thesis on supervision, has enormous experience being a supervisor - this makes the difference!*

Caution: Supervision as Self-marketing

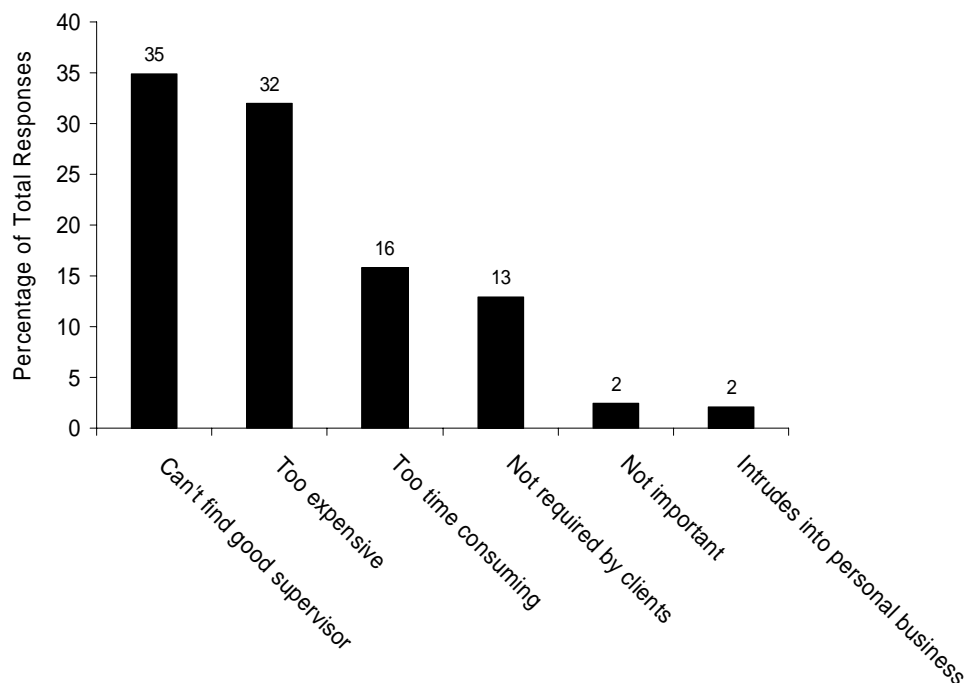
Some respondents expressed caution about an emerging problem in the form of setting unrealistic expectations about coaching and using engagement in supervision as a form of self-marketing:

I don't see any downsides to the use of supervision per se, but I do see potential downsides to setting inappropriate market expectations around what are the current supervision practices in the market - specifically, that if a coach is not supervised then he or she is not a good coach. The aspiration for all coaches to use supervision has merit, but there is no evidence as yet that all good coaches, or even the majority of good coaches, use regular (and appropriate) supervision. There is also an issue regarding what practices actually occur that are currently being labelled supervision. I am aware of a number of claims of supervised practice (which are used to promote coaching services) that would probably not stand up to scrutiny - again an issue between what happens and what is claimed in the market.

Along similar lines some respondents commented that some coaches seemed to “talk about their supervision as if it made them a more superior coach, and seem to denigrate coaches that use other forms of reflective practice”. Others were concerned that supervision was becoming the “new fad” in coaching, and that:

Supervision should not be seen as any kind of guarantee about the delivery of coaching services nor the personal development of the coach themselves as I have seen a lot of passionate discussion about supervision from some coaches where their motivations seemed to be very ego-driven ... they are kind of saying that ‘I’m better than you because I have supervision’.

Figure 4: Perceived Barriers to Receiving Supervision



Negative Experiences of Supervision

The coaching literature almost overwhelmingly discusses the perceived benefits of coaching supervision; there has been little exploration of negative experiences of supervision. Yet, just as in coaching, supervision has the potential to do harm as well as good. To explore this issue, participants were asked the question “Have you ever had a negative experience to do with supervision?” The majority of participants had not had a negative experience. One person commented “*challenging but not negative*”, another wrote “*Haven't had a negative experience, but the experience is not always as good as it ought to be*”. Perhaps somewhat tongue-in-cheek, another wrote “*not with supervision ... but I've had negative experiences being coached though!*”

A Negative: Supervisors' Poor Supervision Skills

However 30% of participants did state that they had had a negative experience. For those who reported having negative experiences, 26% complained about poor supervision skills. For example, one participant observed that: “*I had a supervisor who did not know how to facilitate/structure good supervision sessions, and did not know how to reflect on practice or demonstrate an understanding where I was at.*” Another commented that: “*I felt the supervisor wasn't skilled enough in both coaching me around an issue, and/or wasn't able to create an agenda free space*”.

