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A systematic search of the coaching literature for original peer-reviewed studies into business coaching supervision yielded seven research reports. Evaluation of these studies showed them to be low in the reporting of methodological rigour. However, as an emerging area of research with great importance for the development of the profession of business coaching these studies provide valuable insights into the functions of supervision and its benefits. Gaps in knowledge and directions for future research are identified. There is a need for future research to be more rigorous in its reporting of methods and analytic procedures, small scale qualitative research that can provide insight into the issues and challenges of coaching supervision in specific contexts, and large scale quantitative research which can provide broader and generalizable understandings into the uses and benefits of supervision.

Keywords: coaching, executive coaching, business coaching, supervision

Practice points

- Systematic review of research in business coaching supervision, its uses and benefits.

- Primary contribution is the development of the research agenda in business coaching supervision.

- Implications for researchers to develop more rigorous approach and for practitioners to be aware of the benefits of supervision.

Introduction

The field of business coaching has developed over the past two decades to become firmly established within leadership and management contexts in the UK, the USA, Australia and other G20 markets, and is developing apace in emerging economies. Over this time business coaching interventions have become more complex and clients more sophisticated in their expectations of what coaching can offer (Brockbank, 2008; Kauffman, Joseph & Scoular, 2015; Scoular, 2011).

Business coaching can fulfill a variety of different functions. Business coaching traditionally has taken the form of regularly scheduled face to face or virtual one-on-one meetings between the coach and the client. The number of sessions can vary from open-ended developmental contracts directed toward the leadership development of the client, a one-time consultation for a particular task, or a few sessions focusing on specific performance enhancement issues. For example, in a survey of 140 senior leadership coaches the three most frequent reasons behind coaching assignments were: to develop the capabilities of a senior or a high potential executive; to facilitate a transition, such as moving to a larger role; and to provide a sounding board on organizational dynamics and to enhance the interactions of a team (Kauffman & Coutu, 2009).

As we look to the future of business coaching it is clear that its continued development as a field of practice will be dependent on how the industry faces up to the challenges of professionalism, with calls for the benchmarking of skills (Linder-Pelz, 2014), academically more rigorous educational programs, and more sophisticated theoretical offerings and evidence based research and scholarship (Doggett & Kauffman, 2013; Kauffman & Bachkirova, 2009).

Also, as significant amounts of money change hands, and, probably more importantly, major decisions are taken in coaching of individuals and teams with heavy financial, policy, and political responsibilities, a general sense has developed that supervision is needed (Hawkins, 2008, 2014). Supervision has always been seen as important during the training stages and in helping the novice coach develop professionally but it is also recognized that consultative supervision between two qualified and experienced professionals can be facilitative of effective practice (Carroll, 2006, 2007; Farmer, 2012; Shaw & Linnecar, 2007). As such, supervision promises to be an important component of future business coaching that can help practitioners work to the highest professional standards. However, there is no single agreed model of coaching supervision and in a previous review it was noted that there is little research available on what happens during supervision or on how effective it is (Moyes, 2009). The aim is to provide an up to date review of peer-reviewed quantitative and qualitative research studies on supervision in business coaching.

Background

In general terms the aim of supervision is to help the coach meets the needs of the client, by providing support and practical advice in a challenging environment and monitoring the relationship with the client and the organization to ensure high ethical standards (Special Group in Coaching Psychology, 2007).

In Australia where much of the leading work has been conducted, the Standards Australia Handbook for Coaching in Organisations (2010) proposed that coaches

should be in regular supervision that is subject to a formal agreement and that the supervisor should be an experienced and competent coaching practitioner familiar with the process of supervision.

A survey by Whybrow and Palmer (2006) of 151 practitioners (approximately 10% of the membership) in the then relatively new British Psychological Society Special Group in Coaching Psychology identified supervision as a key element of good practice, with almost 70% reporting having had supervision during training but only 50% agreeing that continued supervision post qualification is necessary. Hawkins and Schwenk (2006) interviewed coaches to find out why there was a relatively low engagement with supervision finding that the man reasons included a lack of understanding about what supervision involved coupled with a lack of well trained supervisors. However, these were surveys of a wide range of coaching professionals. As such it is not certain how well these conclusions apply specifically to business coaches, who it might be expected are less knowledgeable of supervisory practices compared to those coaches who have career backgrounds in the therapeutic professions.

