

The reflection process in supervision groupsⁱ

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Vignette: reflection process one

The coach presented a client's great perplexity about how to proceed. The client is founder CEO of a technical company, whose success is founded on innovation. Competition from companies manufacturing in Asia will reduce profitability steadily over the next five years, and he is faced with a dilemma: move manufacturing to a less expensive environment, which will not ensure growth, and will result in over 1000 redundancies locally, or risk persisting with local production in the hope that further innovation will retain their market leading position.

The coach explains the contradictions faced by the client, gets confused and contradicts himself, all the while speaking faster and faster. The group feel confused and powerless, and at the same time greatly burdened with a need to help.

The supervisor asks how what is happening here and now in the group relates to what the coach is presenting, which helps the group members express their helplessness and bewilderment. Some discover that their feelings reflect the coach's feelings of being paralyzed by the scale of the decision, and unable to help his client, which in turn reflect the client's feelings about his responsibilities to his staff.

One member expresses irritation at the coach's apparent panic. The coach comments that he felt angry with himself. Another, an entrepreneur with business failures as well as successes in her past, is attuned to the magnitude of the stakes – 'playing God with people's lives'. She sees how this had paralyzed the coach as it paralyzed the client, and in turn paralyzed the supervision group. Once the feelings of impotence and the fear of power had been explored, the coach was able to re-establish the reflective relationship with his client.

This is a relatively simple example of how the reflection process – sometimes called parallel process – works in a supervision group. The client's feelings that paralyze him are communicated unconsciously to the coach, who then communicates them to the group, including the supervisor. Words are only a small part of the communication: tone, pace and gesture communicate the emotional content of the dilemma. Different members of the group held different parts of the puzzle, according to their own predilections and experiences.

How is it that these competent professionals (all the way up the chain) were temporarily so gripped by these primitive emotions? It is because the strength of the feelings provoked and *unconsciously* communicated are mirrored and amplified in the experience of the hearers – they resonate in the group. All could feel some part of the emotion communicated. Used consciously, this amplification is a unique strength of group supervision. By fully experiencing the problem and then, in response to the supervisor’s enquiry, regaining the capacity to reflect, the group was able to contain the coach’s panic and so the client’s. Group members also learned something about the impact of such apparently normal business decisions, and how to work with them, through the reflection process.

What would have happened if the link between the material and the feelings in the group had not been spotted? We can’t know for certain, but it is likely that members and/ or supervisor would have been left feeling frustrated, with a sense of ‘unfinished business’, and the presenting coach would not so soon have recovered his confidence.

In the example, some members identified with the coach’s frozen state, and some reacted against it. The identification was unconscious, and members responded according to their own normal patterns. In the face of powerlessness, some of us are paralyzed by panic, and some ‘get busy’ – whether or not the activity truly addresses the dilemma which raised the feelings of helplessness. We could present the reactions to the discomfort of helpless feelings on a scale.

‘There’s nothing I can do’ ‘I’m in charge, must act!’
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The dilemma of dependence versus independence is brought sharply into focus in supervision groupsⁱⁱ, as group members work to make sense of their relationship to the supervisor and to the others in the group. This is particularly true in a training situation.

The example illustrates the working of the reflection process, where the emotional dynamics experienced in the work presented are reflected among those present as the work is recounted. This is also sometimes called ‘parallel process’.

Individual supervision is a curious kind of relationship between three people, two of whom never meet but who are connected by their relationships with the coach; the client may not even be aware of the supervisor’s involvement. Even in this relatively simple structure, taking into account the conscious and unconscious parts of the three people involved, client, coach and supervisor, there are twelve possible axes of communicationⁱⁱⁱ. The reflection process operates through the medium of the coach’s relationships with both client and supervisor.

Where the supervision is in a group, the possibilities for communication, conscious and unconscious, increase by a factor for each additional person in the group, and where the work supervised is *with* a team or a group, it multiplies again. It is the extraordinary power of the reflection process that helps us first surface the dynamics, and then, through use of careful reflection on our responses, select the most relevant and develop a hypothesis to guide the coach's next steps.

The reflection process and supervision of groups

Although this sounds highly complicated in theory, the power of reflection process offers an extraordinarily fine degree of focus on the important issues. As each coach presents, the dynamics of the group presented are experienced in the supervision group. As this is articulated, it becomes possible for what was previously unconscious to come into consciousness and be thought about, so that conscious choices can be made about focus and strategies.

