

Chapter 3 - Action Learning Supervision for Coaches

Supervision in Coaching: Supervision, Ethics and Continuous Professional Development

by Jonathan Passmore (ed)

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Chapter 3: Action Learning Supervision for Coaches

ROY CHILDS, MARTIN WOODS, DAVID WILLCOCK AND ANGY MAN

Introduction

This chapter is about making more high quality coaching available to a much wider community. This stems from a strong belief in the benefits of coaching and a desire to create/support initiatives that promote this aim. However, our experience is that coaching, certainly coaching in organizations, has been focused on high value individuals where the concept of 'value' usually has a salary connotation. While this is understandable and, in many ways, justifiable we believe that organizations would benefit from making coaching available to more people at different levels. However, a key barrier to this is cost. Coaching is usually conducted one-to-one, which means that it involves a high level of resourcing that is inevitably costly. While those of us who believe in coaching may well argue that the benefits exceed the costs, we have found that persuading people of this does not necessarily lead to a slackening of the purse strings. This suggests that our aim of increasing the community that can benefit from coaching is likely to be a long, hard battle. We have therefore promoted the concept of action learning supervision (ALS) as a way of accelerating our aim. Along the way we have discovered that this is not a second-best option – rather it is of clear value and should exist alongside the traditional approaches to supervision. Done in the right way we believe that this is a method for launching novice coaches into a community of practice that is low cost without sacrificing the aim of achieving high standards of professional standards.

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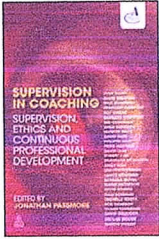
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Background to supervision in coaching

The idea and practice of supervision has its roots in counselling and therapy. In these disciplines the practitioner may address many deep, long-term issues that involve a range of psychological and emotional levels. In such situations there is a danger that the practitioner becomes emotionally entangled with the client and so supervision is seen as a way of bringing some perspective and distance to the relationship. From the therapy and counselling perspective the purpose of supervision has been seen as threefold; this was summarized by Kadushin (1992) in his discussion concerning supervision in a social work context:

1. Education – to ensure the development and upgrading of knowledge, skill and attitude through the encouragement of reflection on and exploration of their work and providing ideas, tips, techniques and knowledge to the process.
2. Support – the practical and psychological support to carry through the responsibilities of the role. Coaching is a taxing process and the stresses and pressures of the work can affect coaching performance potentially, in extreme circumstances, leading to burnout. Here the supervisor's role is to support the coach in managing the pressures and supplying emotional support where needed.
3. Administrative/managerial – the promotion and maintenance of good standards of work and adherence to policies and good practice. Here the supervisor would provide support and guidance in the areas of good practice and values of being a coach. It would include the aspects of standards, ethics and boundaries.

Since coaching is a relatively new discipline/profession, it is useful to borrow from related professions. However, important questions need to be asked about what is genuinely relevant and how far the parallels provide an appropriate or inappropriate model for coaching. Such questions are complicated by the lack of agreement on the boundaries for coaching. Some suggest that it should be focused on performance issues and behaviour change only. Others argue that, even if the aim is performance and behaviour change, these are profoundly affected by deeper psychological, emotional and motivational issues and that these will inevitably occur in the course of a good coaching relationship.

These issues aside, few would argue that the core of supervision (as defined by Kadushin) can only be beneficial to coaching as a profession and the people it hopes will benefit from good practice. However, questions still remain. An important one is how much psychological background, training and knowledge are necessary or advisable for coaches and, more pointedly, for coach supervisors. Many of those advocating supervision from a counselling or therapeutic context generally see this as absolutely essential on the basis that such coaches should see the psychological and emotional dimension to performance issues earlier and with greater clarity than their (psychologically) untrained counterparts. They may also work to a different boundary and depth with their clients and therefore regard supervision as a psychological process. However, there are many coach/mentors who neither have a counselling/therapy background nor hold it necessary to be supervised by someone who has. Their work may be more strategic than behavioural and they may regard supervision more as a process of consultation. This highlights some of the debate concerning the form that supervision should take and some of the options (Salter, 2008).

