

Building Internal Supervision Capability in Organisations

Katherine Long

In September 2011, The OCM launched a pilot supervision programme aimed uniquely at the requirements of lead internal coaches aiming to offer supervision to coaching colleagues. The need for programmes to support internal coaches to build their own supervision skills was highlighted by research on the development of supervision culture alongside coaching culture (Long, 2011). The research showed that there was a wide range of supervision practice taking place within organisations, from no supervision of coaches, to line managers with little or no coaching experience taking on that role, through to more experienced coaches supervising other internal coaches, and in a few cases external supervisors were brought in to support coaches.

professional supervisors, I did note a number of raised eyebrows at the very thought of developing internal supervisors! It jars with a purist vision of supervision, but I think that when we examine some of the underlying assumptions, the situation is not as clear cut as it might initially seem.

Whilst I believe that there is genuine benefit in having some supervision from external providers, especially to lead coaches, we are naïve to assume that being an external necessarily implies pure objectivity. Any supervision which is delivered as a commercial activity will experience certain tensions, and therefore test the integrity of the supervisor. It may lead to collusive behaviours between supervisor and coach, where the supervisor becomes less willing to challenge, and unconsciously acts more as an ally to the coach.

differ to their own. If these differences of perspective are not discussed in a wider context, this could lead to real confusion between the coaches they supervise about 'right' ways of coaching or building coaching culture.

In addition, even if an organisation is prepared to pay for the services of external supervisors, when there is a change in leadership or a new austerity measure is introduced, it may become challenging to defend the cost of external supervision, especially as there is little research currently available to justify it in financial terms. So it would seem prudent for organisations to also develop internal supervision capability as a way of ensuring that internal coaches can continue to access support, whatever the economic climate.

The purist view may therefore not be as robust as it first seems. And there are also some unique advantages to building internal supervision capability which need to be taken into account.



Internal or external supervision – which is better?

It might seem at first glance, that if there were no budgetary constraints, it would be preferable for organisations to make exclusive use of external supervisors. After all, they do not belong to the same system that the coach is operating in, so should, in theory, be able to bring an unbiased objectivity which an internal coach acting as a supervisor would be unable to do.

This view would seem to have some support within the professional supervision community. In discussing the 'Coach as Supervisor' programme with other

Or conversely, the external supervisor may hold strong views which are at odds with the vision for coaching within the client organisation. Part of the unique value of an external supervisor is undoubtedly their ability to bring new perspectives, but they also need to consider their impact in this, especially if they are perceived as having greater expertise or knowledge than the coach they are working with; there is a danger that they stop behaving as a partner to their client organisation, and take on an unofficial role as consultant. The supervisor may inadvertently start pushing their own agenda, without taking into account organisational realities and the client's vision for coaching which may

Supervising the newly developing coach pool ensures that we can provide individual and group support, which allows focus on the tools and techniques that will serve them best in the business. Knowledge of the challenges that the business faces means that we can contextualise the support provided. The biggest benefit to me has been the response from the individuals who are facing challenging issues and who are really appreciative of the time and support provided. In a changing business environment it is validation of the effort that is put in.

Libby Alderson, Coaching Supervisor, RWE npower

Engaging volunteer coaches

In many organisations, the internal coach has to fit coaching around their day job. Their contribution as an internal coach may not even be recognised at appraisal. Whilst coaching can be a rewarding 'escape' from other parts of their role, unless there is encouragement and support from *somewhere* within the organisation, then it is easy to see how the commitment to coach can wane, and for internal coaches to go off radar. This is not only a waste of the initial investment and time in developing them as coaches, but can also send out a detrimental message regarding the coaching activity as a whole.

Building a pool of internal supervisors means that internal coaches can more readily access support in a timely way, from a colleague who both values their contribution, and has a good understanding of the pressures they face. These relationships help to strengthen a supportive community of practice, and normalise supervision as a key component of the wider coaching activity, rather than being the sole preserve of 'expert' professionals.

