Picturing Coach Supervision

An Illustrated Guide to Common Issues and Challenges







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Illustrations by Alysse Asilo

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Unless otherwise indicated, all the characters in this book are fictitious. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

Introduction

Welcome to Picturing Coach Supervision!

I'm delighted to have you here.

There are many books on coaching supervision and exponentially more on coaching so this book does not set out to explain how supervision is done, the theories behind it, or even the core models.

My aim in putting this book together was simply to help convey, in an easy to understand and consume manner, what coaching supervision aims to achieve.

The more I thought about how to do this, the more I felt that focusing on what issues coaches face would be the best and most useful approach.

After all, that's what coaching supervision is about!

It's about the coach and what they face as a result of the work they do.

It's about their emotions, their skills, the relationships they form with clients, the contexts they work in, their hopes and fears, and the professional sector they are a part of.

Supervision is about helping a coach be happy, effective and ethical.

And so this book shares 50 typical themes we come across in supervision. It doesn't set out to be all encompassing and you will undoubtedly spot themes that are missing - indeed, my own blind spots (Theme 19) are sure to be evident here!

But whether you are a coach wondering whether to get a coaching supervisor, an experienced coach thinking of training as a supervisor or a coaching supervisor looking for a simple way to convey what you do for a coach, I hope this book helps.

I'd like to express my thanks to Alysse Asilo, the illustrator of the book who has done such a marvelous job capturing the themes in such witty and fun images.

And finally, to you the coach and the supervisor, I acknowledge you and the amazing work you do day in and day out. I hope this book helps in some small way.

Nick Bolton
London 2021

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PART 01

Ethical Practice & Standards



01

“Am I Following the Rules?”

Many coaches, particularly newer coaches, can get caught in a maelstrom of anxiety over whether they are following the “the rules”. They are so determined to “not get it wrong” that they lose sight of the coaching relationship and of their own authenticity. There’s no doubt that there is a balance to be struck between coaching “rules” and competencies and just “being yourself”.

Coaching supervision supports coaches to embody coaching from a place of authenticity, clarity and creative playfulness.



02

“Facing an Ethical Dilemma”

Coaching can throw up multiple ethical dilemmas that have no easy answers. Whether an issue of confidentiality, a conflict of interests in the workplace, a financial challenge within a private contract or any number of other things, there are times a coach has to come to a decision in which no path is clearly the right one.

Coaching supervision helps coaches figure out the way forward, communicate it effectively and, just as importantly, find peace of mind with their decision.



03

“Uh oh! Is This Therapy?”

The lines between coaching and forms of therapy seem to be increasingly unclear. Coaching psychology has brought a profound depth to coaching but it has also brought with it a growing question of where the boundaries lie between disciplines. Sometimes it’s clear and other times there’s almost an intuitive sense as a coach that you’ve strayed over a line.

Coaching supervision enables coaches to make sense of the distinction between coaching and therapy and to discern when they have crossed that line.

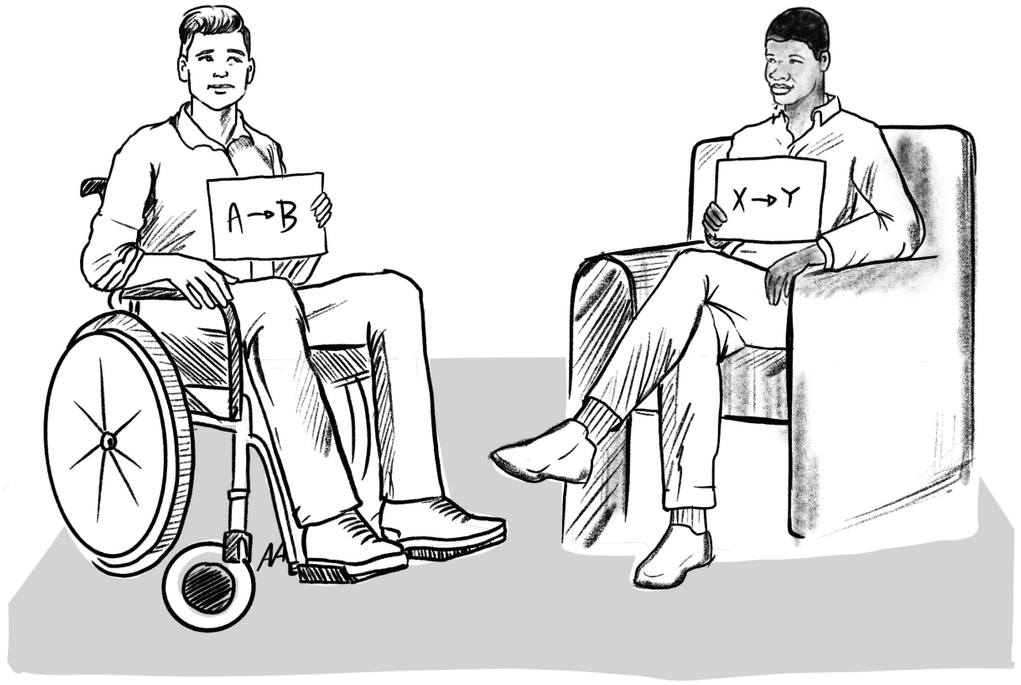


04

“Colluding with the Client”

Perhaps more common than we might like to admit, a coach can knowingly, or unknowingly, collude with a client against an organisation or individual. Whilst this seems explicitly unethical, the attraction of collusion can be very powerful as a relationship evokes a desire to join forces against a common foe.

Coaching supervision challenges the coach to notice, name and question their behaviour and come to better decisions about how to act.



05

“Contracting Gone Wrong”

In supervision we notice that many problems start with the contract. The coach thinks the journey is from “A to B”, the client is pretty sure they’re going from “X to Y”. They have a contracting issue and the coach needs to get clear on what their client wants both at the start of the coaching and all the way through.

Coaching supervision helps coaches explore and improve their contracting - the foundation of all great coaching relationships.



06

“Diagnosing the Client”

The moment we start diagnosing, we stop coaching. Diagnosis ends the journey of discovery as we label a behaviour. We limit the client’s choices, sense-making and interpretation as well as our own and become stuck in a one-way road towards a fixed idea of what’s going on.

Coaching supervision enables coaches to spot the times they diagnose and label and helps loosen the drivers behind this.



07

“The Advice Giver”

It’s human to have ideas and to think you have a solution but the art of coaching is in holding our own ideas loosely and allowing the client to work out what’s going on. When you think you know the solution, it can be so tempting to give it but we often then find we got it wrong!

Coaching supervision helps coaches see how they are falling into the advice trap and helps them step back into a true coaching mindset for their clients.



08

“Unconscious Bias”

It can be easy to assume that people see and experience the world as we do. Coaches are no more immune to this than anyone else and a glimpse at a coach’s client roster will often show a natural bias towards certain client types and assumptions about the world.

