

The Role of Coaching Supervision in increasing organisational performance

This brief article sets a context of an organisational intervention that is helping the client generate a return on its investment via the development of its Change Leadership capability. It summarises what coaching and supervision is in this context, states how coaching supervision was set up and gives two examples of how it has helped our client gain a wider understanding of how its organisation operates and what might need to change in the wider organisational system to improve and sustain its performance.

The focus of the article is not on the detailed definitions of coaching or supervision but on how coaching supervision was used and what impact it is having within the organisation. A more detailed paper will follow.

Context

This major European but predominantly nationally based organisation was recently acquired by a larger pan European organisation. Within the broader context of integration, this organisation decided to embark on developing the leadership skills, capability and capacity of its people to design and deliver long term sustainable change to generate significant returns on the costs of the acquisition.

Supervision is one small part of a much bigger system-wide intervention that the client and Transcend work on together. The broader work includes but is not limited to:

- To co-design a change approach and a change methodology that was appropriate to their organisational needs
- To co-design and co-facilitate the design and delivery of business-led Change Leadership Workshops
- To co-create and deliver a Leadership Journey for the Executive Board
- To co-create and co-deliver leadership events for different populations within the broader organisation e.g. Top 40, Top 100, business unit teams
- To develop the capability and capacity of individuals to lead organisational change
- Co-design and co-deliver the training of internal coaches who are regularly coaching the attendees of the Change Leadership Workshops
- Supervise the internal coaches to improve their capacity and capability to help others develop

What is coaching?

In this context we define coaching as a professional and clearly contracted relationship in which one person (the coach) helps another (the coachee) to achieve clearly identified goals and outcomes at the level of the individual, the team they are working in and within the organisation.

In this client the coaches are all internal and 90% of them came from the business lines.

What is coach supervision?

Supervision is a process oriented and contracted relationship in which one party (the supervisor) both monitors and supports the growth and development of the other(s) (coachee(s)). The relationship is co-created within a mutually agreed framework which takes consideration of the needs of the larger organisation and includes ethics and ways of working. In this particular client an additional very specific role of supervision was to inquire widely into the wider organisational system to seek to understand patterns and themes that were going on more widely.

How we worked

The overall focus of the bigger piece of work was to develop Change Leadership capability and capacity across the organisation. The suggested focus of the coaching was the development of Change Leadership Practices that had been identified in our earlier book "Sustaining Change – Leadership That Works (Rowland and Higgs) and assessed via our suite of on-line tools.

Supervision occurred in a group setting approximately once per six weeks. Each group was mixed in terms of experience, approach and case load in order to bring the diversity of the organisation into the supervisory space. As most of the coaches were from the business we took great effort to ensure that no coach would be matched with a direct report or someone they knew well. We also paid attention to the potential importance of power/hierarchical differences that might arise and whether or not that would help or hinder the coaching.

The approach and content of supervision was essentially led by the supervisory group and was a mixture of:

- Free form emergent needs as they arose in the here and now – which aligned to an Emergent Change Approach
- Specific topics that had been thought of prior to the session arising from their specific coaching sessions
- Live coaching practice sessions which were supervised by the whole group
- Theoretical input based around their model of coaching
- Hints and tips gained from our own experience of coaching and coach supervision
- Inquiry into the patterns that we were seeing in the content being raised in the room "in here" and how they might relate to patterns we were seeing going on "out there" in the organisation
- A summary of the "take aways" of each person and how they were to apply them in their future coaching sessions – the consolidation and

application of learning which was consistent with the importance of Learning and Experiencing in our Change Pathway

(Some of) What we are discovering and learning

Slow down to speed up

Like so many organisations, this one is busy. The majority of people are doing the very best that they can and they are frequently working very long days as well as working weekends. In addition to being long, the days are full with people moving (running) from one meeting to another. Effective coaching implies a movement or an awareness of a need to move towards something different with a clear understanding of the intent of that movement – how can people focus on intent and movement towards a goal when they are so busy?