Adding gravitas and professionalism to the internal coaching activity

Maintaining buy-in for coaching from key stakeholders over the longer term is a challenge for many coaching champions / lead coaches, for a number of reasons.

Key sponsors may have only experienced working with external coaches, and hold a view that internal coaches are unable to operate at the same standards (quite an assumption!). Along with getting internal coaches qualified to independent professional standards, building supervision skills sends out the message that internal coaches are actively concerned in developing the quality of their coaching,

and that they are working to the same standards and levels of accountability as set out by the wider profession.

It is great to have been part of the pilot group for a programme specifically targeted at internal supervisors. Commercially it makes sense for us at Ernst & Young, as it is far more cost effective to train two of our senior coaches to supervise members of our internal coaching team, than to purchase this service externally. We also face slightly different issues, being integrally involved in the system in which we coach and supervise. Sharing these challenges with coaches operating in other organisations has been extremely helpful and I have picked up several new ideas from other participants on the programme, as well as increasing my confidence and knowledge and having the opportunity to practise my supervision skills in a safe environment.

**Nicki Hickson, Director of Coaching,
Ernst & Young**

Developing more strategic internal coaching activity

Sponsors may also have unrealistic expectations about what internal coaching should be delivering, and use inappropriate performance measures to evaluate its impact. By supervising internal coaches, lead coaches can spot trends and themes which will enable them to read the degree of match or mismatch between coaching activity and organisational climate and strategy. Conversations between internal and external supervisors and HR or OD can help to identify where the aims for the coaching are either achieving or falling short of meeting real individual and organisational needs. This may result in reframing the purpose(s) for coaching so that internal coaches are equipped to bring a more strategic focus to their practice. Because internal supervisors will be likely to have a strategic role in developing coaching internally, it means they can shape coaching activity to address key issues more precisely, and thereby create better measures for evaluating its impact.

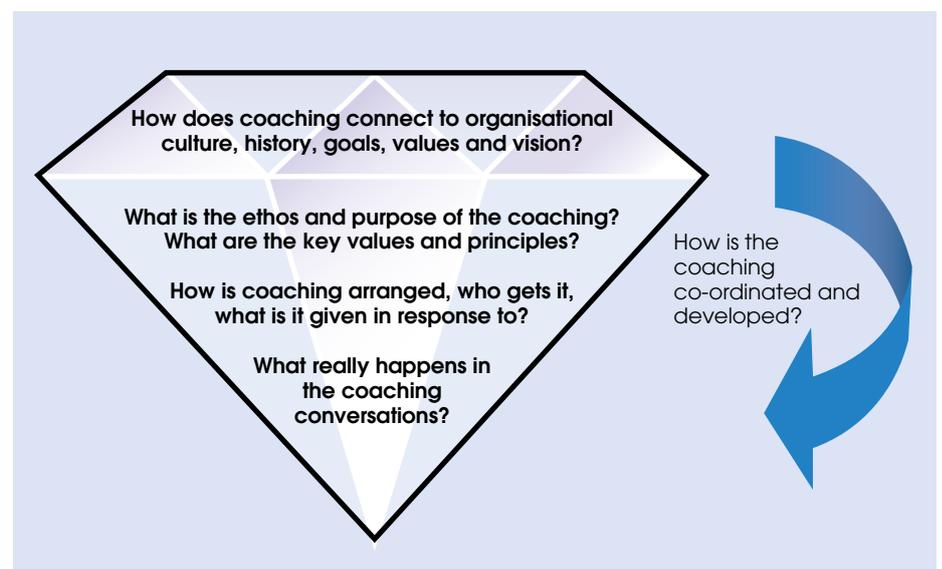


Figure 2. Supervision's role in supporting dynamic congruence between coaching practice and principles and the organisational context

Building Internal Supervision Capability in Organisations (cont.)

Enhancing the coaching skills of the internal supervisors

Developing supervision skills and awareness invariably adds to the quality of an individual's coaching practice. Building awareness of their 'supervision gaze', broadening the range of habitual lenses they use, learning to work more effectively with process and ambiguity (in contrast to a tendency to mainly focus on outputs) adds to the richness of the coaching they can now offer.