Supervision has long been recognised as an important element in social work, counselling, and psychotherapy through providing education, support, and a management role (Hawkins & Shohet, 2012; Moyes, 2009). However, the needs in coaching supervision, and business coaching supervision in particular, may often be very different (Butwell, 2006). For example, Bachkirova (2015) interviewed six experienced coaching supervisors to investigate self-deception. It was found that self-deception was seen as part of being human and that there were various ways in

which coaches could overstep the boundaries at times, or push the client in the wrong direction, ignore ethical dilemmas, or collude with powerful figures, for example. Self-deception may be driven by fear such as not wanting to lose a contractor a wish for gain such as the need to feel successful. It was also found that self-deception can also be a function of the context. Sometimes coaches may be subject to influences of power and culture, or influenced by coaching discourses, which can influence self-deception. Supervision was found to be helpful in dealing with self-deception, by providing a place of safety to discuss issues and to be challenged and provide insight.

It may be that self-deception is more of an issue for coaches compared to therapists, given that therapy trainings are often focused specifically on personal development. Another possible difference is the knowledge of organizational culture that coaches will be expected to have, but therapists will not. As such, there is a need for supervision in business coaching to be informed by research into what actually happens in business coaching and what the specific needs of the coach are.

Literature Review

As indicated above, the benefits of supervision have been alluded to by various authors (Moyes, 2009). In order to assess what we know from the empirical literature on the benefits and use of supervision in business coaching, a Psychinfo search was conducted using the terms 'coaching' and 'supervision' (June, 2016). Inspection of the abstracts of the118 returns showed that the majority were theoretical and conceptual papers, book chapters, book reviews, papers referring to

other professions, or papers on supervision that were not related substantially to business coaching. Inspection of the abstracts yielded seven English Language returns that reported original peer-reviewed research investigating business coaching supervision (Grant, 2012: Butwell, 2006; Armstrong & Geddes, 2009; Donaldson-Feilder & Bush, 2009; Lawrence & Whyte, 2014; Passmore & McGoldrick, 2009; Salter, 2008).

Across the seven studies there is no single set of consistent research questions and related methodology common to two or more studies that would allow for systematic comparisons to be made. As such, each of the studies will be discussed below in terms of its own strengths and weaknesses.

1. *Grant (2012). Australian coaches' views on coaching supervision: A study with implications for Australian coach education, training and practice.* This was a survey of 174 experienced professional coaches. Participants for the survey were contacted via a snowballing approach whereby each participant was asked to invite other coaches take part. The survey was conducted on-line. The majority had five or more years coaching experience (60.4%). It was found that most were receiving some form of supervision (82.7%); 25.7% had formal supervision, 17.9% informal supervision, and 39.1% peer supervision.

Fortnightly sessions were the most frequently reported (37%) although it was noted that many adjusted the frequency of their supervision depending on their needs. The questionnaire included an open ended question "If you receive supervision, what do you find most valuable about it?" A total of 137 participants provided an answer which were thematically analysed.

Three themes emerged. First, supervision was valued, particularly as providing an opportunity for reflection on action. Second, it was seen as important for, insight and the development of new perspectives. Third, supervision was an opportunity for professional and personal development. However, while the survey highlighted the benefits, perceived barriers were also noted, particularly the difficulties in locating good supervisors and encountering supervisors with poor skills.

Overall, it was concluded that coaches were intrinsically motivated to engage in supervision because of the opportunities for challenge and reflection and learning new skills. However, it is not clear that the sample was composed solely of business coaches or whether it also contained life coaches.

A weakness is the lack of detail provided in the methodology section such that it is not entirely clear what the on-line questionnaire consisted of. The strength is the relatively large sample size as it more likely provides an indication of the views of the population, although with snowball sampling the generalizability of the sample is uncertain.

2. *Developing Coaching Supervision Practice: An Australian case study (Armstrong & Geddes, 2009).*

Armstrong and Geddes report how in the year 2004 monthly supervision was introduced for graduates of the Institute of Executive Coaching in Australia. Evenings are structured into peer supervision groups of six to eight people that meet for one and a half hours, in which issues are explored. Supervision is seen as having "…three functions: a learning function (enhancing professional craft knowledge), an insight function (enhancing self-awareness for self-regulation), and an outsight

function (enhancing consideration of influences from the whole system…)"
(Armstrong & Geddes, 2009, p. 2). Sessions are structured into three phases
beginning with narrating the story in which the supervisory function is to encourage
description of critical moments using empathic listening, curiosity, and non-
judgmental questions. The second phase is developing insight in which the
supervisory process is to maintain the distinction between content and process using
questions to elicit self-reflection. The third phase is developing outsight in which
supervisory questions include role analysis to encourage awareness of systemic
influences. Finally, endings include identifying new learning and translating it into
action.