In several early supervision sessions some people had managed to arrive beforehand and gather their thoughts, others arrived just on time and others arrived slightly after the planned start.

As we gathered all eyes were on the supervisor waiting to start the session and “get on with things.” The supervisor’s thinking at this point was to sit with what was in the room to try and experience it and understand for himself what we were all co-creating. Time passed in silence until someone finally spoke and asked when we were starting as we were “wasting time”, they had other things that they could have been doing. This was said in a matter of fact way, genuinely seeking to understand why we were sitting so still for so long. A conversation and debate ensued into which I introduced some content from the Change Leadership Programme with which their coachees would be familiar:

If change is the disturbance of repeating patterns then disturbance implies movement. For movement to occur there needs to be space for it to happen.

I offered that we had been sitting and waiting in order to gather our thoughts and to see what might happen.....

The supervisees instantly recognised two things:

- They experienced that having slowed down they saw things that they had not seen before – their real need to take time to gather their thoughts and themselves in order to focus and become fully present in the supervision session. In this experience something changed for them. Paradoxically, it seemed that taking time to slow down and reflect enabled them to see things more deeply and identify the core issues of what could be going on. This enabled them to “speed up” in terms of identifying options of how they could work more effectively with their coachees. They recognised and partly shared the eagerness and anxious need to get on with things but

had experienced the value in taking time. This was something that they took to their day to day leadership as well as to their coaching sessions.

- A lot of conversation ensued about how they could create conditions for themselves in which they could slow down to speed up in order to support their coaching work. They concluded that the co-creation and set up of the coaching space is a vital consideration in creating the right conditions for effective coaching particularly as many coachees were bringing the very issues of not having enough time, moving and/or cancelling coaching sessions, having too much to do and so on.

The role of hierarchy and power

The Board being aware of old patterns concerning power and hierarchy repeatedly stated that they trust their people to find solutions and consciously managed how they showed up as sponsors or project leads. They created the right conditions for people to generate their own solutions within a few hard rules.

A pattern that had emerged from the wider work we did with the client was the belief about hierarchy and the permission that this gave you to act or not. This theme also emerged in supervision in two ways:

- The content of some coaching sessions was about authority and permission to act within a project team in which there was a day to day reporting line (hierarchy) compared with project teams where this did not exist. Many of those that worked in a hierarchy felt unable to act without explicit permission from the hierarchical leader.
- The willingness of individuals to find their voice in supervision when even though they may be a very experienced coach they were hierarchically junior to most other people in the group.

In two sessions we discussed these two themes and explored them through the concept of Parallel process. Parallel process broadly suggests that patterns repeat themselves across the organisation (the thing that is happening out there with someone else is also happening in here with us). In working in the present moment with the parallel process via the exploration of our own beliefs, experiences, intellectual understanding and our felt sense we were more able as a group to begin to get into the shoes of our coachees and what it felt for them to bring the issue to supervision.

In supervision rather than working at a distance with the first topic (helping the coachees to help their coaches to support people working in a project team hierarchy) we discussed and agreed to work in the present moment with the second issue which I named as a parallel process. Indeed, you have probably spotted a potential third layer of parallel process in the dynamic between supervisees and supervisor!!

The purpose of working in this way was to increase our awareness by working at the level of the individual, the team (in this case the supervisory group) and the organisation (all supervisees are members of the organisation, only the supervisor is external) to see and understand how we experienced working within a hierarchical frame and what we might need to shift in ourselves in order that we might feel more free to act. This increased awareness helped the supervisees:

- gain personal insight into their own issues about working with hierarchy which gave them more resources to be more effective with their coachees
- experience and then understand how hierarchy was alive and well in the supervisory group and how it impacted them working as a group
- gain a wider organisational understanding of how power and hierarchy helped and hindered different parts of the system

This first article gives some brief examples of how supervision can help shift organisational performance by increasing awareness at the level of the self, the team and the individual. Other articles will follow.

You can read more about our approach at www.transcendconsultancy.com

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