This can model something very powerful to the internal coaching pool, who may have lost sight of the ways in which they can develop further, especially if they have been trained to operate primarily within certain modes of coaching, for example 121 performance coaching, and may not see that there are other areas in which to gain competence.

I found that looking into the theory and practice of supervision has helped my own coaching practice become more mindful and 'rounded' in that I reflect from more angles and perspectives than I had previously been aware of.

Following the course has enabled us (at Telefonica) to ensure our group type supervision sessions are more meaningful and balanced, and that a small core of the more experienced coaches within the cohort are able to offer supervision in a variety of situations - new coaches, support of accreditation, difficult / complex cases and of course general CPD and improving capability & standards across our cohort - which itself leads to increased credibility and uptake of the service. A virtuous upward spiral of success.

Liz Arkell, Learning and Development, Telefonica

Internal supervisor as a champion of learning organisation principles

Internal supervision can therefore be seen as performing a key role in protecting an organisation's investment in developing internal coaching. It sends out a message that the internal coaching pool is acting accountably and professionally, and provides greater opportunities to harness themes which emerge in supervision in order to guide the coaching activity towards critical individual and organisational needs. It develops lead coaches beyond their current skills and capabilities, modelling continuous professional development to their peers.

One way of representing the role of supervision in relationship to building coaching culture is an adapted version of the Diamond Model (Long, 2011), which highlights the need for congruence between the coaching conversations which occur in practice, the ways in which coaching is arranged and allocated, the key ethos and purpose for the coaching, and the way it meshes with organisational culture and strategy.

Supervision sits alongside these levels as a key (though not sole) mechanism for developing and co-ordinating 'best fit' practice and for the individual, the team, department and organisation. This 'co-creator' function of supervision is less emphasised in the supervision literature to date, which tends towards the premise that the supervisor's world is (and should be) separate from the client's world.

The OCM's approach, however, is to see internal supervisors (and indeed coaches) as being critical in building key characteristics of a learning organisation (Senge, 1990). This is where external providers can partner very effectively in supporting internal supervisors to develop and model these characteristics with confidence. Working with external

supervisors can offer a safe and relatively objective place to examine their own thinking and development, in an environment of support and challenge.

Let's look at each of the facets of a learning organisation in turn and briefly consider how they are modelled by the internal supervisor.

1. Systems thinking

In working with internal coaches, the internal supervisor is both concerned with the inner system of the coach, their own system, the system of the coachee and the wider system(s) in which they all operate. Developing a systems perspective brings strategic and developmental value to the whole coaching function. In their role as a coach, it also introduces a set of powerful lenses for them to use and transfer when working with senior leaders and teams.

2. Personal mastery

According to Senge, 'personal mastery is the discipline of continually deepening and clarifying our personal vision, of focusing our energies, of developing patience, and of seeing reality objectively. As such it is an essential cornerstone of a learning organisation - the learning organisation's spiritual foundation.' Internal supervisors who 'walk the talk' of expanding their own self-awareness have the potential to model deep levels of personal enquiry which can help both coaches and coachees examine their own purpose and contribution in new ways.

3. Mental models

Mental models are deeply ingrained, pervasive and largely unexamined assumptions. 'The discipline of working with mental models starts with turning the mirror inward; learning to unearth our internal pictures of the world, to bring them to the surface and hold them

rigorously to scrutiny.’ A principle function of supervision and coaching is to unearth hidden assumptions and build new mental models which serve better, e.g. ‘There is never enough time.’ vs ‘There is enough time to do the things which will really make a difference.’

4. Building shared vision

Internal supervisors help to build clarity for the purpose of coaching within the organisation. If the vision is fuzzy, it will lead to confusion around the success criteria for the coaching. The vision and purpose for coaching needs to be periodically examined and refined. Typically the initial

objectives for coaching need to be tested through experience in order to surface where there are gaps with reality. For example, coaching may initially have been seen as a mechanism for driving performance, but would be much better used in addressing engagement issues.