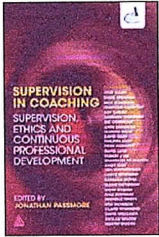
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Background to action learning

Action learning, as the name suggests, is something that happens all the time. Whatever activity we are engaged in can provide an opportunity for learning. With children we see this happening at a phenomenal rate. As we get older, we are less likely to learn as quickly and so a more conscious approach is required. What is now called action learning was founded by Reg Revans, a Cambridge scientist, in the 1930s. He observed that his colleagues learnt a good deal from each other even if they were not of the same discipline. Simply by sharing problems, questioning each other and receiving each others' views and comments, all the scientists made useful contributions even if it was not their expertise! This moved the emphasis away from knowledge and expertise towards discovery and exploration. Subsequently, as director of education and training at the National Coal Board, he developed the approach that has now been carried across the globe and applied extensively within and across organizations in every sector. As long ago as 1985, an MBA based exclusively on action learning was started and in 1995 Revans hosted the first action learning conference in London. Revans noted that 'lasting behavioural change is more likely to follow the reinterpretation of past experience than the acquisition of fresh knowledge'. This shifts the emphasis of learning towards action. Following action there is a need to reflect and consider what has happened, what worked, what could have been better and to then consider what could be done differently. At some point this leads to experimenting with new actions and the cycle can begin again – all of which is very reminiscent of Kolb's learning cycle. Revans (1982) summarized the process in terms of a simple formula:

$$\text{Learning (L)} = \text{Programmed Knowledge (P)} + \text{Insightful questioning (Q)}$$

This means that the essentials for Action Learning are:

1. An environment in which people are willing to share, admit mistakes and learn.
2. A process of enquiry – clearly fuelled by insightful questioning.
3. Periodic opportunities to practise and review that practice.
4. Access to resources (people, books or electronic information) that can fill knowledge gaps if required.

Action learning has parallels with a number of group processes such as group facilitation, group coaching, team coaching and peer coaching (in a group context). All of these are overlapping models and all can be useful for development. However, we wanted to position our approach to the action learning model because we wanted to de-emphasize the need for the 'wise and experienced' supervisor. Now this is not to devalue what wisdom and experience has to offer – which is a great deal – but there is not enough of it around and it can be expensive.

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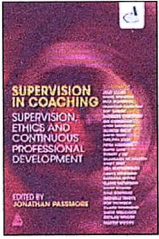
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Why use the action learning supervision approach?

One reason for ALS is not so much the cost of traditional supervision but the fact that it is not always effective. For example, one of the critics of supervision in therapy (Myler, 2007) makes the following points:

1. Most supervision is ineffective (which he claims from his personal experience and from anecdotal evidence).
2. Supervisors are themselves problematic (making the point that a good practitioner does not necessarily make a good supervisor).
3. It is a money-spinning exercise (the fact that it has become a requirement for qualification introduces motivations beyond 'noble support').
4. Most famous therapists were never supervised in the modern sense.
5. It is a power play that plays out a parent–child relationship.
6. It can be easily replaced by other methods (namely group/peer support).

Of course it can be easy to find examples of ineffective practice and this should not be used to condemn a practice that can be done well. However, it does show the weakness of relying on one approach that may not always achieve what is desired. We are not presenting ALS as an alternative to more traditional approaches. Ideally we would see it running alongside (ie 'as well as' rather than 'instead of'). However, it is important to note that we do not see ALS as a second-best option. We regard it as having equal standing because, in some ways, it is more in tune with the basic principles of coaching. This is because, no matter how it is dressed up, the traditional approach is founded on knowledge, wisdom and expertise (ie the common expectation is that it is like an apprenticeship with 'a more experienced colleague providing learning input, challenge and support to more junior colleagues'). ALS challenges this approach in two ways. First, it proposes a group process rather than the one-to-one dyadic relationship. Second, it honours the fundamental belief of all coaching – that the coachee already has the skills and answers to his or her most important questions. A criticism of traditional approaches to supervision has been conceptualized in terms of Berne's work in transactional analysis. Myler (2007) states that:

As a supervisor you are acting as a Parent to the counsellor's Child ego state. This means that the supervisor is not acting as coach or mentor but as a superior who is often judgemental and parental in guidance. It does not matter whether the supervisor takes a critical parent's role or that of a nurturing parent – the power play is the same. The counsellor is submitting through experience of childhood to a parental symbiosis with the supervisor. This is unhealthy and restrictive and most counsellors will take the Adaptive Child's role in that they will submit to supervision as a way to make their Parent (supervisor) happy.

While Myler cannot claim that this is true for all supervision relationships it does advise us to be wary. It could also be implied that that ALS is more easily concordant with coaching's fundamental beliefs since it does not depend on the skills and experience of a more experienced supervisor (although this can still be available). Instead, it relies on creating a spirit of enquiry together with good questioning. These are the fundamentals of the action learning approach from which the best learning can ensue.