A Negative: Problems with Peer Group Supervision

Supervision can occur in a number of ways. One-to-one supervision involves an experienced coach providing supervision to a less experienced coach on an individual basis. Co-supervision involves two peers providing supervision to each other. Group supervision with an identified supervisor involves a group of coaches being supervising in a group setting with the group leader facilitating group process.

Peer group-based supervision was a source of dissatisfaction for 28% of those that had a negative supervision experience. The most common concern was expressed by those who had been in a peer group supervision context where untrained or overly-vocal individuals dominated group process. One respondent wrote that:

I attended a number of group supervision sessions for about 1.5 years at XXX (a coaching organisation) and got very little from them. I found that I had as much if not more experience than most of the people attending”. Another reported that: “a group supervision session I attended (9 people) was railroaded by a couple of individuals running their own agenda.

In the same vein another wrote that “*I have observed supervision being done by people who don't really know what they are doing - in a group setting. The result is group and individual confusion and if anything a diminution of coaching effectiveness for those involved*”.

These comments highlight the need for those who organise peer group supervision or group supervision with an identified supervisor leading the session, as part of their commercial offerings to ensure that those who are running such groups are fully trained in both supervision and facilitating group process. Although peer group supervision can be seen as a cost effective way to deliver or access supervision, those who organise such activities have a duty of care to ensure supervision quality. However, it should be borne in mind that only a minority of participants reported negative experiences related to supervision.

Increasing Awareness of the Need for Supervision in Australia

The above comments are particularly salient as coaching supervision becomes an increasingly discussed issue in Australia. When asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed with the statement “In Australia, the issue of coaching supervision has been increasingly discussed in the coaching industry in past one or two years”, 70.7% agreed or strongly agreed.

Not surprisingly 90.9% agreed or strongly agreed that it is very important that all professional coaches should have regular on-going supervision on coaching. However, again some notes of caution were expressed: “*But it's the quality not the quantity of supervision that counts. The last thing we need is green coaches touting themselves as supervisors when they are not ready to do so*”.

But not all were in agreement with the need for supervision. One participant wrote: “*I am not sure (about the need for supervision) but it's important that coaches have a coach, are developed themselves, or have a mentor*”. Many others participants took a similarly balanced approach. For example one commented that it all “*depends on how well supervision is conducted and the objectives of the supervision arrangements*”.

On Being a Supervisor

Participants were also asked about their own experiences as being a supervisor and their views on the provision of supervision services to other coaches. Of the 187 participants, 87 indicated that they acted as a supervisor for other coaches on a formal, informal or peer supervision basis. Of these 87, 42 indicated that they acted in a formal supervision role and these individuals also engaged in informal and peer supervision activities. Not surprisingly, those who provided either formal or informal supervision services were more likely to be experienced coaches themselves. 88.1% of those who provided formal supervision had more than five years coaching experience, and no coaches with less than three years experience acted as a formal supervisor.

These supervisors were strident in their enthusiasm for providing supervision, clearly expressing the benefits for both coach and supervisor:

The feedback I receive weekly from the coaches I supervise/mentor is how valuable it is because it helps raise the bar on who they are being as coaches and helps them to develop their skills, their confidence and to think in new ways. They find it very helpful to have a more senior experienced colleague as a sounding board for challenging situations and to bounce ideas and brainstorm. Most of them are also comfortable in sharing with their clients that they have a supervisor/mentor coach. Having a supervisor/mentor also keeps them connected to the coaching world so they don't feel they are out there on their own.

Training in Supervision is Seen as Important

Questions related to training in supervision raised some interesting responses in that 70.1% of participants said that coaches who provide coaching supervision services should have a specific qualification or training in coaching supervision.