5. Team learning

Internal supervisors may be part of / working with a number of teams, and have a key role to enhance team learning, not least with the pool of internal coaches they work with through 121 and group supervision formats. Themes surfaced in supervision can inform the building of

shared vision, awareness of mental models, personal mastery and systems thinking, making it both a microcosm of and driver for the learning organisation.

The ‘Coach as Supervisor’ programme

So to sum up the discussion so far, we believe that internal supervisors have a vital role to play in building coaching culture and in role-modelling characteristics of a learning organisation. The Coach as Supervisor programme was designed to support individuals in playing these vital roles, and also to reflect the unique contexts of internal supervisors, and so was based on these following principles:

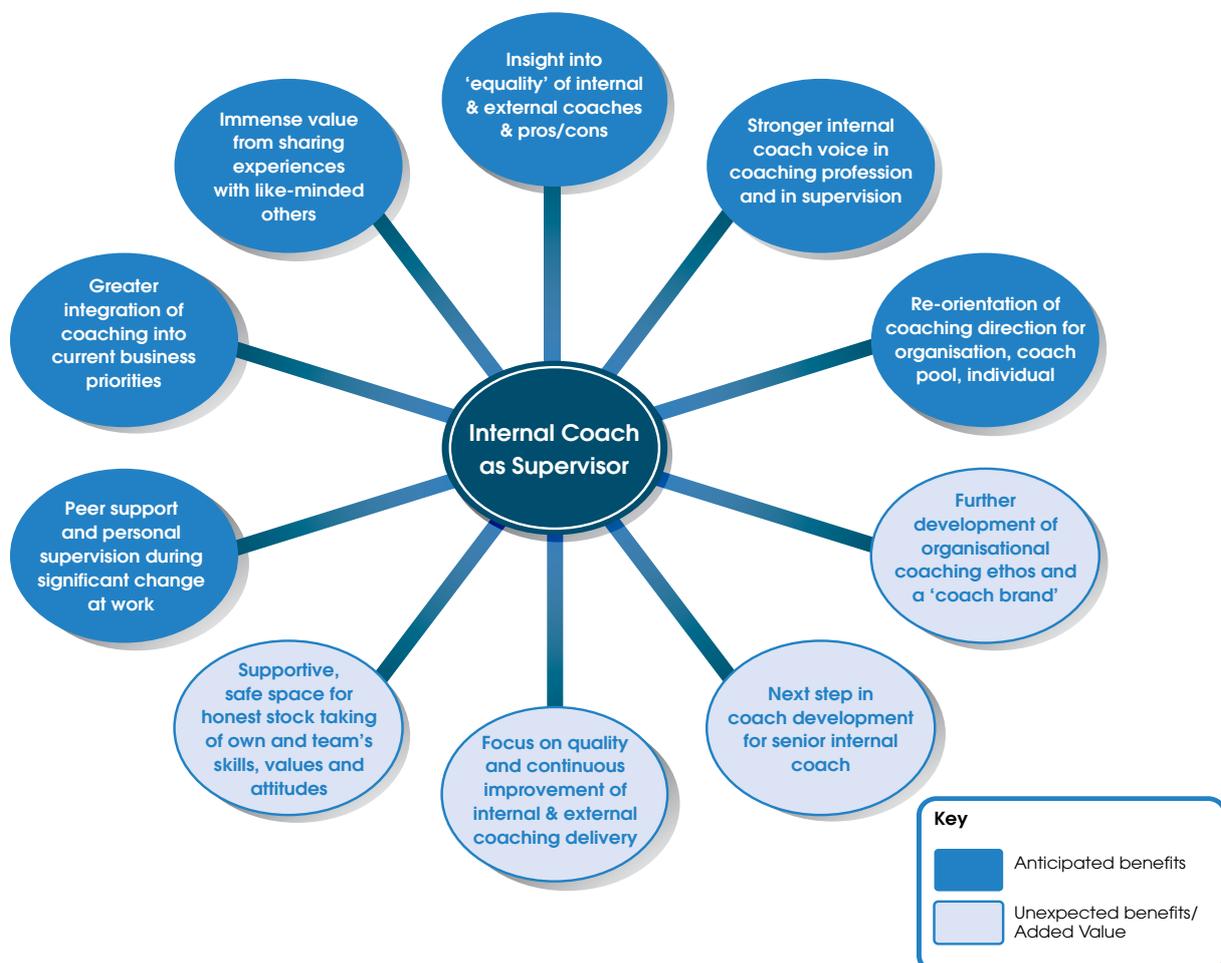


Figure 3. Anticipated and unexpected benefits gained from ‘Coach as Supervisor’ programme (A. Hill)

Building Internal Supervision Capability in Organisations (cont.)

Use of relevant supervision standards

Coaching supervision standards as agreed by professional coaching bodies are still under development, and to date reflect a range of sometimes contradictory stakeholder views (for example in some quarters, there is a belief that supervisors must not only be psychologically trained to a high level but must have received a substantial amount of therapy themselves). We decided to base learning outcomes for the programme on a pragmatic, research-based model, based on a best practice survey commissioned by CIPD (2006). This was selected because of its relevance to our clients and the contexts they operate in, and emphasises competences related to generating organisational learning as well as core practice skills.

As our organisation moves towards a coaching culture, to have the capacity to offer continuous development to our internal coaching pool is a huge benefit and will allow us to provide quality coaching provision to everyone. To add a different dimension to my own coaching practice has been invaluable and will enable me to ensure that our internal coaching provision meets the standards we expect.

Angela Mappin, Learning and Development Advisor, B Braun Medical UK

Building 'good enough' supervision skills