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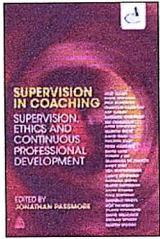
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What is involved: setting up the parameters

As part of the training participants are invited to sign up to the principles for working in each of the groups. These are summarized below and are communicated prior to Module 1 and then revisited prior to the division into groups. Each trainee is asked to sign up to:

- Bringing real problems, questions and issues to the group.
- Being willing to share openly his or her experiences, mistakes, hopes and fears that arise from the process of coaching – recognizing that attention is given to the process, feelings and relationships as well as the content.
- A firm (signed) commitment to treating all information disclosed by the trainee coaches and information about their coachees as confidential – the only thing to be taken out of the group is the learning (this signed commitment includes the usual proviso concerning serious illegality or risk of harm).
- Taking full responsibility for him- or herself in terms of his or her own learning and development.
- Using 'I' language as far as possible.
- Giving equal attention and commitment to other's issues and learning as he or she does to his or her own – which means giving as well as receiving.

The role of the facilitator: each group has a facilitator who helps the group to form and to understand the process. In the early stages the facilitator manages the process, which means establishing the format and timing, enabling everyone to participate, ensuring that the questions build up coherently in terms of enquiry and clarification before offering ideas and solutions, checking that the questions are of most use to the presenter of the problem, and checking with the other participants about the usefulness of the process at each step.

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Rose was surprised by how often she unconsciously stepped into 'fixing' things. Interestingly, during the time-outs, the group also demonstrated the same tendency – ie suggesting how she could have phrased her question rather than asking her how she might have phrased it differently. This was an extremely useful example of the 'parallel process' whereby Rose's own tendencies were being played out by the group. She was also able to give feedback to the group about how, when they showed genuine curiosity (enquiring rather than giving advice), she found herself relaxing and being able to be more reflective, thoughtful and experimental. She stated how she felt more in control, more respected and more willing to trust her own thinking and conclusions. In other words, the coaching process was being enacted.

Naturally, Rose was not immediately able to make all the necessary changes but over a period of two or three ALS sessions it became clear that her practice was improving dramatically. This became really clear to the group when, at a later meeting, Rose facilitated the learning of another group member. In a 'fish bowl' coaching process she managed to pursue an issue with a group member right through to a quality outcome (without intervention or time-outs). The 'coachee' had not expected to make such progress and this was the point at which both Rose and the group realized the progress she had made. Subsequently Rose has presented a very competent portfolio of coaching evidence to the coaching assessment team, resulting in her obtaining her recognized coaching qualification with flying colours.

The successes in this action learning group can be summarized as follows:

- *Trust*: the development of openness and trust between members was very evident – from some hesitant beginnings to some very open declarations of fears, uncertainties and vulnerabilities that the group respected and supported. The group became able to discuss almost anything without fear of judgement.
- *Responsibility*: there can be a propensity for the group facilitator to take an expert/parental role. The process allows a rapid shift from being facilitator-led to self-managing – and this group took early responsibility for managing their own time and learning. After the second ALS they began running sessions without the facilitator (which were necessarily restricted due to costs).
- *Diversity of process*: the process is flexible enough to appeal to all learning styles – visual (the group members see each other in action in co-coaching scenarios played out in the ALS sessions), auditory (group members hear examples of good and bad practice) and kinaesthetic (group members have the opportunity to try out new ways of working and responding to what 'effective' feels like).
- *Diversity of inputs*: the process encourages non-experts to contribute. It is very powerful to see how even the most naive question can produce great learning.
- *Learning through action*: the focus is on learning not judgement. This gives trainee coaches an opportunity to experiment live. It also gives them a rare opportunity to see others in action. This not only gives a rich source of ideas about questioning and styles through observation, but it also provides real practice in a safe environment.

mentoring capability. Their usual style (which had been the basis for their success in their career to date) was to work at a fast pace, giving advice and opinion and making quick decisions. Hence the expectation of their organizational role was to provide (rather than facilitate) solutions. This was in stark contrast to the needs of the coaching role they were hoping to take up. They needed to learn to appreciate the need for a slower pace and for different kinds of questions – ones that would encourage the coachee to reflect on the meaning and best course of action that would be true for him or her. However, the early group dynamics were characterized by their old habits – a fast pace, rapid conversations and the trading of views and opinions interspersed with leading questions. All were well intentioned, but the intellectual understanding of the coaching process and skills (acquired in the training modules) had yet to become natural. It quickly became apparent that the style they used in the action learning groups was habitual and was inevitably played out in their coach/coachee interactions. The facilitator's contribution helped them to reflect on how they were operating and what needed to change – namely to learn, listen and ask questions that were relevant to the presenting issue, rather than making judgements, giving advice based on their own experience and getting side-tracked with their own examples.