Those who did not support the notion of supervision requiring specific qualification or training (29.9%) tended to modify their response, arguing that such training should not be compulsory or that different types of supervision require different skill sets and hence training: “*I don't think this question can only be answered with a yes/no option. I believe the case could be argued either way depending on the situation and who is involved*”. Others wrote: “*There could be some exceptions here. Depends on how the supervision is positioned. Some forms - yes; others - no.*”; another wrote:

“Training is important (qualifications would be well-regarded but not essential)”; and *“not unless this provides the bulk of their work”*.

However, some respondents were very clear in their endorsement of need for training and qualifications:

Absolutely, it requires a different set of skills to coaching itself. Supervision is beyond technical content of coach / coachee session and is (a) very important, and (b) not something that all coaches will have had exposure to or understand the requirements of. Training is therefore essential.

Others who supported training took a more moderate view:

Some people will be excellent supervisors despite having no specific training, but I suspect they will be the exception. The advantage of having some qualification is that there will be a core group of skills or capabilities that will be the minimum requirement for a supervisor and you can expect them to be proficient in those. I sometimes come across a similar issue when I am assigning mentors. Some are excellent and it is just intuitive to them how to be a mentor. For others, they are very unclear and tend to have lots of lovely chats, which are nice but not necessarily that helpful. I wouldn't want coaching supervision to be as unstructured as mentoring can be.

The Dilemma of Supervision: Lack of Training

Although 70.1% of respondents agreed that coach supervisors should have formal training or qualifications in supervision, when asked the question: “Have you had training in coach supervision?” 79.3% said no – highlighting a possible dilemma for this sector of the coaching industry – supervisors who believe in supervisor training, but do not themselves have such training.

However, it should be noted that 50% of those who provided formal supervision had received some training in supervision, compared to only 21.7% of those who provided informal supervision had received specific training in supervision. This is encouraging as it suggests that Australian coaches who offer supervision do indeed take the responsibilities of their supervision role seriously.

A major issue raised by many participants was the difficulty of finding training in coach supervision and being assured of the quality of any such training. One respondent remarked: *“I'd love to get some good training, but not sure where one would get it!”* Another expressed concern about the quality of supervision training: *“It would be good to get a qualification ... but only if the qualification itself is quality! I would be hesitant about something proprietary”*.

Discussion

Overall, participants in this survey showed a relatively sophisticated approach to supervision, as might be expected from a group of experienced coaches. Australian coaches appear to be engaging in a positive and professional manner with the practice and challenges of supervision.

The key themes emerging from this research echo the findings of past research into coaching supervision in the UK (see for example CIPD, 2009; Hawkins & Smith, 2006; McDougall, 2007). It should be noted that past UK research and the present Australian research used somewhat different research methodologies; hence the results are not directly comparable. In addition, the sample size of 174 was somewhat smaller than Hawkins and Smith's (2006) UK research with 525 coaches, but understandable given the smaller population of Australia. However, there are several key

commonalities between this Australian research and UK research conducted by CIPD (2009), Hawkins and Smith's (2006) and the Association for Coaching (McDougall, 2007) which are worth noting. All of these UK studies (and the present study) found that the key benefits of supervision included the fact that supervision offers a reflective space for practitioners, potential for insights, help with difficult cases and an opportunity to develop professionally and personally.

The findings from this Australian study also echo those findings from the UK that suggests that coaches are intrinsically motivated to engage in supervision. Coaches *per se* do not appear to take supervision because their clients or and industry bodies require them to. Rather they seem to engage willingly in the often-challenging process of facilitated reflection that lies at the heart of good supervision.

The barriers to engaging in supervision reported in this Australian study also parallel UK findings. A key reported concern is the difficulty in finding a good supervisor and the perceived cost. In the McDougall (2007) UK research, 39% of respondents said that a barrier that stops them having a supervisor is that they had not yet found someone to work with, and 37% mentioned the cost as barrier, with similar figures found in this Australian study.

An aspect of the present study that has not received much attention in the literature involves negative experience of supervision. Although this group of respondents were overwhelmingly in favour of supervision, 30% reported negative experiences of supervision, and there are some important lessons to be learnt from these negative experiences. Two key areas were unsatisfactory experiences in peer group supervision and poor supervisor skills.

