

# Coaching at Work

## “pp44-47 – Stay sharp, stay safe by Clare Norman”

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# Stay sharp stay safe

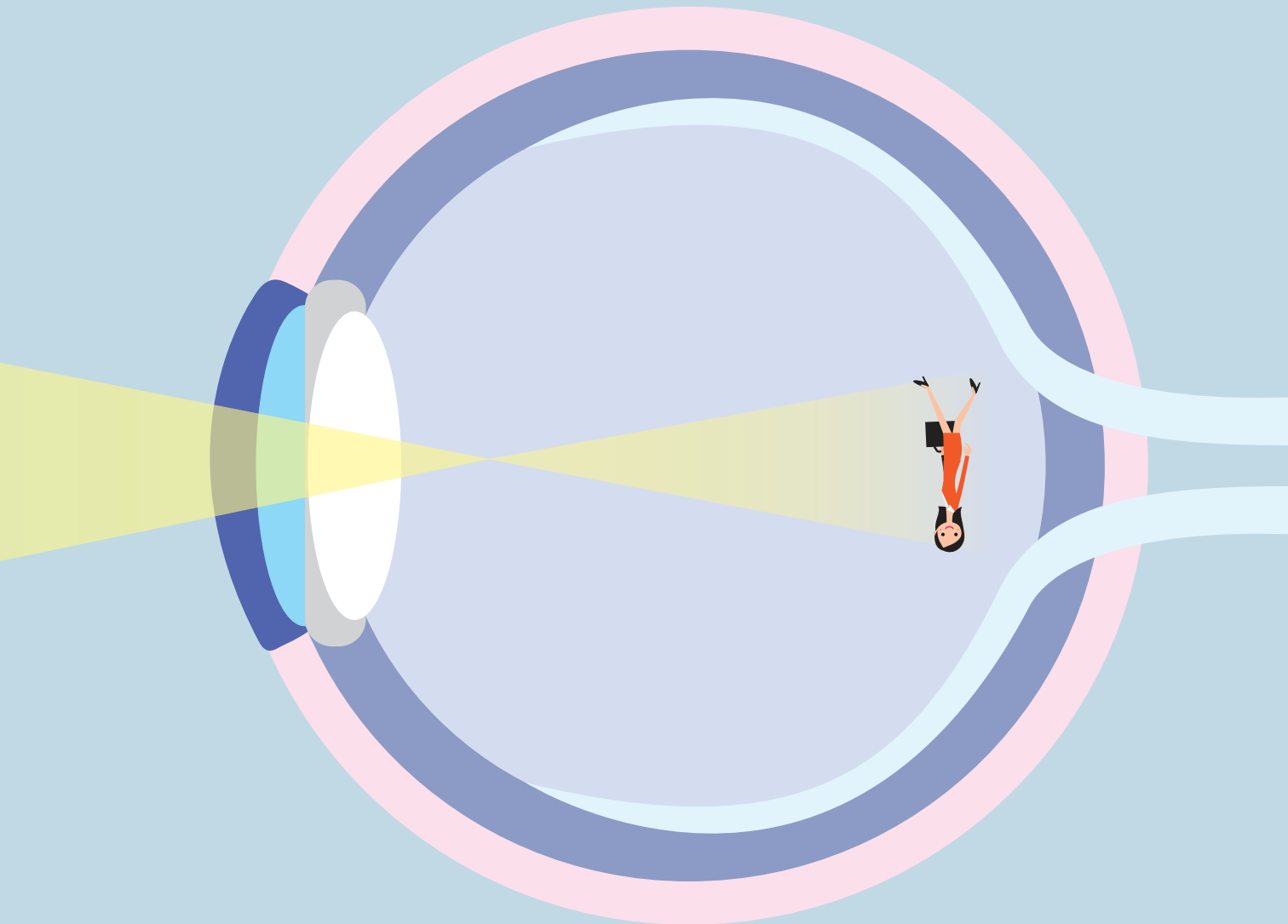
*What motivates coaches to access supervision? Clare Norman interviewed internal and external coaches on why they devote time and money to coach supervision*

**“How dare we [coaches] believe that our clients need a safe thinking space and that we don’t need that for ourselves?”**

So said one of the coaches I interviewed for this article about why coaches invest in supervision, echoing similar comments from others.