Supervision can help coaches notice the extent to which unconscious biases and worldviews shape their client group, working method, assumptions and values.

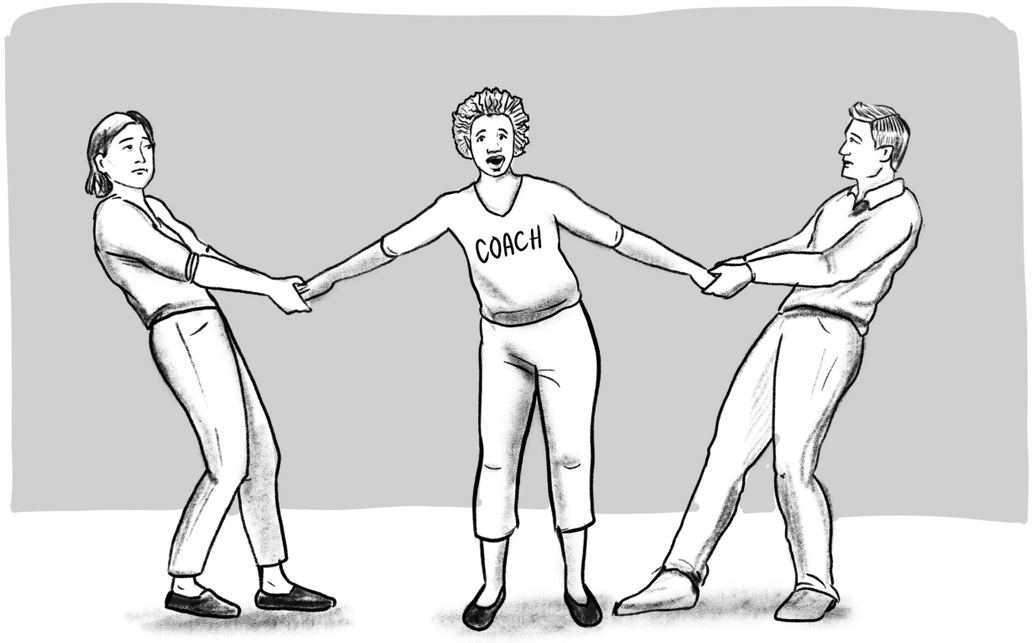


09

“Blurred Boundaries”

The relationship between a coach and client is not always clear. In organisations, they may be colleagues or line reports and power dynamics around career progress might be at play. They may develop a friendship or have other social connections. They might even find themselves attracted to one another and find the relationship becoming more than coaching.

Supervision helps explore the risks of blurred boundaries to ensure roles are clear and the coach is aware of the ethical dilemmas and choices they are facing.



10

“Conflict of Interest”

Coaches working in organisational settings can often face conflicting needs from different stakeholders, leaving them struggling to manage their response. The sponsor of the coaching may wish to have feedback on progress that is outside the scope of confidentiality yet wield, knowingly or unknowingly, the power of contract extension that leads the coach to feel under pressure. Likewise, leaders, managers, colleagues, HR departments and others might present multiple conflicts of interest.

Supervision helps the coach manage these demands and come to clear decisions.



11

“Coaching in Isolation”

Coaching as a one-to-one activity can easily lead to the coach and client locked in a bubble with both paying insufficient attention to the needs and roles of key stakeholders - the coaching proceeds as if in isolation.

Supervisors help coaches bring attention to the whole system and metaphorically introduce the stakeholders into the room.



12

“Ghosts and Stakeholders”

A counterpoint to Theme 11 is the unspoken presence of the other stakeholders in the room. Robin Shohet, a founding figure of supervision, refers to the Ghosts and Stakeholders in the room which can include not just those involved actively in the supervision but anyone whose energy and implicit presence is affecting the coaching - this might include previous role holders, former partners, previous coaches and many, many more.

Supervision helps the coach notice how the expectations and influence of stakeholders is impacting the coaching.



13

“The Coaching Shadow”

Beneath the surface of the coaching conversation, multiple shadows are at play. The shadow of the coach and the shadow of the client as well as the shadow of the system the coaching is taking place within. Much has been written about the shadow in psychology but, simply put, it is the unacknowledged parts of ourselves that are finding expression through the coaching conversation, behaviour and ways of being.

Supervision helps the coach acknowledge their own shadow as well as explore what other aspects of shadow are showing up in the work from the client and wider system.



14

“Shame and Fear”

Shame, fear and embarrassment can be strong forces within coaching. Research has shown that coaches often fail to bring their most pressing concerns to supervision due to these emotions, preferring instead to play it safe with “easier” topics.

Supervision seeks to find what’s not being talked about as well as what is and help coaches deal with the deeper emotions and anxieties within their work.

PART 02

Coaching Skills



15

“Keeping It Simple”

Sometimes coaches have so many tools, models and approaches to hand they forget that it can often be the simple things that work.

Supervision can help coaches focus on what works, what matters and to keep it simple.



16

“When all you have is a hammer”

The flip side of Theme 15 is equally problematic. A coach with a limited palette or a strong attachment to a way of working can begin to treat every client in the same way and fall into the classic trap that when all you have is a hammer, everything becomes a nail.

Supervision can help a coach see when they are limiting their impact through an overattachment to one way of working.