The research was conducted as part of an action research project. Armstrong and
Geddes provide qualitative data from 10 group participants about why the above
supervision was effective which are represented by five themes: 1. Supervision is a
reflective space where coaches could talk about their practice; 2. Supervision is a
place where they could be challenged, validated and held accountable; 3.
Supervision provides a community of practice where coaches can network; 4.
Supervision was an extension of the learning space where people could share
expertise and experience; 5. The quality of the supervisor's facilitation.

As a research study there are a number of limitations, most notably that there is a
lack of detail on the selection of participants, their representativeness of the
population from which they were selected, and details on their coaching experiences
and practices. The study is also limited that it is of one Institute at one point in time.
Despite these limitations the study provides evidence that coaches report that they

find supervision helpful and the thematic analysis points to what seem to be key elements of good practice, although the detail on the analytic process is not described in sufficient depth to fully understand how the themes were arrived at.

    3. *Group supervision for coaches: is it worthwhile? A study of the processes in a major professional organization (Butwell, 2006).*

Participants were one group of eight which included the supervisor and the author of the paper as a participant observer. The aim of the group was to provide support and supervision for those who use coaching in their organization and ran for a 14-month period during which five half day meetings were held. The first meeting was used to develop a group contract. In each subsequent meeting members discussed a coaching tool, followed by a presentation of a case to which the rest of the group provided challenge, support and feedback.

The aim of the research was to establish whether supervision was a worthwhile experience for the members. Data were collected by the participant/observer who kept notes of the sessions and through semi-structured interviews with group members. Various issues were raised, notably that the amount of time was insufficient to meet everyone's needs and that more frequent meetings would have been helpful, that it was important to have a facilitator who could contain the group dynamics although there was also questions raised about what the role of facilitator constitutes. There were benefits experienced by members of feeling less isolated, learning about new methodologies, gaining confidence, obtaining insights from others, and dealing with client boundaries. Coaches thought that supervision provided the opportunity to discuss difficulties, explore one's feelings towards a

client, to think about how to move forward when feeling stuck, get advice from someone with a different point of view. The research was supportive that supervision can be experienced as helpful but also raises questions about the appropriate frequency of supervision and exactly what the functions of supervision should be. However, it is an exploratory study of one small group of participants in the United Kingdom and lacks in detail about the methodology and the analytic process.

4. *Donaldson-Feilder, E., & Bush, K. (2009). Achieving effective supervision for coaching psychologists: Exploring a peer supervision/reflective learning group model.*

This is a short report of a discussion held at a conference workshop on a peer supervision. The peer supervision group was set up to help participants assess whether they were meeting the needs of their clients, to reflect on their own and each other's practice, to support each other and facilitate resolution of difficult issues, and maintain a high level of ethics. Responses at the workshop quoted in the article indicated the benefits of having different perspectives and the opportunity to discuss and debate issues. Overall it was thought that what had worked well included the opportunity for reflection on self and process, learning from others, and building an internal supervision. The details of the analytic process are not described in detail so it is not possible to ascertain the rigor of the work.

5. *What is coaching supervision and is it important? (Lawrence & Whyte, 2014).*

The aim of this study was to investigate attitudes of clients and coaches in Australia

and New Zealand. As such this study was seen as building on the earlier work of

Grant (2012) which had surveyed the views of coaches in Australia. However,

whereas Grant (2012) has used survey methodology, this study interviewed coaches.

An initial sample of 11 participants were selected from members of the International

Coaching Federation (ICF) or their national psychological association. These

eleven then referred the researchers to a further 22 coaches.

To obtain a sample of purchasing clients the authors drew up an initial list of 50

clients that were known to purchase coaching services on behalf of their

organizations. Twenty-nine purchasers from 26 organizations accepted the invitation

that were estimated for an annual spend of approximately 5% million on coaching

services. Participants were interviewed for between 30 and 45 minutes about the

purpose of supervision using a list of pre-defined questions.