The reflection process: beware

When first working with the reflection process, it is not uncommon to be captivated by its remarkable power to illuminate previously unthought of aspects of a situation. Supervisors can easily be seduced into assuming an unwarranted degree of certainty about their interpretations. Beware.

The reflection process needs to be used thoughtfully. The process twists and turns through the psyches of many people on its route to the supervision group; its expression in the supervision group will include distortions arising from the perspectives of each member of the group, including the supervisor^{iv}.

While it sheds strong light on the problem presented, the mirroring is not exact, as the vignette below shows. What it does reflect accurately is the underlying *feeling* that is unable to be thought about, the obstacle to progress.

Vignette: reflection process two

Frank was working with a college English Department, whose Head, Aggie, was very anxious. The department had gone through a very bad patch and pupils were consistently achieving lower grades than they should, based on their previous performance. As the team coaching progressed, Aggie became increasingly agitated and spent a good proportion of her one-to-one sessions asking Frank whether there was something he could do to move things along faster. Frank felt irritated and undermined. The Head Teacher, a calm man who had commissioned the

work, withdrew once it began. 'No wonder, to get away from Aggie!' commented one of the supervision group. Everyone laughed, including Frank and the supervisor.

The supervisor found himself thinking about the laughter, and its contrast with the serious consequences of the team's failures for its pupils. Aggie's distress seemed more understandable. The men in the group had laughed the hardest, and he found himself wondering whether gender was part of the issue. He asked the men what Frank's tale had stirred in them. With some reticence, one spoke of his fear of powerful women, and another agreed.

Frank leaned forward. He spoke of his discomfort working with the mainly female English team, and of his fantasy of running away from Aggie. Thinking out loud, it became clear to Frank that his anger was interfering with his ability to coach Aggie and engage with her concerns. Although her anxiety was annoying, it arose from her frustration. Aggie had gone into teaching out of a sense that she had got her life chances through education, and wanted to 'give something back' to students from poor backgrounds like her own. She had a sense of the urgency of the problem which the rest of the team had not fully 'got'. Frank had not got it either, till now, as he reflected on the long term impact for students of poor results in English. Frank had been over-identified with the team, at the expense of Aggie's genuine concern for the students.

To aid the fluent use of parallel process, the supervisor can encourage a kind of group reverie^v or free association to the material presented. Group members are encouraged to listen quietly to the presenter, paying attention to their internal responses – fantasies, memories and thoughts, and then to choose something to share. Group members' comments have the purpose neither of supporting or criticizing the presenter, but simply of opening up a new angle. Group reverie has some common ground with the Balint method described on page x. The impact of each person sharing their responses without judgement can illuminate previously un-noticed aspects of the case, and, as the group matures, builds a common language and way of working together.

The reflection process affects all supervision groups to some degree, and it is helpful for supervisors to bear it in mind, even where it is not used as a primary tool in supervision. Where ignored, it can disrupt and undermine supervision. To work with it, the supervisor needs training in working with awareness of unconscious dynamics. It will often take some time for a new supervision group to develop skill in working at this level, even if some of the coaches are similarly trained. The reflection process will be at work, but a new group needs to become accustomed to working with each other on the irrational and inexplicable. The

power to illuminate coaching dilemmas of this way of working provides the motivation, but the capacity can only develop through use.

For very anxious groups or for less experienced practitioners, the method has some pitfalls. Using personal reactions in this way requires members to have a personal maturity, and an ability to distinguish between exploration in the service of improving client work (supervision) and of personal growth (therapy). Having had some experience of personal therapy certainly helps members keep the boundaries clear, but it is the supervisor's role to help the group stay within them.

ⁱ Searles H, 1962, *The informational value of the supervisor's emotional experiences*, in Searles H 1965, *Collected papers on schizophrenia and related subjects*, London Hogarth

ⁱⁱ Fuller, V G, (2003), *Supervision in groups*, in Wiener J, Mizen R & Duckham J, *Supervising and being supervised: a practice in search of a theory*, London, Palgrave Macmillan

ⁱⁱⁱ Summarized from: Perry C, 2003, 'Into the labyrinth: a developing approach to supervision', in *Supervising & Being Supervised: a practice in search of a theory*, eds Jan Wiener, Richard Mizen and Jenny Duckham 2003

^{iv} Stimmel B, (1995) *Resistance to awareness of the supervisor's transferences with special reference to the parallel process*, *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 76, 609 1995.

^v Berman, A & Berger M, 2007, *Matrix and reverie in supervision groups*, in *Group Analysis* 40 (2), 236-250.