Coaching, Mentoring and Organizational Consultancy: Supervision and Development

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Coaching, Mentoring and Organizational Consultancy: Supervision and Development is quite a mouthful, and triggered two questions in my mind. Firstly, ‘Why?’ That is, ‘Why all these topics and why together?’ Secondly, ‘Why is this book about more than supervision?’ or, ‘Why am I reading this and not Supervision in the Helping Professions (Hawkins & Shohet, 2007). Unfortunately, the book cover didn’t seem to tell me. Thankfully, the authors explain in their preface. In brief, the three professional activities can be bound by a process that is common in its core principles: this process is expounded in Part I of the book. The respective practitioners can (and should) follow an approach to development which includes supervision, which itself follows similar core principles: the approach to supervision is explained in Part II. And finally, there is a set of competencies, capabilities and capacities that is common to all three practices and to their supervision: Part III. As I read the book, I came to appreciate that the sum was greater than its parts, and that putting all these discussions together created a degree of coherence that would otherwise be lost. This is a complex brew that would perhaps be difficult to get across satisfactorily on a book cover. Maybe it would even put some readers off, which would be a pity.

The authors call the underlying model ‘systemic transformational coaching’. This model, they argue, supports and feeds coaching, mentoring, and organizational consultancy and is based on their own very clearly articulated humanistic constructivist values:

‘We believe that all the practices we explore in this book are part of a unitary craft of enabling adult learning and development in real time connected to the challenges of work.’ (p. 3)

The emphasis on development and transformation is clearly set out in Chapters 1 and 2, which place the approach in the context of the authors’ interpretation of the field, more particularly in the context of other definitions of coaching. The assumption of an organizational context is established and the CLEAR model outlined (Contract – Listen – Explore – Action – Review). Setting the tone for the rest of the book, these chapters demonstrate a careful consideration of relevant thinking in the field and a willingness on the part of the authors to set their own model against those of others.

Acronyms are popular and somehow present something tangible. What is presented here is much more than an apposite acronym, though, and there seems to be much more to be drawn from the authors’ choice of description for their approach:
‘We have adopted the term ‘systemic transformational coaching’ to distinguish our approach from those that focused on either skill or awareness or insight as the primary goals for progress.’ (p. 28)

This transformation is achieved through working with the system in which the client plays a part, joining with that system, but crucially still able to see it from outside. The work embodies a strong emphasis on the understanding of adult learning and development, with an emphasis on achieving change ‘in the room’.

The body of the book consists of three parts. Part I discusses the three types of practice: coaching, mentoring and organizational consultancy, thus demonstrating a ‘systemic transformational’ approach to each, with an additional chapter on team coaching and one on creating a coaching culture. Part II looks at the development and, especially, the supervision of these practices. It covers principles and the discussion of supervision in general, with specific chapters on the seven-eyed model and group/peer supervision. Part III turns to the skills and capacities common to the practices, and highlights, in a chapter of its own, ‘ethical capacity’.

I left my reading of the chapters in Part I feeling slightly uncertain. There is plenty of excellent discussion and excellent practice. Practitioners of any orientation could surely find stimulation in the models presented and the experience shared by the authors. The exposition is thoughtful and well referenced. It has an openness to other possibilities, yet an assurance of experience. In these respects it goes beyond the level of ‘this-is-my-practice’ practitioner literature and this is very welcome. It would be good for students of any of these disciplines (and I mean students in the widest sense) to refer to these chapters. However, these chapters do not, for me, go far enough into the individual practices to be used as a practice manual in the way that some other, perhaps less complex, coaching books can. It would not be the first port of call for new practitioners. Reading the chapters back-to-back, I also experienced a degree of ‘model fatigue’. The full benefit of these chapters was revealed later.

Part I couches coaches, mentors and consultants as the developers of the system as a whole through the development of the element with which they all have contact: the client. The client in turn is seen as the potential developer of the system. Part II turns the other way and looks at ‘developing the developers of the developers’ (p. 119).

In Chapter 7 the developmental principles are applied to the training and development of coaches, touching on the need for (and nature of) supervision. This discussion links together a deep understanding of learning, of the practices laid out in the first part of the book and of their economic context. It was worth reading Part I as a preamble to this chapter. Chapter 8 brings in supervision: its role, process and issues and Chapter 9 lays out the seven-eyed process model of supervision. No matter how many times I work through this model it always turns up something new. Not least because through any explanation the reader (at least this reader) is constantly checking the model against recent engagements and gaining new insights (Thank you Dr. Hawkins for the supervision session!).
I found Chapter 10 equally stimulating, especially the ‘games people play in group supervision’, for example, ‘Who is the best supervisor?’ (p. 189). Chapter 11 lays out the corollary of supervision in organizational consulting (which the authors term ‘shadow consultancy’) using a systemic approach as elsewhere. This was the part of the book I enjoyed reading most and seems to me to be its core and its purpose.

The discussion of the skills of the practices in Part III was most interesting for how it placed the personal development of the practitioner at the heart of good practice. This is a concept that is touched on in many coaching books, but rarely with the consideration and commitment that comes through in these pages. It is a concept that is dear to educators and one that deserves to be well understood by practitioners and those who seek to develop them. The key quality for the authors is ‘fearless compassion’. The concept of ‘ethical capacity’ was also interesting and the discussion of the limitations of normative ethical positions was again well-argued. These three areas: the nature of personal development; the quality of fearless compassion and enabling ethics, should all be studied by developing practitioners.

The book as a whole is complex. Sometimes I found there was too much to hold onto – too many plates spinning. For example, in Chapter 12, I started to feel lost in the discussion Clynes’ seven ‘sentic states’ which were related to the seven chakras (p. 221), illustrated with examples primarily from classical music and opera, and set within a section on the skills relating to the third stage of the CLEAR model so far as they relate to the capabilities – but not capacities, that’s Chapter 13 – of supervision.) This is its quality and its shadow side: it demands of the reader a level of concentration and willingness to work at their learning in order to fully benefit from the coherence of the three parts of the book. At points we must hold our mind open and wait for the coherence to emerge. But are these not, after all, commitments that a coach might make to their clients? The systemic transformational coach does.

As the discipline of coaching has developed, the early literature has been understandably dominated by ‘star’ practitioners. This literature has done much to popularise and enthuse as well as inform. We now have a full-blown industry on our hands and there is a need for something that goes beyond ‘best practice’. As Tony Grant has done in talking about evidence-base, this book raises the bar in terms of talking about the development of professional practice. It is time for coaching – and publishers of coaching literature – to move on from the elevation of the hero-practitioner and towards a deeper form of enquiry. Through a combination of thoughtful consideration of theory, enormous breadth of practice and considerable insight, the authors do just this.

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