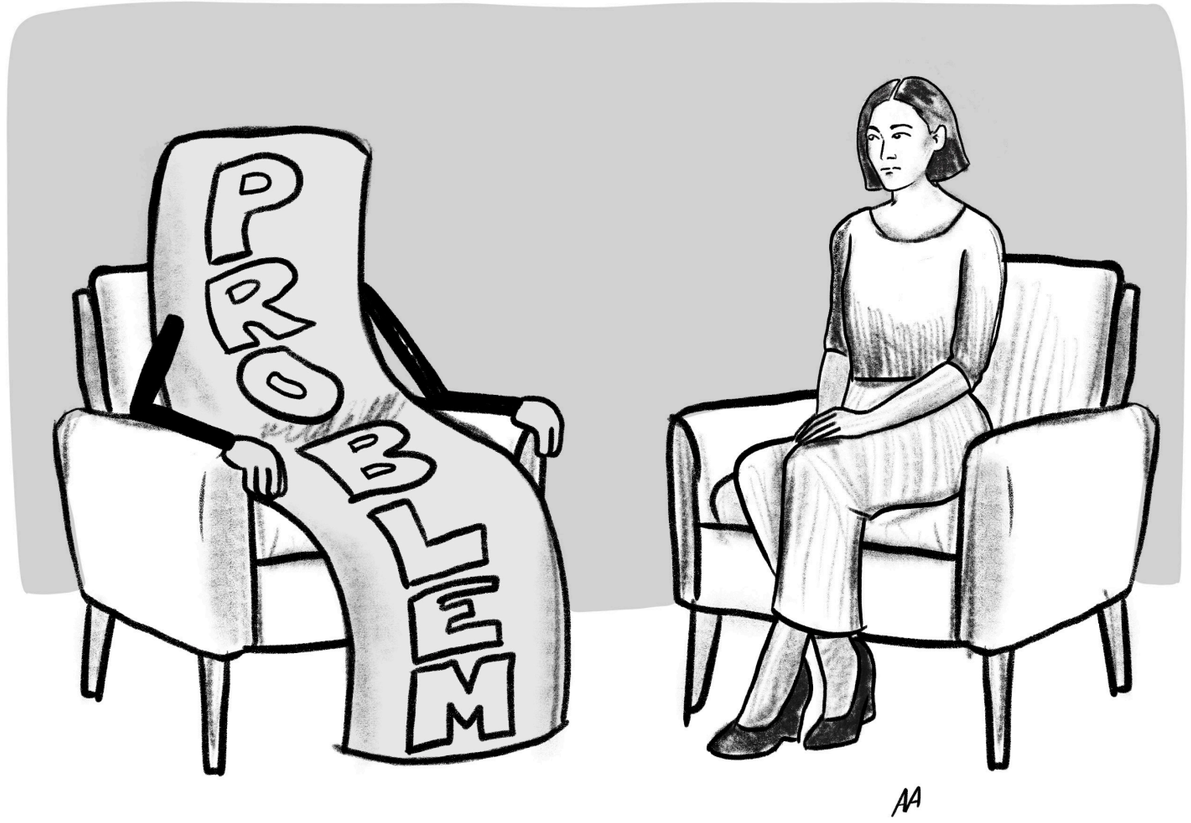


17

“Losing Sight of the Outcome”

It’s all too easy for the coach and client to lose sight of where they’re going leading to directionless conversation and confusion. The lack of direction can be frustrating for both coach and client and ultimately leads to poor outcomes.

Supervisors can help coaches refocus on the outcomes and direction of the coaching.



18

“Trapped in the Problem-Focus”

Coaches can get so focused on the problem that they forget to support the client to see the possible solutions. When both coach and client circle the problem for an extended period of time, progress can slow or halt completely.

Supervision can help bring the client, their desire and their potential back to the fore.



19

“Blind Spots”

Coaches and clients alike only see what they see. The well-known Johari Window model lays out the concept of the blind spot in terms of what others can see but that we can’t. This can be invaluable for coaches as they become locked into a coaching relationship or way of working and can’t see what others are able to.

Supervision helps take the blinkers off and surface the blind spots from which change can emerge.

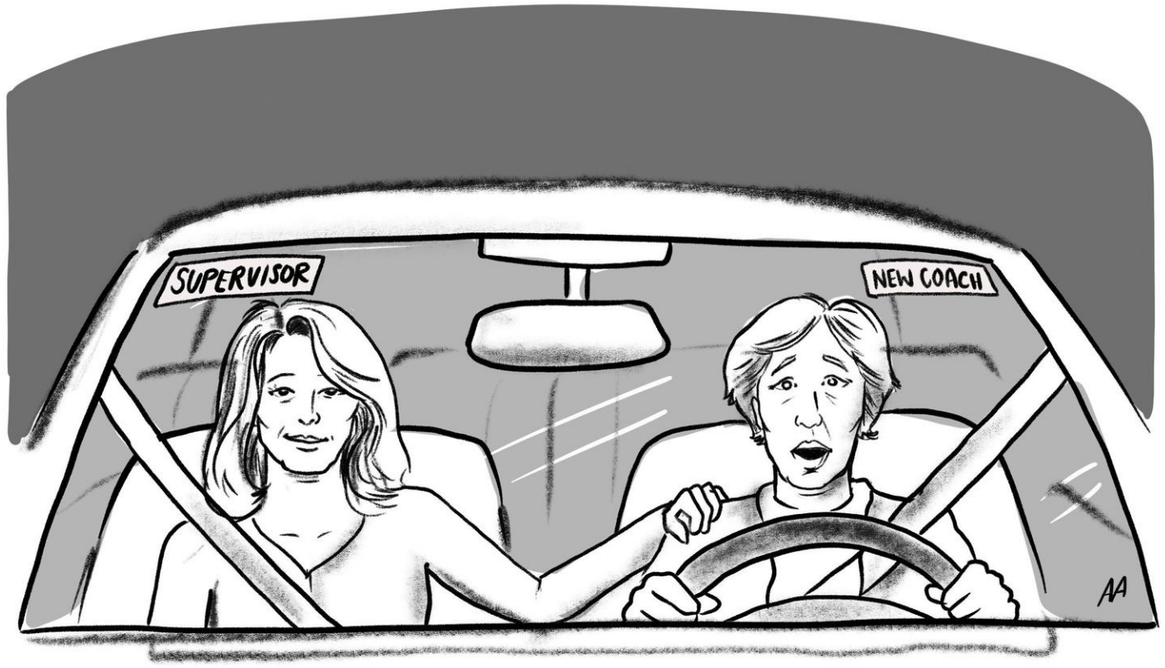


20

“Confusion and Overwhelm”

Coaches can face a lot of information. Clients can easily overwhelm the coach with stories, emotions, data, detail, multiple needs, contradictory goals and much more besides. Quite simply, the coach can feel at a loss where to start or where to go with a client.

Supervision can help the coach cut through the noise and begin to notice what matters most and to make sense of their choices and ways forward.