Another coach said, “Given that I am the main tool in coaching, shouldn’t I be servicing that tool, to continually get the best performance out of it?”

I am an avid believer in accessing coaching supervision to keep me sharp and safe. I’d like to see more coaches invest in supervision, whether they are internal or external coaches, and no



## Why coaches choose to invest in supervision:

**An ethical accountability to someone else that:**

- Ensures the coach's and client's safety
- Expands the coach's learning edge
- Allows the coach to identify blind and deaf spots
- Enables the coach to reflect on the system within which they are coaching.

matter what kind of coaching they do.

I recognise that I have a vested interest as a coach supervisor myself, and having become a coach supervisor because I care so much about the quality of the coaching profession. However, I wondered what motivates other coaches who get supervision to do so.

I asked a small number of coaches why they devote their time and money to coaching supervision, in the hope that their reasons might influence more coaches to do the same.

The sample size is 17 – all from the UK, six internal and ten external coaches – plus myself, who has been in both camps. I have used a Human-Centred Design approach, which focuses on the needs and desires of the coaches in relation to supervision.

**By Clare Norman**

From the data, I have created two personas, capturing themes that I heard in the interviews, and showing the differing needs and desires of internal and external coaches.

### **THE INTERNAL EXECUTIVE COACH: 'MARGARET'**

*Margaret is in her 40s and based in London. She came to coaching through her work in leadership development. She was looking for ways to get a better return on investment from the training offered to her organisation's leaders, and came across coaching three years ago. She became trained herself and has offered coaching internally since then. Her organisation expects her to participate in group supervision it provides for all practising coaches. She occasionally has one-to-one* ➔

supervision as well. She enjoys the support of her fellow coaches in supervision and believes it is valuable to have protected time out to reflect and develop.

**Margaret’s goals for supervision**

- Being safe as a coach for herself, her client and her organisation
- Being challenged to be the best coach she can be for her clients
- Reflecting on her part in the system and how she can remain neutral despite being an employee
- Reflecting on dual relationships that might need to be treated ethically
- Letting go of issues that are concerning her.

**Margaret’s needs in supervision**

- Exploring boundaries, such as coaching/counselling, junior person coaching senior, how to say no to a potential client, how to end a coaching contract that has been drifting
- Exploring three-way contracting
- Focusing on the client, not the story
- Focusing on her values, views and projections and their impact on her coaching
- Getting unstuck
- Challenging her clients more.

**What success in supervision looks like for Margaret**

- Ideas for a way forward when she was previously stuck
- Having a more complete picture of how and why she responded as she did in the coaching, and who she is as a coach
- Identifying any warning shots – where her intuition is telling her to watch out for something
- Learning from the wide range of issues that others bring to supervision
- Positive impact from supervision over time
- Ability to handle ethical issues of confidentiality and conflicts of interest
- Noticing what she is doing/how she is being that she has not been fully aware of through self-supervision



*“The nature of what we do is sensitive – people are sharing their innermost concerns and fears, which makes them vulnerable, and that makes me vulnerable too”*

- Ability to work through how she feels as an employee when she hears things in coaching going on in her organisation’s culture that are not congruent with her values
- Being part of a group has legitimised her feeling of being a professional.