Thus the action learning group provided a context for learning from the parallel process – how their approach in the group mirrored how they worked with their coachees. All group members, to a greater or lesser extent, tended to slip into advice-giving with coachees early on in the programme, making suggestions about action or asking 'leading' questions. Working on this in the group helped them to experience the benefits of the coaching approach directly – asking the questions, providing space for the focal person to reflect, staying with the silence rather than filling it. Since the facilitator was able to demonstrate (role model) the appropriate behaviour they all learnt to recognize the appropriate approach and soon began to call each other to account, thus increasing the amount of listening and questioning in the group. Early on in the programme a 'time out' would often be called to review the group process, the impact it was having and the implications for coaching practice. Knowledge inputs were provided where relevant, such as a reinforcement of good listening and questioning and an explanation of the issues of power and control in the coaching relationship.

From the facilitator's perspective a key learning point was that, no matter how well defined your process or ground rules, the process is going to be 'lumpy' in the early stages. Patiently role modelling the process combined with group coaching and occasional 'expert' inputs gradually steered the action learning set towards a more sustainable self-managed process. Maintaining a light touch and a sense of humour also helped. The groups' development over the period of the programme can be likened to a shift in the locus of control, from the facilitator to the action learning group members and from them as coaches to their coachees. A key lesson that emerged over the period of the programme was summarized by one group member who said: 'Of all the actions agreed with my coachees, the only actions they committed to and followed through on were those they arrived at themselves. All the actions I suggested earlier in the programme were not followed through on. This is powerful learning for me.'

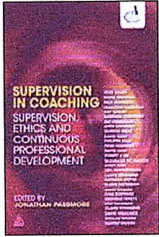
Case Study 2—(Martin Woods facilitator)

The background for this case study is an action learning group of five individuals who worked for a large local government authority. The participants were aiming to become internal coaches across a partnership of local authorities – this was part of the process for introducing a coaching culture within the authority. The trainee coaches had attended as a large group of 24 trainees but the action learning based supervision was in the smaller groups. One of the trainee's (Rose – name changed) main role within the authority was as a trainer and subsequently training manager. She was very enthusiastic about this role, which she enjoyed, but she saw the benefits of undertaking the coaching training and supervision to extend her skill set and effectiveness.

At the first session, the facilitator explained the process for action learning (see above) and the importance of bringing real coaching examples and issues to subsequent meetings. To facilitate this, the other four members agreed to use each other as coachees. In addition they agreed to seek out other coachees so that they could obtain sufficient practice in between meetings. The group took personal responsibility for arranging their own practice sessions and reviews and used the ALS sessions as a way of formally reviewing their progress and presenting questions on how to best learn and progress.

At the second ALS session Rose presented her issue, which was about how she could become more 'inquiring' since she recognized her tendency to 'fix'. She explained that, having been a trainer for many years as well as having a personality that tended towards being a real action-based problem solver, she couldn't stop herself from suggesting ways to resolve her coachee's issues. She recognized that the coaching process was different – requiring her to help the coachee identify his or her own way forward. She was finding this hard to do.

Rose then summarized her 'issue' as 'turning problem solving into enquiry'. The group then began to ask her questions about her last coaching session. This enabled her to identify specific examples of when she had slipped into problem-solving rather than enquiring. The process required the facilitator to act as 'referee' by 'blowing the whistle' when the group moved towards closed questions or trying to give advice. Once Rose had a clear picture of what she did and how she did it she was asked what she felt would be the best way forward. She decided to 'try doing it differently' by practising in front of the group. This meant choosing one of the members to play the role of her coachee. During the role play the facilitator called some 'time-outs' which allowed a review of progress at various points.



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How it works

There is a nine-part sequence involved in a typical action learning session, as follows:

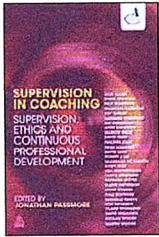
1. A group check-in where set members report briefly on what is happening in their life including any reflections or actions from the last meeting plus a brief description of what they would like to bring to the session.
2. The group decides who will present their issues and what time will be allowed to each.
3. The first person (the presenter) is chosen, who presents a problem, experience or issue without interruption. It can sometimes be useful for this to be summarized in a short sentence and written on a flipchart.
4. The group asks clarifying questions to ensure that the elements of the problem are fully articulated and understood. These questions should be asked slowly and encourage reflection since they are designed to help the presenter to come to a deeper understanding of the issue and are not opportunities for the group to offer advice, pass judgement or tell their own anecdotes. The presenter has a clear brief to only address the questions that he or she feels are appropriate, relevant or useful.
5. When sufficient understanding has been achieved and if it is appropriate, the problem can be acted out in a 'fish bowl' setting. This involves one or more members of the group playing the role of the characters involved. For example, one member can play the role of the presenter (as coach) and another of the presenters the coachee.
6. The presenter reflects, expands or reframes the problem and then formulates some options and actions.
7. The group assists the presenter to review these options and, if he or she desires, they can offer suggestions until such time as he or she is ready to make a resolution to take specific actions (no matter how small).
8. The group then reflects on the process and gives feedback on what has taken place. It is useful to capture some of the key moments and insights and to identify what was particularly useful. It can also help to identify which questions were particularly challenging and insightful.
9. The process is then repeated with the next presenter.

For this process to work, it is important that group members show genuine respect for the presenter and that they see their role as helping him or her to articulate and understand the problems and to explore the issues. As in all such situations the key skills are listening and questioning. It can be useful to analyse the questions that are asked and to reflect on whether there is scope for a greater range and variety to be used. In the early stages, the facilitator will play a major role in this and may, sometimes, intervene by asking the questioner to rephrase the question in a more open way. However, this is all aimed at modelling the process so that eventually the group participants will become skilled at doing this themselves. Some of the ways to think about the questions asked by the group are whether they helped the presenter to:

- clarify the situation, the options or the way forward – these are 'inquiry' questions;
- achieve a deeper insight – these are 'challenging' questions;
- consider new ideas and options – these are 'catalytic' questions;
- identify/release hidden emotions that are blocking the process – these are 'cathartic' questions.

Case Study 1—(David Willcock facilitator)

The key theme that emerged very early on was the development of good listening and questioning. Perhaps this was particularly evident because of the background of the people in this action learning group. All were very busy operational managers who had been selected for the programme to help the organization develop a coaching and



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Why is ALS useful: what are the benefits of this approach?

As we mentioned at the start of this chapter, one of the key benefits of an ALS set approach is its low cost. Using external coaches or supervisors can be expensive. By teaching people ALS skills and role modelling these with the group, the process skills are built in preparation for 'going alone', which makes for a very efficient model. Thus, although efficiency and cost were the initial drivers for this approach, the benefits appear to be much wider. They include:

- A process that allows multiple relationships and perspectives to become part of the learning process.
- The development of relationships that extend the informal network of communication, which has impact beyond the work on the coaching development – an antidote to the isolation that is sometimes felt by those primarily engaged in coaching in organizations.
- A tone and approach that is empowering since all group members contribute and new trainees learn that they have valuable perspectives that are helpful to others even when they are not 'experts'.
- Moving from a culture of 'training' to one of 'learning by doing' with the opportunity to take risks in a safe environment and hence allowing people to experiment and 'stretch' with different approaches and behaviours.
- Moving responsibility for learning from the 'teacher' to the 'learner' and the avoidance of 'social loafing' since all members are actively involved.
- A forum where people can feel listened to and where feelings and emotions can be expressed and explored.
- A self-sustaining process – group members can continue to meet and support even when funding dries up.
- Creating a community of practice that allows the ideas and principles to be more widely shared and promoted within the organization than tends to happen with individually focused interventions.

Our experience of ALS is that it can work very well – and that it has advantages over individual supervision. We recognize that some people who have experienced individual supervision may doubt that they would learn as much in a group situation; this is usually because they have concerns about developing the high level of trust that is necessary for a group to operate with the degrees of openness and challenge that characterizes the best ALS groups. Perhaps this means that ALS is not the right approach for some groups. However, our experience is that the people who want to become coaches have a strong orientation towards openness, learning and support.

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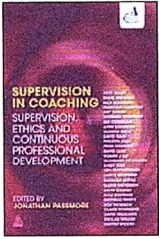
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Conclusion

Traditional approaches to supervision can be highly effective – but not in all situations at all times. We know that the purpose of supervision should be to develop competence, capability and learning in an environment that opens people up for this opportunity rather than closes it down. The word 'supervision' can have connotations of one-way traffic, of the 'right-wrong' world of the expert. Given some of the limitations and criticisms it is useful to have alternative approaches. In the same way as there is a need for both individual therapy and group therapy, there is value in individual supervision and group supervision. For those interested in group supervision, the approach adopted here, stimulated by the action learning approach, has merit as a tool since it fits closely with the coaching ethos.

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