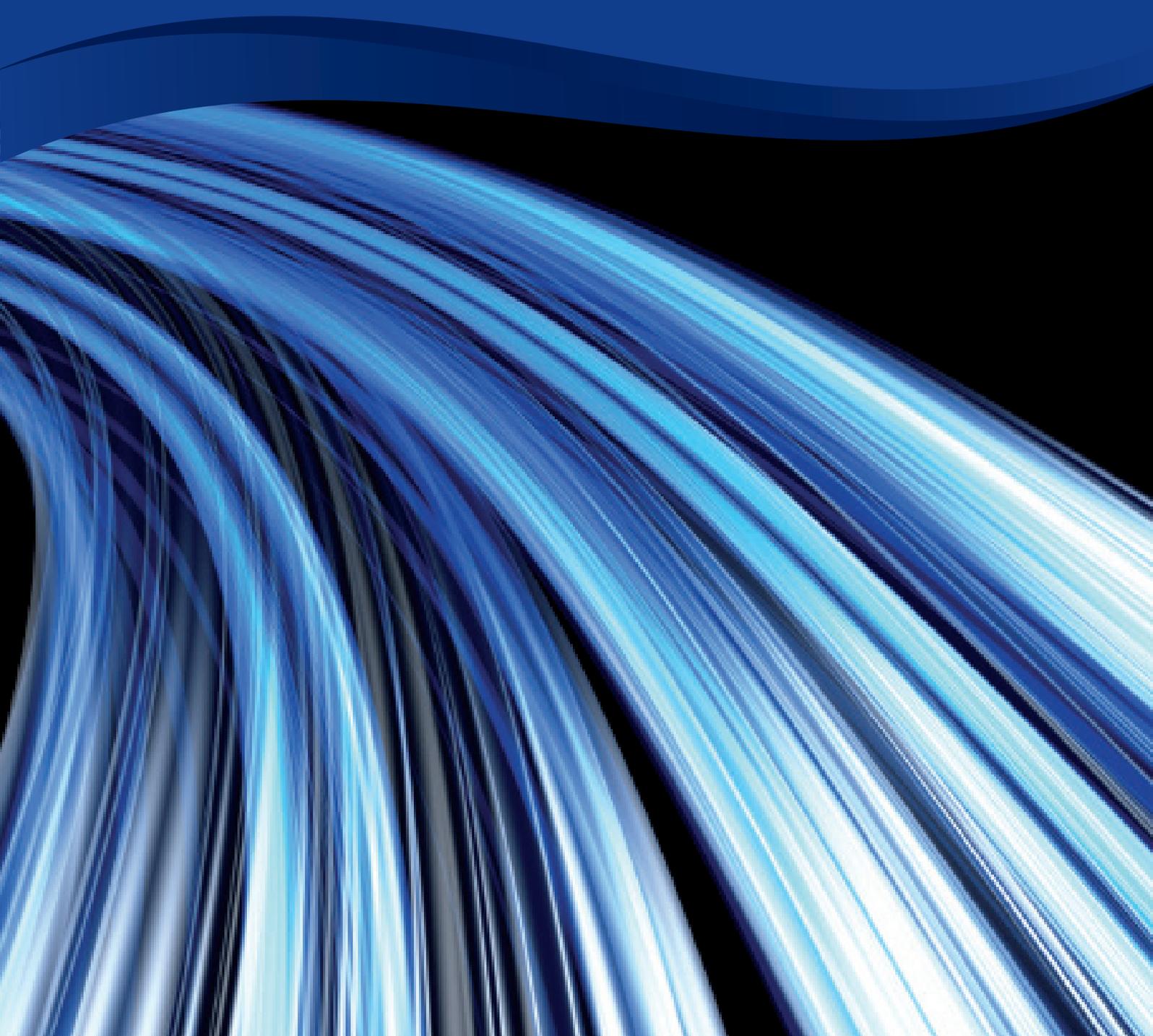


White Paper

Coaching supervision and its use in working with leaders

Dr Patricia Bossons, Director of Henley Coaching Services



At the time of writing, in 2012, coaching remains an unregulated business. As well as moving towards more formal professional status, receiving coaching supervision is becoming an essential element of a professional coach's practice. In this paper, we will examine the nature of coaching supervision and also extrapolate into the field of leadership where, increasingly, coaches are taking on 'supervision' roles with their executive coachees around their leadership practice. Our corporate clients are becoming increasingly interested in the idea of 'leadership supervision' and at Henley we view it as a fundamental contribution we can make to the organisations and individuals with whom we work. Coaching supervision is now used within many organisations who have an internal coaching facility, with the coaching supervisor often being external, and the coaches internal. One organisation, Fujitsu Services, where Henley developed a significant cadre of over 90 internal coaches, has developed a coaching culture where groups of internal coaches work as peer coaching supervision groups on a regular basis, sometimes facilitated by an external supervisor, and sometimes self-facilitated. This is all part of building a sustainable coaching culture.