For the coaches, 79% said that supervision was a way to help them get unstuck,

36% said that supervision was an aid to learning, 76% to provide support and self-

awareness, and 27% to ensure ethical practice. It was also clear that supervision

meant different things to different coaches, with some viewing it as a formal process

whereas others saw it as an informal consultation. For some it was conducted in

group settings but for others it was on a one to one basis. There were also

differences in whether it was regular or ad hoc and whether it was paid or unpaid.

Supervision was seen to provide several functions. The most highly mentioned

was gaining access to others perspectives (33%) followed by becoming more self-

aware (24%). Also mentioned were gaining support and confidence, increased

quality control, self-development, and gain access to a subject-matter-expert.

Most of the purchasers did not insist on the coaches being supervised (79%), for a variety of reasons including not knowing what coaching supervision was or, assuming that the relevant professional organization undertook this role. Those coaches with a psychology background were more likely to seek supervision.

It is stated that using a grounded theory approach interviews were analysed, but the detail describing the interview and analytic process and how themes were developed is not provided in depth.

6. *Passmore and McGoldrick, S. (2009). Super-vision, extra-vision or blind faith? A grounded theory study of the efficacy of coaching supervision.*

This study involved observation of a coaching session followed by semi-structured interviews with six coaches and supervisors, all of whose work was related to business coaching. Interview data was transcribed and analyzed using grounded theory methodology. Main categories included influencing factors, process of supervision, necessary conditions, limiting factors, supervision potential, and outcomes. Supervision was seen as offering a number of benefits, including raised awareness, confidence, perseverance, sense of belonging, increased professionalism and the development of an 'internal' supervisor.

This study provides rich detail on the interview process and the themes arising from the transcripts but the detail on the analytic process is relatively sparse.

7. *Salter, T. (2008). Exploring current thinking within the field of coaching on the role of supervision.*

The research consisted of two phases. In the first, an on-line survey to 218 coaches consisting of open and closed questions was used to ask, for example, if supervision

should be voluntary or mandatory, whether supervision contributes to the quality of coaching, and if the profession needs to be regulated. The majority were involved in business or executive coaching and most had received professional supervision. However, of these 64 had only received supervision during training. Of the 173 who answered the question, 109 thought that supervision should remain voluntary. Of the 178 who answered the question, one-third thought that supervision did not necessarily contribute to the effectiveness of coaching.

The second phase consisted of six telephone interviews with three coaches who endorsed the idea of receiving ongoing supervision and three who were disagreed with the idea, as indicated by their on-line responses. For those who disagreed supervision was seen as potentially stifling of their creativity, as a violation of confidentiality, and as breeding conformity. Practically, it was seen as costly and difficult to find appropriate supervisors, and that organizations may want to promote supervision for their own financial gain. Those who were supportive of supervision pointed to how it improved their performance and skills, promoted feedback and constructive criticism, offered opportunity for development. These participants saw supervision as a collaborative and supportive process rather than a policing function. It was also thought that the cost of supervision should be build into client work so that it was not an additional financial burden. The details of the analytic process are not described in detail so it is not possible to ascertain the rigor of the work.

Summary

Inspection of these seven studies showed that most addressed clear questions, with a

stated methodology and analytic procedure appropriate to the question. However, despite this all were seen as lacking detail in the description of the method and the process of analysis that would allow a reader to make a refined judgment of research rigor or to feel confident in the generalizability of the results (see Table 1).

-insert Table 1 about here-

Overall therefore the evidence base for business coaching supervision is sparse, consisting of a small quantity of research that is low in methodological rigor. However, as a small body of research it does possess originality, insofar as novel questions are being asked, and significance, given the importance of this topic for the development of the profession. There are a number of conclusions and recommendations for future research and practice that arise.

Conclusions and recommendations

Two main conclusions arise from this review:

First, there is a paucity of research into the use and benefits of business coaching supervision. Only seven original peer-reviewed research studies were identified. Most of these were small-scale qualitative studies. Research into this topic seems to be in its infancy and there is a clear need for greater attention from researchers.