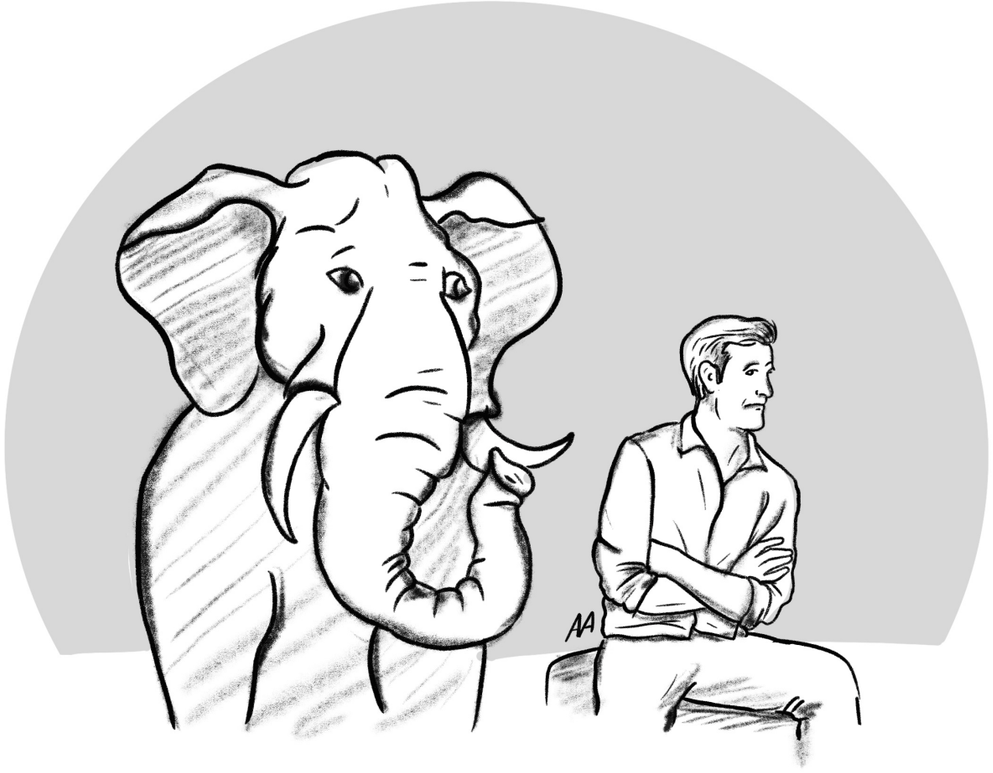


21

“Beginner Coach”

The beginner coach taking the wheel for the first time can feel nervous, inadequate and anxious. They fear they might forget what they learned or that they’ll fall into old habits that undermine the coaching. Yet, sometimes all that is needed is a safe, reassuring hand on the shoulder.

Supervision for beginner coaches can help normalise these feelings whilst providing clear support and guidance to improve their practice.

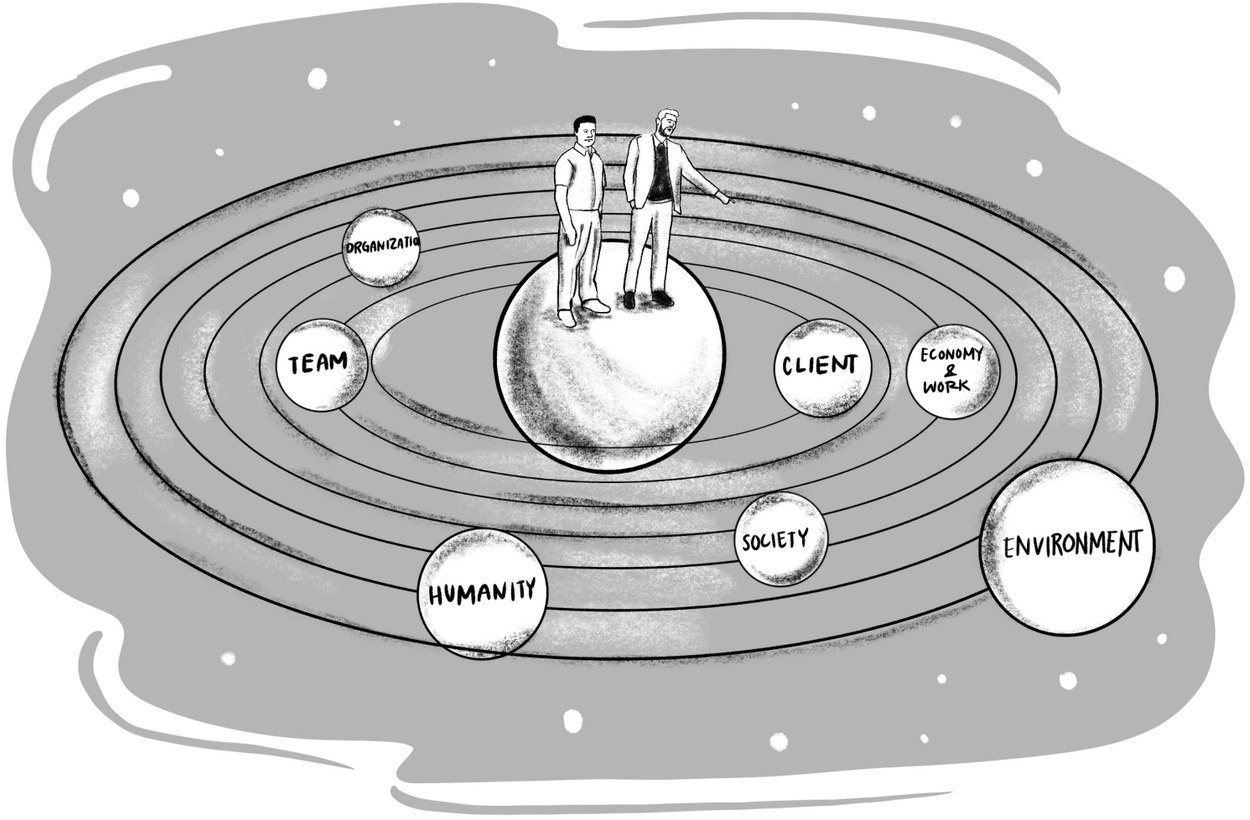


22

“The Elephant in the Room”

So often in coaching, there’s an issue that’s being avoided by both the coach and client. It’s just too uncomfortable.

Supervision can surface unspoken issues that hold the coaching back from achieving its potential.

