

Coaching at Work

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MY SAFE SPACE

In the second in a series of columns on internal coaching/mentoring, Sara Hope reflects on the support of internal coaches through supervision and mentoring

When I was first introduced to the concept of coaching supervision as an internal coach 10 years ago, my initial response was quiet suspicion. Why did I need someone examining my practice as a coach?

Very quickly, however, I recognised its value to me. I was able to pause, reflect, explore new ways of thinking, enhance my skills and develop new insights.

Exploring my assumptions and beliefs, and the impact of my 'state' in my coaching sessions was an eye-opener. Seeing how my thinking in that moment had informed my interventions and questions, gave me a different perspective about my coaching conversations.

Over the years I have experienced supervision in different formats: one-to-one, peer and group. I have also selected my supervisors based on my evolving needs as both an internal and external coach. Each experience has brought a different perspective and enabled me to develop my own style and authenticity.

As the internal coaching market continues to establish itself, sponsors are increasingly recognising the ethical dilemmas and complexities in an internal coaching relationship. This is where supervision has a critical role to play in supporting professional practice.

How do internal coaching sponsors navigate around the field of supervision? The conversations I have with sponsors when they come to design their approach, highlight some interesting challenges and questions:

- How much coaching do our internal coaches do, and what impact does this have on the supervision provision we provide?
- What support do we need to provide for our colleagues who coach occasionally in their day job?
- What benefit would we gain by developing our own supervision pool internally?
- How do we ensure and maintain confidentiality if we offer group supervision?
- Where do we go to source external coaching supervisors?
- What budget do we have and how can we best use it?

More and more we are noticing a trend towards a blending of supervision approaches, partly driven by the many factors that have an impact on the approach, but always with the overarching aim to ensure the quality of internal coaching provision.

Naturally, cost will play a key part, but internal coaching sponsors have an important part to play too. Their own experiences and understanding of what coaching supervision is and how important it is to the professional practice of an internal coach, is critical.

I remember having a conversation with one of my internal sponsors, and asking for financial support to pay for external supervision. At that time, their understanding about the value of coaching supervision was limited, and the request was turned down. That left me with the choice of investing in it myself or refraining from what I saw as a key component of my professional practice. I went with the former, but many may not.

My supervision

The blended model of internal coaching supervision I've experienced is as follows:

- Highly experienced internal coaches work with a small number of externally resourced supervisors who provide them with one-to-one supervision. This enables individual focus and the opportunity for deep exploration into personal coaching practice.
- Highly experienced internal coaches are trained as supervisors, and provide internal supervision to support line managers and those who coach as part of their day job. In addition, they may offer mentoring conversations to enhance learning.
- Group supervision for those who coach as part of their day job. This may be in the format of action learning, and is a cost-effective approach to development. It also provides the opportunity for



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organisational trends to emerge and for increased peer learning.

- Internal coaches and external coaches participate in a joint group supervision programme. This provides a tremendous opportunity to stretch participants' learning and to establish a wider community of coaching practice.
- Internal coaches across different organisations have 'learning dialogues' together, designed to give them the opportunity to explore their practice and learn from those outside their immediate organisational system.

Your flexible friend

Taking into account the variety of ways internal coaches are being used in organisations, and the breadth of how supervision can be applied, having a flexible approach makes sense.

The careful thought and consideration being given to how organisations use supervision to support internal coaches is encouraging. The benefits I gained were critical to my development as

an internal coach, but there was also a positive impact on my clients, my sponsors and the organisation I was part of. There are many creative ways that supervision conversations can take place, balancing effectiveness and cost, and I would encourage coaching sponsors to explore them.

How mentoring helps

I am increasingly noticing, too, how mentoring is being used as support, particularly in organisations with mature internal coaching models.

Offered in addition to a supervision relationship, mentoring of new internal coaches by those more experienced, can add another dimension to learning. There is something quite powerful about drawing from another's stories and experiences.

Providing space and opportunity for internal coaches in one organisation to mentor their counterparts in other organisations and sectors is also something we work with.

One internal coach who worked with an internal coaching mentor from another organisation says, "I was keen to find an independent mentor who offered a breadth of experience and currency of thought within the coaching and mentoring community. We had co-delivered a number of coaching programmes in the previous year and in doing this, struck up a positive working relationship. With ambitions to be an executive coach myself, I felt I had much to learn from my mentor's experience and journey. I feel this is a 'safe space' where I am able to test out ideas and share concerns, the exploration of which is without agenda."

This demonstrates the power of how a conversation in a safe space helps move us forward.

Reflecting back on how I selected my own supervisors, I notice a common thread I placed upon the importance of the relationship, and how much I valued recommendations from those I respected. While this might not be the 'right' way of selecting, it worked for me. Thankfully now, as the supervision market continues to evolve, the amount of support available to internal coaches is growing too. ■

● **Sara Hope** is director at *The Internal Coach*: sara@theinternalcoach.com

● Contact the Association of Coaching Supervisors at: info@associationofcoachingsupervisors.com