The aim of the programme is to develop a good enough understanding of current coaching supervision theory and practice, and the confidence to use these skills in practice, so emphasises development of 'practitioners in the field', in contrast to 'expert academics'. We designed it as a solid foundational platform (100 hrs of study and practice based on The OCM's blended learning values) which would equip an internal supervisor to work with

systems perspectives, apply psychological mindedness and awareness of unconscious processes within relationships and systems, be able to deliver a range of supervision formats and work creatively with alternative approaches to awareness raising and problem solving.



Encouraging an organisational as well as individual focus

The advantage of our first cohort being on an open programme was the learning generated between candidates from different organisations – all at slightly different stages of developing coaching culture. This reinforced the strategic and organisational emphasis to the programme and enabled sharing of best practice from different contexts. As part of their evidence portfolio, each candidate is required to write (whether collaboratively or in consultation with their colleagues) a 'Supervision Practice Statement' which outlines the strategy for supervision within their organisation, and which will have real world value beyond the completion of their programme.

Finally, the programme has added valuable learning to The OCM, which we hope will help us to continually find new and effective ways of partnering with client organisations to help them to harness the transformative power of coaching and mentoring to achieve their vision and purpose.

References

Hawkins, P and Schwenk, G. (2006) *Coaching Supervision: Maximising the Potential of Coaching CIPD* <http://www.cipd.co.uk/NR/rdonlyres/5EBC80A0-1279-4301-BFAD-37400BAA4DB4/0/coachsuperv.pdf> (accessed 07.05.12)

Long, K. (2011) *Supervision and the Internal Coach: Findings from an Action Research Project* The OCM Coach and Mentor Journal 2011

Long, K (2011) *The Self in Supervision*, in Bachkirova, T. et al (2011) *Coaching and Mentoring Supervision: Theory and Practice* Maidenhead: Open University Press

Senge, P (1990 reprinted 2006) *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organisation* London: Random House

Katherine Long, Director of Qualifications, The OCM

Contact: katherine@theocm.co.uk



For enrolment details of the Coach as Supervisor programme, [please contact mark@theocm.co.uk](mailto:mark@theocm.co.uk)