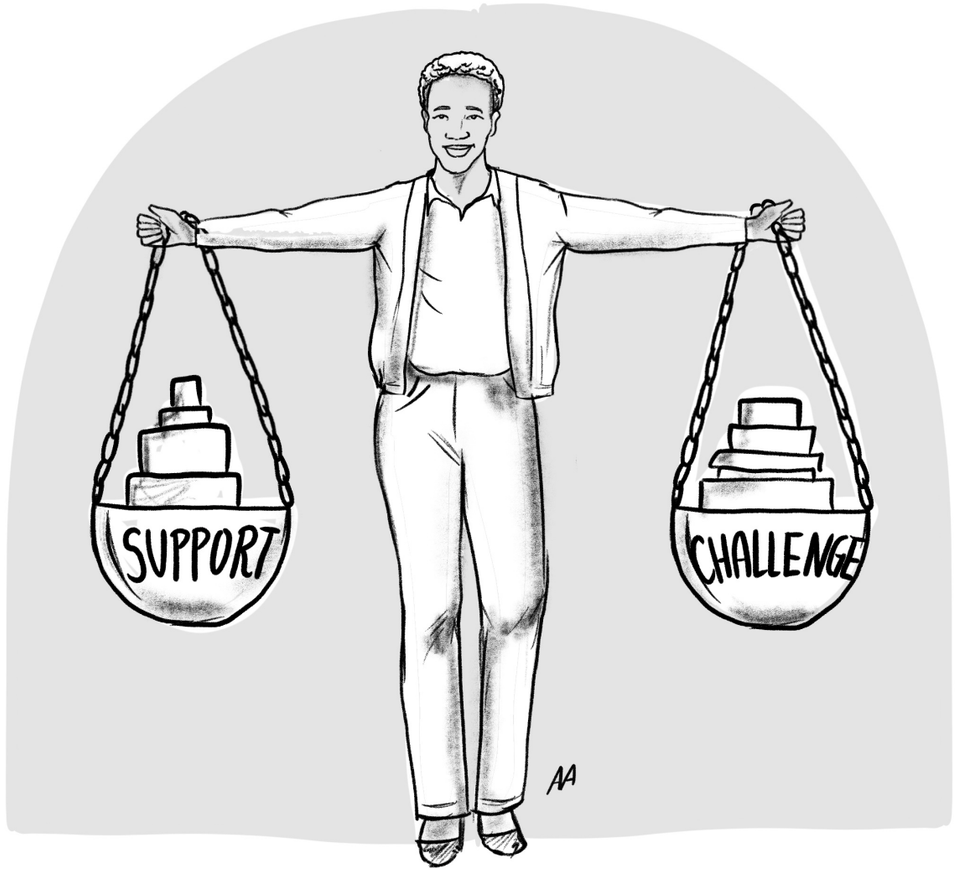


23

“Systemic Thinking”

Coaching increasingly recognises the systemic, interconnected nature of our existence and the forces at play in what feels like an intensely individual experience. Yet it can be all too easy to coach as though the client’s issue exists in a vacuum.

Supervision can bring a systemic lens to draw upon the unseen impact, needs and forces of systems with the coaching work.

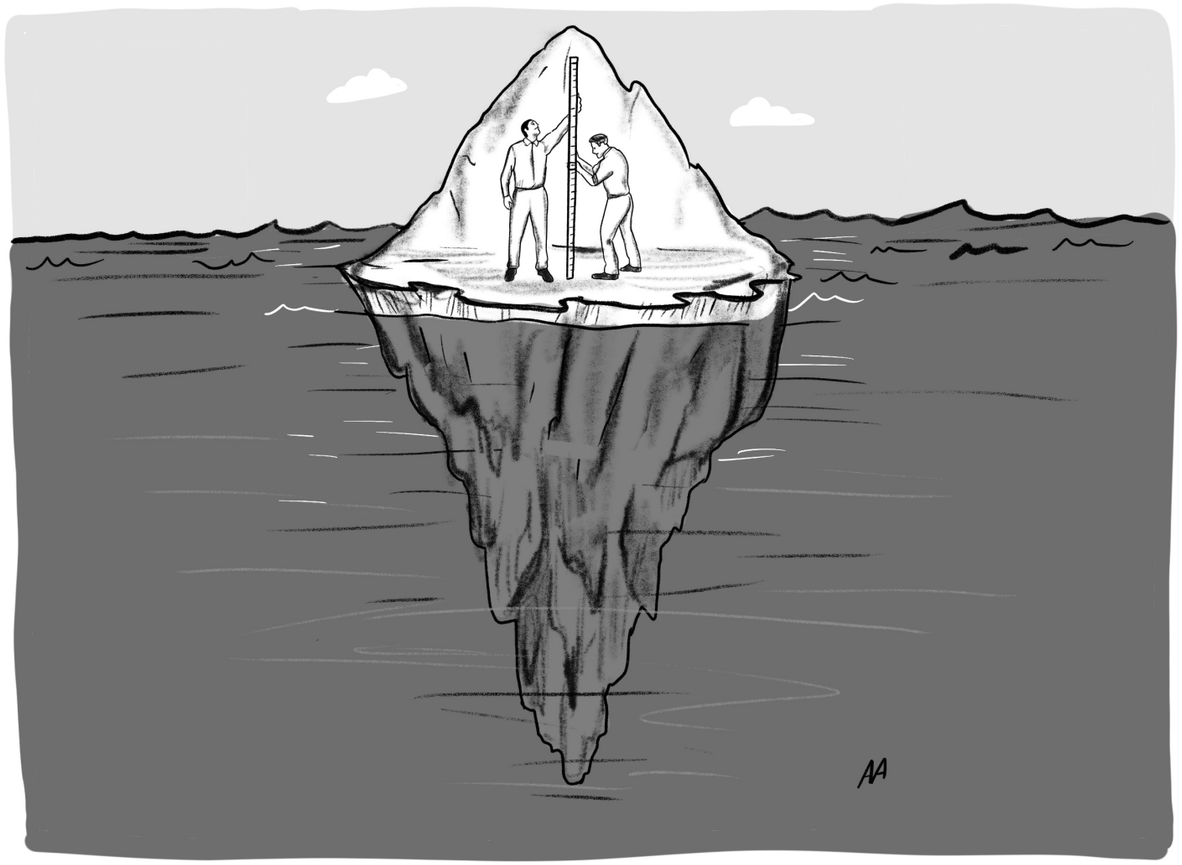


24

“Balancing Support and Challenge”

Coaching can be seen as a balance of support and challenge yet many coaches err on one side or the other. Challenge too strongly and the client can feel cajoled and pressured by the coach’s expectations and assumptions. Support too much without the challenge and the coaching can lack the teeth to create real change.

Supervision helps the coach to notice how they manage these two aspects and to bring a balance to their work.



25

“Looking Beneath the Surface”

Beneath any presenting challenge or issue in coaching is typically a much deeper set of beliefs, assumptions and expectations. Coaches can get caught in working at the surface level only and get frustrated by the lack of progress or change that the coaching creates.

Supervision can help coaches explore what’s not being said or surfaced in coaching to help it become more effective and impactful.

PART 03

The Coaching Relationship & Psychodynamic Forces



26

“What’s the Dance work?”

Every coaching relationship is unique and has its own energy. One might be like a tango and another a waltz. At the heart of this is the interplay of two human beings and all they bring to that space. The impact of the dance, however, can be profound to the coaching making it more or less effective.

Supervision helps coaches look at the quality of their coaching relationships and explore how this is impacting the coaching.

