

## Supervising executive coaches

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The organisational structure and culture needs to be taken into account when counselling supervisors move into the turbulent waters of company and business systems

by Michael Carroll

Have you noticed how organisations are moving inexorably to centre-field of supervision? You certainly will have if you are involved in supervising executive coaches. Not so long ago if you wanted to talk about the role of an organisation in supervision your supervisor might have, quite rightly, suggested that he or she did not think that was a legitimate focus for the valuable time of supervision. The focus of supervision has widened since its inception. In its early days, supervision concentrated on the individual: the client was the main and sometimes only focus. Making sense of what has happened to this individual with an aim to deciding what interventions would work were, by and large, the focal points of supervision (whether in social work, probation, education or counselling). With the arrival of counselling and psychotherapy, supervision adopted another task – dealing with what was happening to workers as they went about their practice. Managing the self behind the professional self became an important and appropriate consideration for supervision. But still little attention was given to the organisation.

In the 1990s the organisational dimension of supervision came of age. With the growth of workplace counselling (internal and external) and the upsurge in counselling in organisation settings (medical, educational, industrial and religious) came a realisation that the organisation in which counsellors worked impacted enormously on them and their work. Not only could it be raised and reflected on in supervision, it was quite important to do so.

The 1990s were also the time when the organisation moved from the shadows of supervision into the limelight. Hawkins and Shohet<sup>1</sup> had alerted us to it in the first edition of their book. The second edition extends that section of their work substantially. A number of authors followed: Inskipp and Proctor<sup>2,3</sup> highlighted the contractual side of supervision with organisations; Carroll<sup>4</sup> looked at the tasks of the supervisor where there was an organisation as part of the system. In 1996 Holloway<sup>5</sup> produced her 'Systemic Approach' to supervision with the organisation playing a major part in that approach. Copeland<sup>6</sup> recently published her book *Counselling Supervision in Organisations*, outlining a systematic model for supervising counsellors who work in organisational settings. This coming year will see a spate of new publications with the organisational dimension as central to supervision work<sup>7,8,9</sup>.

There is still a certain amount of suspicion and wariness about considering companies, organisations and institutes as legitimate foci for supervision – after all, most supervisors have had little training, experience of or knowledge about the dynamics of working within organisational settings and are anxious about moving into arenas where they are not at home: hence the importance for supervisors to have some models and frameworks to guide them as they enter the murky waters of organisational life.

### **A new supervision task**

What is new and different about supervising executive coaches is that the organisations become a major player in the field, no longer a substitute to be brought on if needed. The organisation to which the coachee belongs is no longer a quiet, uninvolved cash cow in the background. Unlike workplace counselling where what happened in the counselling room was dictated by the client and the organisation had little say in that agenda, suddenly with executive coaching it is the organisation that often sets the agenda. Coach and coachee work on this agenda and the organisation keeps an evaluative eye on the outcome.

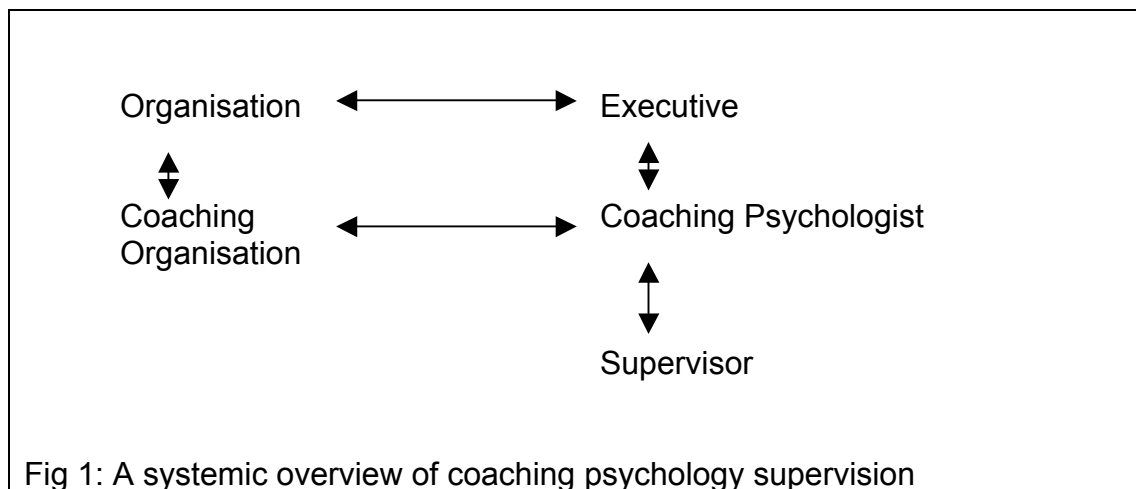
This is a new game. The role of the executive in the organisation is the focus of the coaching work: the role of the supervisor is to ensure that the executive coach is working with both individual coachee and the organisational agenda. Hawkins and Smith<sup>8</sup> capture a number of these elements in their definition of coaching supervision: ‘Coaching supervision is the process by which a coach with the help of a supervisor, who is not working directly with the client, can attend to understanding better both the Client System and themselves as part of the Client-Coach system, and by so doing transform their work.’ Emphasis in this definition is on working with systems and subsystems.

### **A series of subsystems**

Pampallis Paisley<sup>10</sup> poses the key question as to ‘whether the existing models of supervision are sufficient for the demands of coaching’. The answer is ‘partially’. Her suggestion is that coaching supervision can borrow elements and models from supervision as applied to other professions but that there is room to look at coaching as ‘a distinctive enough discipline to require a particular frame of supervision and a particular theory to support this’. Supervision in this context has to be systemic and hold the tensions among a number of subsystems.