**THE EXTERNAL EXECUTIVE COACH: ‘JUDY’**

*Judy, based in Surrey and in her 50s, came to coaching because she wanted to work with people in a non-directive way, helping them to be more resourceful, and giving them the time and space to experiment. She trained as a coach 10 years ago, although she was using a coaching style for a number of years before that. Once trained, she started to work with a coaching supervisor. She prefers one-to-one supervision, as she can go deeper into her own being and the complex systems she works in. It’s a bespoke learning journey, specifically tailored to her, and she never knows where it will go – there is no curriculum. She approaches supervision expecting at least one uncomfortable bump in the session.*

**Judy’s goals for supervision**

- Being (not just doing) the best she can be in service of her clients
- Being safe as a coach, checking boundaries, ethics, triggers
- Being stretched to her learning edge; being brave and taking more risks; thinking into new space – co-creating new learning
- Being systemic, holding the individual’s and the organisation’s needs
- Making herself accountable with someone in service of the bigger system
- Looking at her portfolio of clients, to identify her sweet spot, her comfort zone and her learning edge.

**Judy’s needs in supervision**

- Exploring systemic questions about the complexity of who relates to whom and what is ethical in that system
- Discussing ethical dilemmas, such as where she has a dual relationship with a client
- Working with not knowing
- Exploring her fitness to work with clients, such as when she feels unwell

- Exploring theories and how they might inform her coaching
- A place to air her professional ‘dirty laundry’, including any shame she might be experiencing
- Exploring how her values challenge or collude with her clients’ values.

### What success in supervision looks like for Judy

- Confidence to try new ways of working and being
- Having voiced something and it no longer looming so large
- Affirmation that she acted ethically (or not)
- A transformative insight that moves her forward significantly
- Noticing parallel processes, transference, counter-transference
- Positive impact of supervision over time
- Feeling more robust: ‘I’m a better coach, providing better value for my clients and their organisation; I’m more flexible’
- Consideration of her own resources and entanglements
- More attentive to herself, the environment, others, the contract and her relationship with those



- More satisfied in her coaching as she continually learns and grows to provide individualised coaching in every session
- Heightened awareness of ‘man-traps’ in organisational coaching
- More open when contracting with clients, and when facilitating, about not knowing
- More work, as organisations expect coaches to be able to articulate what they learn through supervision.

My sense is that there are more sub-personas, mapping the evolving motivations of supervisees to the length of experience a coach has and the developmental journey they go through – from self-centred, through client-centred, process-centred to process-in-context centred (*Hawkins & Smith, Coaching, Mentoring and Organizational Consultancy, OUP, p136, 2006*) and that more research is needed to break out these personas further.

Internal and external supervisees said they would only stop supervision if they stopped doing this work. “I would never continue as a coach or supervisor without supervision. That would be unethical,” said one.

Having a long-term relationship with a supervisor also gives supervisees the ability to get just-in-time critical incident supervision.


### VULNERABILITY AND SAFETY

Almost all the supervisees asked questions relating to competence and safety. One said, “How can you know you are safe to practise without being held accountable with another person?”

As coaches working with individual clients, we work alone, with no one other than our client seeing what we are doing. While we can self-supervise in the moment and reflect in a journal afterwards, talking it out loud with a supervisor or in group supervision shows up details we were blind to ourselves. As one supervisee said, “We’re only human.” And as another said, “The nature of what we do is sensitive – people are sharing their innermost concerns and fears, which makes them vulnerable, and that makes me vulnerable too.”

In the course of many years of coaching carried out by those interviewed, it appears there were not many instances of ‘crisis supervision’, when the coach was really worried about someone’s mental state, for example. Planned supervision was more the norm, to address ongoing learning and development specific to the coach’s being and their work.

One supervisee wondered out loud, “We all pay for liability insurance each year, in case of need, and yet the insurance companies don’t [yet] hold us accountable to proactively investing in supervision as a preventative measure. I wonder why?”

While my small survey highlighted many potential benefits to be gained by investing in supervision, arguably supervision may not be the only route to getting them. I’d love to hear from coaches who don’t have supervision and manage to achieve these benefits by some other route. 

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