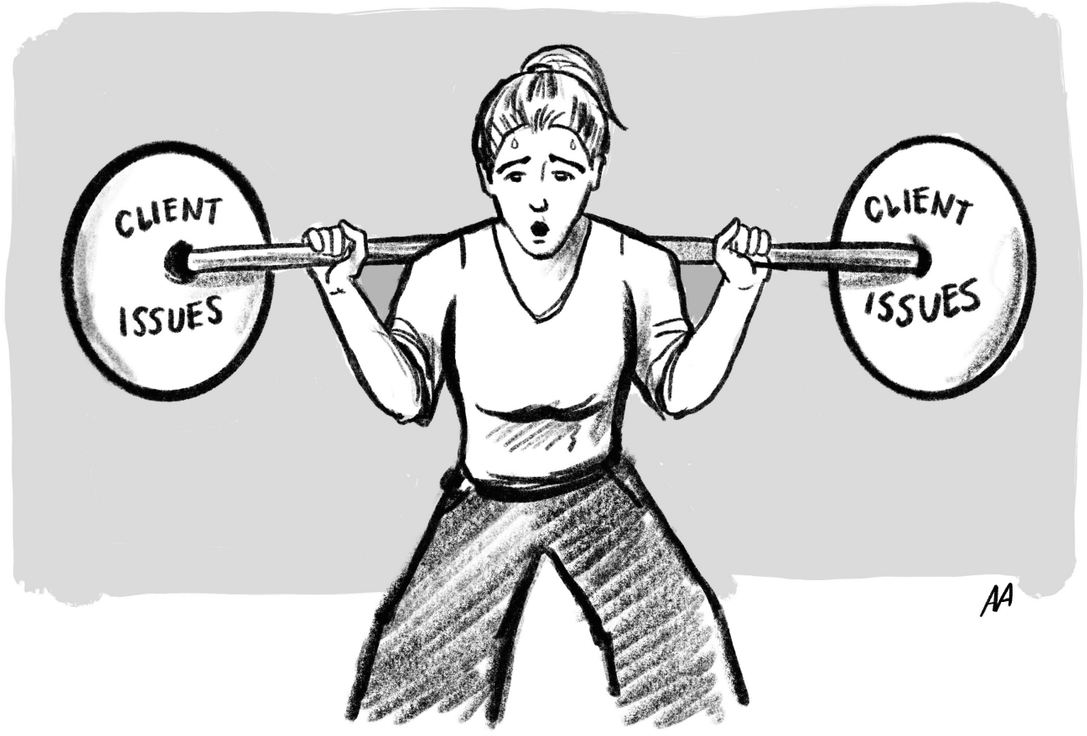


27

"The Value Bringer"

Coaches can feel a real pressure to bring value and to make sure that they measure up to expectations of both the client and themselves. This can lead to the coach doing everything in their power to "bring value" rather than trusting the process for the client to *create* value.

Supervision helps the coach to step back and notice how they are trying too hard and getting in the way of the client's own ability to find the way.



28

“Carrying the Load”

Coaches can absorb the emotions and needs of their clients and over time this can start to weigh on the coach. Coaching can be emotional and deal with very difficult issues that build up over time for the coach leaving them emotionally exhausted or burnt out.

Supervision provides a restorative space to release the emotion and let go of the load.

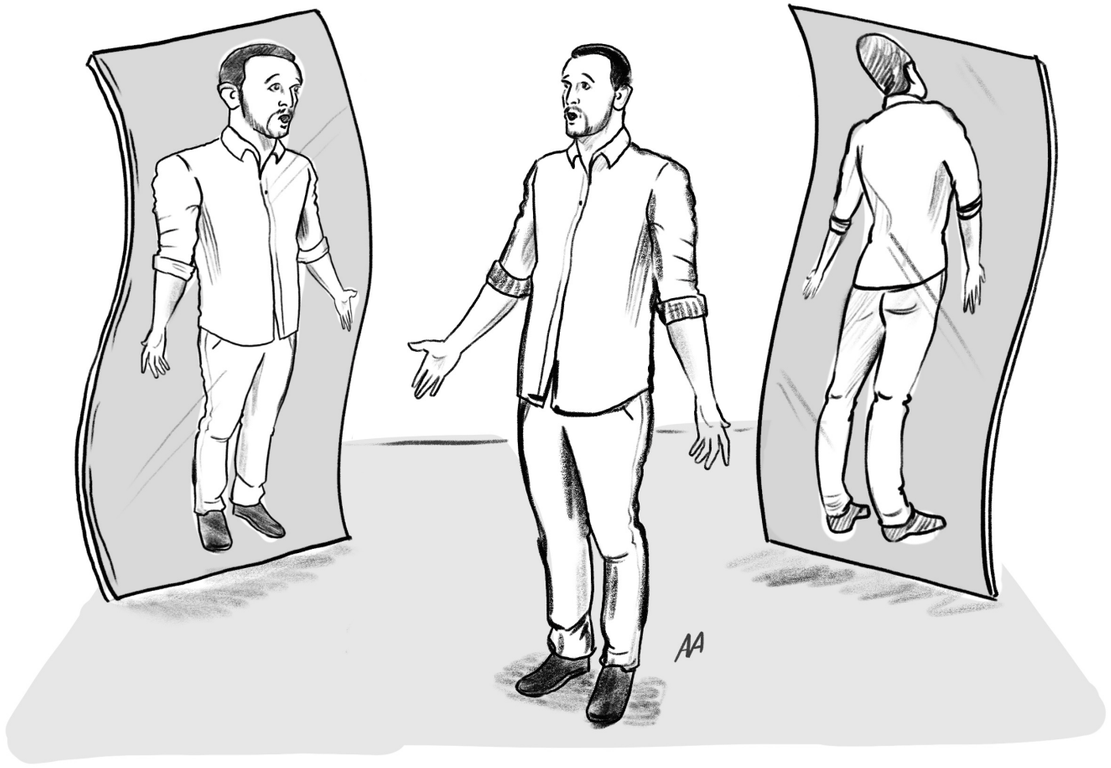


29

“The Knight in Shining Armour”

Being the hero that slays the dragon is tempting and coaches can easily fall into that trap. Coaches can feel they need to be the one to fix the client, resolve this issue, or sort out the problem. After all, they are a skilled helper, right?

Supervision helps coaches spot where they are being the rescuer, the hero, the star and enables them to step back and allow the client back into that position.



30

“Distortions of Self-Image”

Like any human, coaches have their own self image and these can often be distorted and unhelpful. “I’m a poor coach”; “I can’t coach that kind of person!”; “who am I to coach this person?”

Supervisors help coaches look again at who they are and how they see themselves and to come to a more constructive image.



31

"The Impostor Syndrome"

Similar to Theme 30, impostor syndrome is a hugely common issue for many coaches. No matter what their experience or skills they can question who they are to be a coach and so even as they are coaching they are secretly asking themselves. "How can I look confident, capable and as if I know what I'm doing right now so I'm not found out?!"

Supervision can help coaches see they are good enough, have the skills they need to be true to themselves.



32

“Hero Worship”

Coaches are apt to put other coaches on a pedestal. “They seem so much better, they’ve written so many books, they charge so much, they’ve been doing it for years!” This can also happen within the supervision itself such that the supervisor becomes the coaching hero!

Supervision helps the coach see themselves more compassionately and appreciatively recognising that every coach and supervisor is standing on a pedestal that has cracks in it.



33

“Working Too Hard”

Sometimes it can feel that a client is just not that interested in making change. The coach starts to work harder and harder and the client less and less. It can end up with the coaching pulling the client to the change and doing all the work.

Supervision helps coaches see when they are working too hard and need to take a step back to look at the coaching relationship and what the client really wants.