However, to start with the idea of coaching supervision. One of the main reasons for the rise in importance of coaching supervision is that purchasers of coaching (and endorsers of coaches) are making it an entry criterion for being considered for work as a coach. Organisations are increasingly requiring both external and internal coaches to be in coaching supervision before they will be considered for work with their managers. The various professional bodies for coaching all require individuals to demonstrate that they are actively receiving coaching supervision as part of their application for membership. Finally, any individual looking to choose a coach to work with simply as a personal decision would be advised to make sure that the coach they choose is in supervision.

So, what is coaching supervision, and why is it so important?

The original model for supervision in coaching comes from the kinds of supervision that practitioners in other, regulated, 'helping professions' receive. It has long been the case that someone working as a counsellor, psychotherapist, social worker or clinical psychologist receives regular sessions of supervision, directly in proportion to the amount of client contact time that they have. In reality, there are exceptions to this, but the regulatory guidelines of the official professional bodies in these fields make it clear that this is a requirement for acceptable professional practice.

Protecting the client and the coach Supervision is used for the protection of both the clients of practitioners and for the protection of the practitioners themselves. The type of emotional stress and responsibility that results from working in close and intimate contact with other human beings who are often in significant states of heightened emotion cannot only result in burn-out of the 'helper', but also in the 'helper' being unable to continue to be effective with their client. The severity of the coaching client's emotional state and the nature of the presenting issues may be less extreme than that of clients visiting the other categories of practitioners (although most coaches will have experienced significant emotion in their coachees at times) but the impact on the coach can certainly be detrimental to their continuing effective performance.

Focusing on the client's issues In order to coach others effectively, it is important for the coach to be able to separate out their own 'issues' from those being presented by the coachee. This is far more subtle and difficult than it might initially sound, and requires a level of self-awareness that is hard to achieve without an external perspective. A coaching supervisor is someone whose job is to listen. They observe a coach talking about their experiences of coaching and help them understand where their own beliefs, values, preferences, judgments and personality make-up are getting in the way of them being able to work exclusively on their client's issues. Without this external perspective, it is all too possible that, unknowingly, a coach can find themselves getting enmeshed in their coachee's issue, which has in fact triggered a personal response in the coach themselves.

The supervisor's responsibilities

The main responsibilities of a coaching supervisor are to provide:

- knowledge and input
- help for the coach to manage boundaries
- support.

The knowledge and input may include anything from insights into how the coach's behaviour with a coachee is affecting the work being done (perhaps from the supervisor's knowledge of psychodynamic principles, for example), to simple factual assistance, such as a useful book reference or suggestion for a coaching technique.

Boundary management is a topic that is frequently taken to supervision by coaches. These issues are often the ones that can keep a coach awake at night, wondering if they have 'done the right thing' in a coaching session. The boundaries being examined can range from 'does this coachee need counselling or therapy instead of coaching?', to 'should I tell the coachee's boss that they have asked me to coach them on how to get a job with another organisation', or 'I'm finding myself personally attracted to my coachee, what should I do?'

Support This is an important thing to receive from supervision. Coaching can be a tough job, and staying resourceful is vital for effective performance. Sometimes acknowledgement that you are doing your best is an essential intervention! If this can come from someone who knows your coaching world and who you know has your best interests at heart, then this can be very powerful and useful. As a rule of thumb, you should leave a coaching supervision session feeling better than you did when you went into it. If you leave feeling reprimanded, criticised, patronised or in any other way less than you were, then find another supervisor.

Leadership supervision Being able to supervise requires a specific skill-set, experience and a particular mind-set. The essence of it is that it is not 'coaching the coach', but it is reflecting the coach's impact on the coaching back to the coach, from a skilled, external perspective. Many of the issues brought to executive coaching are within the context of leadership, and much of the work carried out by coaches, especially at senior levels in organisations, may be better framed as leadership supervision, rather than simply coaching. In other words, the coach is not working with the coachee to enable them to achieve a particular goal or outcome, but instead is allowing them to reflect on their own leadership practice in a confidential and non-judgemental space. Using

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also reflect back to the coachee/leader where aspects of the coachee themselves are likely to be the issue that needs attention, rather than any external presenting situation.

Developing as a supervisor Learning and developing supervision skills can therefore be seen as having a wider application than purely to provide coaching supervision for coaches. Henley is working at the leading edge of introducing leadership supervision into organisations, as well as assisting with the development of coaching cultures in organisations. Whenever Henley supplies coaches to work with managers in a particular organisation, a Henley coaching supervisor always works with the coaches to ensure their effectiveness. An example of this kind of work is a leadership development programme – now in its 4th year – that Henley runs for a global construction organisation. On this programme, groups of up to 14 senior managers from the different businesses in the group get together to work on personal development and leadership issues as part of the business succession planning process. A core part of the programme is one-to-one coaching sessions with Henley coaches. The groups of coaches working with the managers in each cohort receive coaching supervision at the end of each programme from the Henley coaching supervisor allocated to the overall client relationship. This means that one coaching supervisor works with all the coaches working with all the managers. As a result of this consistency, core themes are gathered and consolidated for the client, which feeds back into the organisational agenda. The coaches also receive a consistency of supervision which provides reassurance and support to help them work with their coachees.

The new Henley qualification programme in coaching supervision, the Professional Certificate in Coaching Supervision will take its first cohort of students in Autumn 2012.

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