Recommendations for Teaching, Training and Coaching Practice

A number of suggestions and recommendations for teaching, training and coaching practice in Australia stem from the above findings.

Firstly, as regards teaching: There is clearly a need for specific training and possibly certification in coaching supervision. At present such training is hard to come by in Australia, and there are anecdotal reports of professional Australian coaches travelling to the UK and other overseas destinations in order to undertake such training. Australian coach training organisations and those involved in coach education should consider developing theoretically-grounded, evidence-based programs in coach supervision. This is particularly poignant in Australia given the emphasis that the recently developed guidelines by Australian Standards on coaching in organisations places on the role of supervision and the notion that engagement in effective supervision is a critical component of professional practice (Standards Australia, 2011).

Secondly, the difficulties many respondents articulated in relation to finding a good supervisor suggests that those who do offer supervision need to find new and more effective ways of communicating their services to coaches and potential supervisees. This is may be easier to say than do. At present there is no peak industry body or forum for coaching in Australia that could facilitate the widespread dissemination of such information. Presently such communications take place primarily within specific coaching organisations, with little formal communication between coaching organisations. It may be time for the Australian coaching industry to develop mechanisms for enhanced communication.

Thirdly, organisations that offer supervision as part of their commercial offerings have a duty of care to ensure that the supervision is of a consistently high standard. The findings of this study suggest that this appears to be particularly important in peer group settings. It should be emphasised

that group supervision is a doubly-complex skill set that requires that the group facilitator have both supervision skills *and* the ability to facilitate group process – a sophisticated combination that requires significant training and development. Where the supervision is on a peer group basis another layer of complexity is added. Thus organisations that offer such supervision should ensure that they adequately train group and peer group supervisors and ensure that those involved in delivering group supervision themselves receive an adequate level of supervision.

Finally, it is essential to recognise that there are a wide range of approaches to supervision and many ways to engage in constructive reflective practice. As the coaches in this research have shown, it is important to ensure a flexible approach to coaching supervision and reflective practice. What might be effective for one coach in one situation may not be effective for another. Professional coaches and coaching industry organisations need keep this in mind, rather assuming that their own preferred supervision approaches or reflective practices should be adopted by all.

Future Research

This paper represents a small step in developing an understanding of coach supervision in Australia. Clearly, there is room for further research. Firstly, this research was conducted in Australia with a relatively small sample of Australian coaches. It would be informative to use a larger sample, and to survey coaches from a wide range of backgrounds and with different levels of coaching experience. Most of these coaches were experienced, and this should be taken into account when interpreting the results of this survey.

Secondly, it would be informative to conduct comparative international research and compare attitudes to and engagement in supervision between coaches from different countries. Given the accessibility of global on-line communication, such a research project would be relatively easy to conduct and could yield some interesting data that could, for example, inform guidelines for the development of coaches. It is generally assumed that there is broad homogeneity between coaches from different countries. It may be that coaches in different countries have different attitudes towards, and needs for supervision, and the results of such a study could inform both the training and professional development of coaches.

Conclusion

This study has begun the process of exploring coach supervision in Australia. There is clearly an increasing awareness about supervision within the broader Australian coaching industry and supervision is seen as important by many Australian coaches. Overall this survey has found compelling support for the further development of supervision and the adoption of supervisory practices by Australian coaches. Such sentiments bode well for the further development of the coaching industry in Australia.

This kind of development will be of benefit in terms of coaches' own personal and professional growth, and will also foster the continued professionalisation of the Australian coaching industry. Not least, many buyers of coaching services are starting to view coaches' own supervision as an important part of their professional practice and development and should take such matters into account when employing external coaches (Wycherley & Cox, 2008). As one respondent wrote:

I think encouraging coaching supervision is a necessary next step in the journey of 'professionalising' coaching. As a buyer of coaching services I would like to see more coaches who can talk in depth about their coaching supervision arrangements.

It would appear from this study that Australian coaches are indeed committed to their professional and personal development through engagement in supervision. Supervision may well play an important role in the continued maturation of the Australian coaching industry and the on-going development of evidence-based approaches to coaching.

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