34

“Counter Transference and Deference Threshold”

In an early edition of Hawkins and Smith seminal book on coaching and supervision, Nick Smith wrote a piece on the Deference Threshold. He describes the moment that a coach feels disempowered by the client at some unconscious level and loses their sense of self within the relationship. Their normal poise and confidence evaporates. This is surprisingly common and is typically a form of countertransference - a significant person from our history finding its representation in the coaching.

Supervision helps coaches notice what triggers these moments and to find both the source and the resources to maintain their sense of self.



35

“Transference”

Ever had that feeling your client is responding to you in a way that doesn’t fit who you are? Welcome to transference! Transference happens when a client imposes a significant figure from their personal history into the coaching space and onto you as their coach.

Supervision helps uncover how a coaching relationship is impacted by transference, how to work with it and where change for the client may lie within it.



36

“Parallel Process”

A fascinating and common phenomenon in supervision is the manner in which coaches can unknowingly play out their own clients’ behaviours within the supervision. For instance, a coach with a client that demands all the answers, suddenly finds themselves demanding answers from their supervisor in a way that’s unusual for them.

Supervision helps spot these parallel processes to surface hidden forces at play in the coaching system and to help the coach decide how best to work with them.





37

"Projective Identification"

Coaches sometimes find themselves feeling and behaving in certain ways that don't seem to come from themselves. They become cajoling or angry or meek in a way that really isn't how they normally are. Something feels off. Projective identification is the concept that we can unconsciously take on and act out parts of someone else which that person projects onto us. The illustration here, though extreme in its silliness, makes the point well.

Supervision can help coaches to explore when they find themselves out of character and whether they are somehow taking on an aspect of the client that not been acknowledged.



38

"Games Clients Play"

From a transactional analysis perspective, Games are routines we play out to achieve an unhelpful psychological outcome. In coaching, as with everywhere in life, these games are rife. Clients can adopt games such as the "Yes, but" or "I'll always be late" to unconsciously test out the coach or reinforce their expectations.

Supervision helps unpick these unconscious patterns to create more authentic coaching relationships.



39

"Games Coaches Play"

To complement #29, we have to recognise that coaches have their own Games that lead to their being inauthentic in the coaching relationship. Whether it's feeling like they have to follow rules they don't believe in, or always end up feeling like they failed, these Games can create huge damage to a coach over time.

Supervision helps coaches to recognise their own unconscious patterns and scripts and supports them to change their behaviour and beliefs.

PART 04

Restoration and Wellbeing



40

“Restoration”

Quite simply, sometimes coaches need to get time to come back to themselves. They are worn out, burnt out, worked up and used up!

At such times, supervision provides a space to release, vent, unload, gain perspective, reflect and restore.

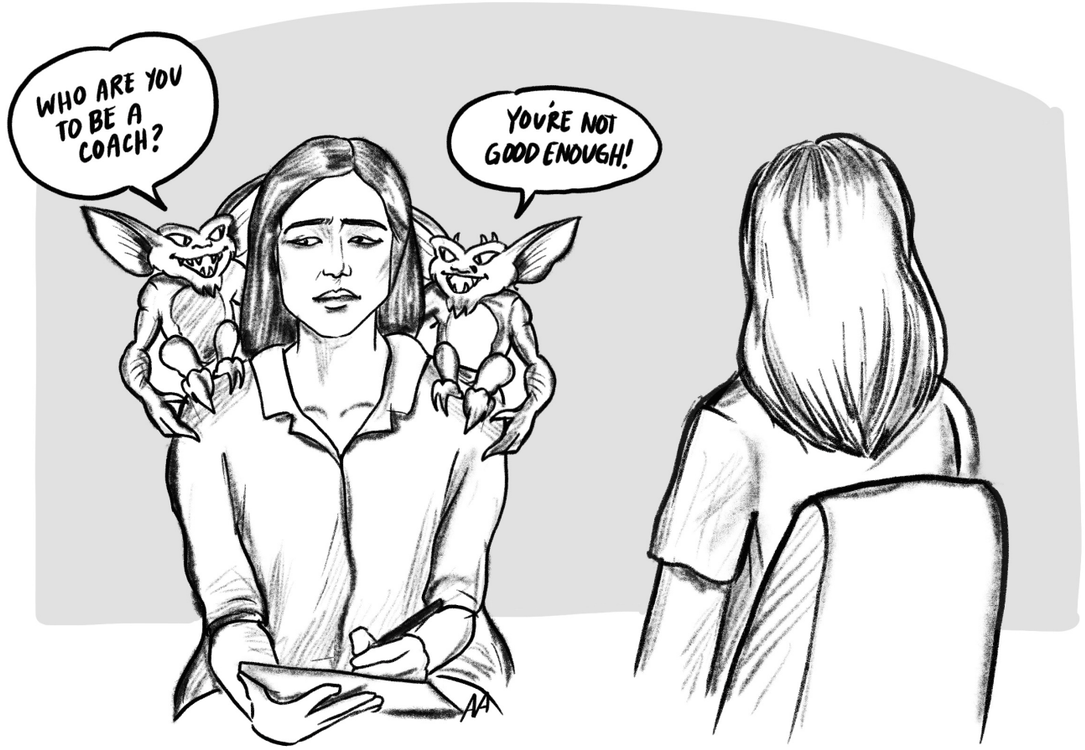


41

“Many Paths”

Coaching never has a clear single path and this reality can leave coaches second guessing themselves, wondering whether what they could have done differently and whether the exploratory path they took was the best one. The idea of “what if?” can haunt them as they think through their coaching conversations.

Supervision allows coaches to make peace with the reality that we can never know what would have happened and that there is no right path but that we can consider the other options to become more choiceful in the future.