While the visible focus of executive coaching supervision is usually two people or a small group of people (peer, team, group supervision), to ignore the systemic side of supervision is to miss the unseen but very active participants in the wider field who impact dramatically on the executive coaching, the coachee and their work together. Supervision inevitably involves a number of subsystems, even if they are invisible participants in the process. Not to consider them and keep them in mind and be aware of their influence is to

create what Oshry<sup>11</sup> calls ‘system blindness’. A systems approach to executive coaching supervision keeps the big picture in mind as outlined in Figure 1.



In Fig 1 an organisation contracts with a coaching organisation for individual executives to engage in executive coaching with designated coaches employed by the coaching organisation. These coaches are supervised by an external supervisor or in some instances by a supervisor internal to the coaching organisation. In one instance of which I am aware, supervision takes place with small groups of executive coaches. It is easy to see, from the above, the ‘multiple triangulations one finds oneself in when supervising in an organisation, and the main one for coaching is: the coach, the client and the organisation’<sup>10</sup>. Effective executive coaching supervisors hold these subsystems in mind, their needs and interactions, in a creative tension.

Sometimes the above five subsystems are all involved, sometimes four of them and – less often in executive coaching – three of them (executive, coach and supervisor). Complex dynamics include maintaining professional boundaries, managing contracts and in particular the psychological contract<sup>12</sup> and being aware of the needs and responsibilities of each of the players<sup>6,13,14</sup>.

### **Company-business context**

It is here, particularly, that executive coaching supervisors need knowledge, insights and skills in understanding and working with companies and within a business context. Many coaching supervisors do not have this background from their previous experiences, even when they have worked in the public sector. Hawkins and Smith<sup>8</sup> alert us to this factor: ‘...hence the dangers of over-applying the theories and models of one group to the work of another. One of the dangers of a coach going for supervision to a counsellor, or counselling psychologist, is that the supervisor’s professional focus will tend towards understanding the psychology of the client. The biggest danger is when a fundamental orientation, which is more interested in individuals than organisations, tips over into an unrecognised tendency to see individuals as

victims of a “bad” or “unfeeling” organisation.’ Executive coaching supervisors add the systemic and cultural organisational aspects (as well as the individual perspective) to their agendas.

Two recent PhDs have looked at supervision within organisational contexts, one in particular reviewing the impact of the organisation on the supervision arrangement<sup>14,15</sup>. Neither of them has been focused on executive coaching supervision but their conclusions are pertinent to that area.

Towler<sup>14</sup> is specifically interested in ‘how the factor of context has influenced the process of supervision’ and he uses the concept of ‘organisation as client’ to look at the impact and ‘influence of the invisible client’ (the company or organisation). His qualitative research uncovers the psychosocial process of ‘supervisees and supervisor assimilating and acculturating in the flux and flow of the supervisory field’.

### **The challenges**

I have translated his conclusions into the areas of executive coaching where the main challenges are:

#### *Creativity*

Executive coaches and supervisors co-creating a flexible space and relational focus for supervision (coping with organisational change, difficult clients, ethical issues)

#### *Valuing and feeling valued*

- a) Executive coaches valuing and feeling valued by the supervisor (relationship, respect, protection, supervisor flexibility).
- b) Supervisors valuing and feeling valued by the executive coach (respect, trust, clarity of roles)
- c) Supervisors and executive coaches valuing and feeling valued by the organisation (congruence in values, being held)

#### *Working within the organisational culture*

Executive coaches wrestling with the perceived negative influences of the organisation (litigation, expectations, constraints, culture)

#### *Power*

- a) Executive coaches wrestling with the perceived negative influences of the supervisor (multiple roles of supervisor, not being understood, power)
- b) Supervisors wrestling with their role in relation to executive coaches and the organisation (collusive stances, monitoring, three way contracts)

Towler’s conclusions are similar to those of Gonzalez-Doupe<sup>15</sup> who concluded that supervisors act as buffers between supervisees and organisations. Her work

centred on small-group supervision within organisation settings and her core finding was that the work group functions as a boundary of protection against group, team and organisational pressure. This is the first time small-group supervision has been referred to as 'group as protection'. Her study shows the importance of supervision and supervisors 'supporting counsellors' attempts at self-advocacy within the organisational system'. The same could be said of executive coaching supervisors who support executive coaches in their work within organisations while not colluding with the executive coach, the coachee or the organisation. Contracts here need to be very clear, a point made continually by Copeland<sup>6</sup>: 'Contracting would safeguard everyone's rights within the tripartite relationship. Supervisors would need to have negotiation skills and be robust enough to engage in the process.'

Both these authors offer conclusions highly relevant to supervisors of executive coaches who work within organisations where executive coaching is nested. Copeland<sup>6</sup> – whose work is also with counsellors in organisations – challenges us further to focus on the systemic (organisational) side of supervision, holding together the tensions that arise where agendas can differ, cultures can clash and where power dynamics can impact in unforeseen ways on the executive coaching work.

### **Conclusion**

Supervising executive coaches propels supervision into a new historical era where the challenge is: how to accommodate and work with the organisation (or organisations) as a partner in the executive coaching arrangement where the organisation is an invisible but powerful force in the supervisory field. Executive coaching supervisors not only need knowledge of coaching, supervision and organisations but need emotional competencies such as resilience, assertiveness and diplomacy. They need to be part of a system and separate from it at the same time; they want to be supportive of all parties without colluding with any of them and they require special 'parallel process eyes' to notice when there is leakage from one subsystem into another. It is a complex demand and also a challenge. To underestimate the impact of the organisation on executive coaching and executive coaching supervision is to fall victim to that influence and to miss the possible creative elements involved in new partnerships for new learning.

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