Second, although the number of studies is relatively small, they have provided useful and important insights into the various functions of coaching supervision. There are practical functions related to maintaining ethical practice, negotiating complex systems, and ensuring that boundaries are appropriate. There are also educational and advice giving functions related to enhancing professional

knowledge and understanding. Finally, there are developmental functions related to the person of the coach such as their self-awareness and ability to be reflect on their coaching practice. This review suggests that business coaching supervision has wide ranging functions. Some functions will be more pertinent to a coach depending on the organizational context and the client's needs at any time.

Following from these two conclusions, there are six recommendations for future research:

First, large scale surveys obtaining data representative of the various professional groupings engaged in business coaching are required. Although many leaders in the field agree that supervision is in principle to be encouraged, not all coaches agree about the benefits of supervision, and may not engage in it themselves. However, the extent to which coaches actively engage with supervision, the types of supervision they receive, their attitudes towards supervision, is unknown due to limited research but would be helpful for professional bodies to know in terms of helping to steer the development of good practice.

Second, the main argument for developing supervision will however be that it provides important functions. As such, there is a need for further small scale qualitative research that can explore the functions of business coaching supervision in different organizational contexts. For example, there are almost always multiple stakeholders, often in multiple time zones and different cultural contexts, further complicating the issues that need to be considered. As such a business coach must artfully navigate the systems to retain appropriate confidentiality at the same time aligning the coaching goals to the needs of the organization as well as the individual

client. Further small scale qualitative research into the different functions of supervision and how they are used and found helpful across the varied, unique and challenging contexts of business coaching will be insightful.

Third, small scale qualitative studies do not directly address the question of whether there are objectively determined benefits of supervision. There is a need for stronger evidence to substantiate these qualitative findings. As such, there is a clear need for quantifiable and prospective research assessing whether supervision increases effectiveness of practice. For example, no research yet exists testing for differences in the effectiveness of those coaches who receive supervision compared to those that do not.

Fourth, there is a need to understand why supervision may be helpful. Qualitative research can provide helpful insights into this question, but we also need sophisticated quantitative research investigating the mechanisms through which supervision may exert its effects. In what ways does supervision actually work? Is it through the learning of new skills? Is it through becoming more reflective? Research is needed to identify the factors that mediate the effects of supervision. Another question is whether some people are more likely to benefit from supervision than others. For example, are there some personality profiles that are less likely to benefit from supervision?

Fifth, one issue that has not been addressed to date is the possibility that supervision can have unintended negative consequences. This should not be overlooked in the design of new studies. In asking coaches about the benefits of supervision there has been no attention to the possibility that supervision may at

times lead to less effective practice. Are there some ways in which supervision can be damaging? Are there some models of supervision that have been transported from the field of therapy that are actually unhelpful in business coaching? Are some personality profiles unsuitable for supervision?

Sixth, across the seven studies reviewed their methods and analytic procedures all appeared to be appropriate to the research questions asked. However, in general the description of the detail was insufficient to provide in depth critical analysis or to allow future researchers to replicate. As such, greater attention to the reporting of methodological rigor is called for in future studies, thus allowing for more detailed critical evaluation and a robust judgment of rigour to be made.

In terms of practice, it will be helpful for supervisors to be aware of the range of functions that are associated with supervision. Supervisors may benefit from reflection on their current practice and whether there are functions that they could be fulfilling that they are not. Current models of supervision tend to be derived from the fields of social work, counselling and psychotherapy and may not fully address the needs of coaches. There is a need for models of supervision that are based in coaching research and that accommodate the functions of coaching.

Finally, with greater attention to these issues, new theory and research will build the evidence base for business coaching supervision and help shape good practice.

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Qualitative							
Armstrong & Geddes, 2009	Y	N	Y	N	N	Y	N
Butwell (2006	Y	N	Y	N	N	Y	N
Donaldson-Feilder & Bush, 2009	N	N	Y	N	N	?	N
Lawrence & Whyte, 2014	Y	N	Y	Y	N	Y	N
Passmore & McGoldrick, 2009	Y	N	Y	Y	N	Y	N
Salter, 2008	Y	N	Y	N	N	Y	N
Quantitative							
Grant, 2012	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	N

1: Are the research questions clearly stated? 2: Is the method described in sufficient detail? 3: Is the method appropriate to the research question? 4: Is the sample clearly described? 5: Is the analytic procedure clearly described? 6: Is the analysis appropriate to the research question? 7: Are the results generalizable? Y= Yes, N = No, ? = Uncertain.

Table 1: Summary of Research studies into coaching supervision