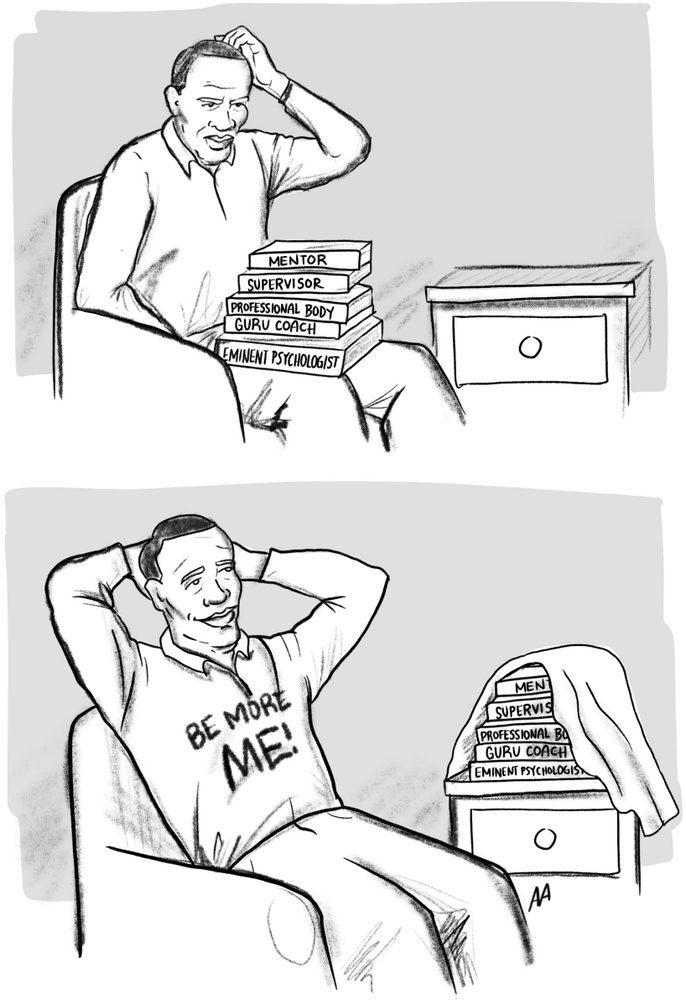


42

"Taming the Gremlins!"

Coaches can be beset by their own internal critic that tells them they're not good enough, not educated enough, not enough full stop. Whether you call that the internal critic, the gremlins or something else, we surely all recognise that voice.

Coaching supervision helps coaches deal with these critical thoughts and support the coach to focus on their strengths and skills.



43

“Be More You!”

Coaches are often swamped with theories, models and schools of thought to the extent they don’t feel authentic or present for their client. They can become anxious of which models to use, which key thinkers matter most, or what approach they should take that will fit a client.

Supervision helps coaches to enjoy these ideas and their learning but to hold it all lightly and ultimately to be more of themselves.



44

“The Multitasker”

Being a coach can mean juggling many things - client work, marketing, administration, personal learning and more. It can be exhausting at times.

Supervision supports coaches to get clear on their current priorities and how they can manage their time more effectively.

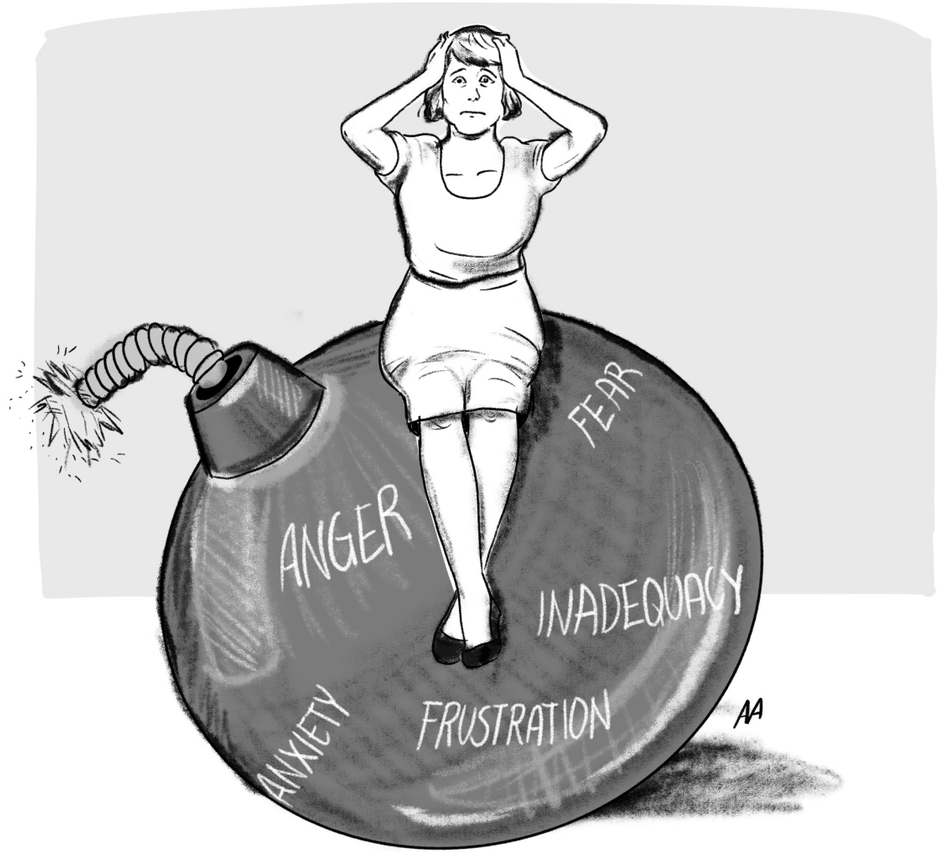


45

“Washing off the mud”

Executive coach, supervisor and author, Erik de Haan, describes supervision as the utility room between a muddy garden and the family home where a coach takes time to clean up and change their emotional and mental state.

Supervision is the space between two worlds that allows the coach to let go of what is sticking to them.



46

“Unexpressed Emotions”

Coaching can bring up a lot of emotion for the coach and over time these can build up. The coach can feel unable to express what they feel either through guilt at feeling those things or simply because they have no place to do so.

Supervision allows the coach the space to release pent up and unexpressed emotions which can lead to burn out and disillusionment.

PART 05

Supporting Coach Success



47

“Finding Superpowers”

Supervision isn’t just about helping coaches with challenges - it’s also about helping them find their strengths and identify what makes them unique.

In short, supervision helps coaches uncover their superpowers!



48

“Celebrating Success”

Coaching can be a lonely profession where success is celebrated alone or not at all. In addition, the coach so often attributes all the success to the client, dismissing their role in the change.

Supervision helps the coach notice and celebrate their successes which then reinforces confidence and competence.



49

“Which Professional Credential?”

“Should I go for the ICF, EMCC, AC, APECS?” Coaches can feel lost when it comes to credentialing - whether they need it or who is the right professional body for them.

Whilst supervisors won’t advise on this directly, supervision helps the coach think through their professional credentials and the choice of professional membership.



50

“Mapping the Future”

Finally, supervision isn’t all about supporting coaches to explore current challenges, issues and opportunities. It also about the future and the life and practice a coach wants to create.

Supervision helps dream, envisage and plan for a bright coaching future.

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An Illustrated Guide to Common Issues and Challenges



Coaching is a joy. Every coach chooses to coach because they love the work and want to make a difference to the lives of others.

Yet coaching also confronts us with challenges that can leave us feeling inadequate, incompetent or unsettled.

That's where coaching supervision comes in.
Coaching supervision helps coaches navigate the complexity that emerges in practice and supports them to be happy, effective and ethical in their work.

This book sets out to explain what coaching supervision aims to achieve, why it matters and what gets talked about!

About the Author

Nick Bolton is the founder of Animas Centre for Coaching, an international training school for coaches and coaching supervisors. A coach for over 20 years and a supervisor for over 10, Nick has worked with thousands of coaches at every stage of their journey and seen the challenges they face, both practical and emotional, along the way.