

# One More Time: What is Supervision?

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What does clinical supervision offer contemporary professional life? MICHAEL CARROLL reviews the changing meanings of supervision over time tracing its history from the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century through its travels and adaptation in different countries and professions. Scharmer's work will be used to suggest that supervision is being challenged to provide a new modern service—creating the emerging professional future. Ways to understand what that means are explored and suggestions are given for how we can begin to create a framework for this kind of supervision.

Clinical Supervision has been around for over a century and in that time has developed substantially. The stages through which it has travelled have been well delineated, but worth revisiting as a background to asking the question, 'One more time: What is supervision?'

## Stage one

In the early days of Freud there is some evidence that small groups gathered to discuss and review each others' client work. Supervision was informal at this stage. Max Eitington is thought to be the first to make supervision a formal requirement for those in their psychoanalytic training in the 1920s.

Alongside its use in psychoanalytic circles, supervision was introduced as a supportive and reflective space for social workers in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century in USA. It is difficult to know if there is a connection between the psychoanalytic use of supervision and its introduction to other professions, or vice versa. Slowly, the practice of supervision was adopted by other helping professions—probation, advice and welfare programmes, employee assistance programmes and teaching (Carroll, 1996).

## Stage two

The second phase of supervision emerged in the 1950s with the introduction of other counselling and psychotherapy orientations in addition to the traditional psychodynamic approach. The type of supervision that emanated from these new developments has been called 'counselling-bound or psychotherapy-bound' models of supervision in that their theory and interventions in supervision were allied to the counselling and psychotherapy orientation they espoused. An observer watching Rogers, Perls or Ellis supervising could be forgiven for wondering what was different from the manner in which they supervised to the way they engaged in counselling.

## Stage three

It was in the 1970s that supervision began to move away from counselling and make a bid for being a more educational process than a counselling one. This was Stage Three in supervision history with the focus moving from the person doing the work to the work itself. As a result social role/developmental frameworks for supervision became popular.

Supervision now became centered on practice, the actual work done with a view to using that work to improve future work. This was a major shift in supervision theory and practice and established a firm divide between counselling and supervision. Supervision was centred on practice unapologetically and unashamedly, and the rightful subject of supervision was whatever impacted on that practice (e.g., the person of the practitioner, the impact of organisations involved, etc).

By the 1970s supervision had been adopted by the counselling psychology fraternity in the US and found its primary home there for the next twenty years. From the US Universities there emerged a wealth of supervision theory, models and research. There is little doubt that the bulk of supervision research has come from, and still comes from the USA and, in particular, from counselling psychology. The emphasis from within counselling psychology on the 'reflective-practitioner' model as the best way to define a counselling psychologist gave supervision its credibility. Supervision was the 'reflection on practice' aspect of the clinical work.

Though supervision had been in Britain before 1980s (in youth work, social services, teaching and probation), in the late 1970s and early 1980s clinical supervision made another journey across the ocean and discovered a British home. It arrived carrying the US models and frameworks through the professions of counselling, counselling psychology and psychotherapy. Going even

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further than in the US, the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy not only adopted the new infant, but made supervision mandatory and a requirement for all its practitioners. No longer an option or a recommendation, BACP was the first counselling organisation to require all its practitioners members to attend supervision for a minimum of 1.5 hours a month. This is still the case.

As in the USA, counselling psychology in Britain saw supervision as an integral part of training and ongoing development and, while stopping short of making it a requirement for those qualified (it is mandatory for those in training), has been forceful in recommending its use and usefulness.

**Wider applications and contexts**

In the past 10 years supervision has annexed further territory. Called, at times, 'Inter-Vision' in mainland Europe, it has become a profession in its own right with supervisors trained in coaching, individual and group supervision and organisational consultancy and is applied across professions e.g., in hospitals, social services and in private organisations. Currently, coaching and coaching psychology is reviewing its stance vis-a-vis supervision. Few coaching conferences pass without supervision at least getting a mention, if not center stage—the latest conference in December 2006 in London introduced its draft copy of *Guidelines for Coaching Psychology Supervision*. However, quite

rightly, coaching psychology is wary of transferring models of supervision pertinent to other professions into the coaching arena. Pampallis Paisley (2006) asks the key question here: 'whether the existing models of supervision are sufficient for the demands of coaching', and answers it with 'both...and'. Coaching supervision can borrow elements and models from supervision as applied to other professions and

there is room to look at coaching as 'a distinctive enough discipline to require a particular frame of supervision and a particular theory to support this'. Perhaps there is a hint here of Stage 4 in the development of clinical supervision—making sense of the learning theory that underpins supervision and allowing for complexity models that combine internal and external, individual and collective. This is an adaptation of Wilber's (2001) *Integral Model*.

Supervision has journeyed further afield and found its way into other countries too. Australia has a growing literature on supervision (McMahon

& Patton, 2002), as has New Zealand (see O'Donoghue, 2006) and these countries have brought new and dynamic ways of thinking about supervision to the supervision table (Carroll, 2002). Supervision has also been adopted by other, seemingly unlikely, professions. The Prison Service in England and Wales is introducing supervision (called IPD—*Individual Professional Development*) for those working in high-risk jobs. A number of Police Services are realizing its importance for those in specific roles such as family liaison officers, and several Human Resource Departments have team supervision as part and parcel of their ongoing development and support.

**What is supervision?**

This potted and all too brief historical overview of supervision provides a platform to revisit an old question 'What is supervision?' Like all 'identity questions' this one is asked within developmental contexts—it is not easy to freeze supervision and capture it in words that last forever. Rather than ask what supervision is, perhaps we should ask: how do we build on what supervision has been in order to provide trainees, professionals and professions with what they need to do their jobs better?



Illustration: Savina Hopkins ~ [www.savinahopkins.com](http://www.savinahopkins.com)

## What is meant by supervision?

At its simplest, supervision is a forum where supervisees review and reflect on their work in order to do it better. Practitioners bring their actual work-practice to another person (individual supervision), or to a group (small group or team supervision), and with their help review what happened in their practice in order to learn from that experience. Ultimately, supervision is for better quality service.

In a relationship of trust and transparency, supervisees talk about their work and through reflection and thoughtfulness learn from it and return to do it differently. Supervision is based on the assumption that reflecting on work provides the basis for learning from that work and doing it more creatively (Bolton, 2001; King and Kitchener, 1994; Moon, 1999). There is no such thing as supervision where work is not reviewed, interviewed, questioned, considered and critically reflected upon. Supervision that is not centred and focused on actual practice and work is simply another form of counselling or psychotherapy.

Ryan (2004) puts it well: '*Supervision*', she writes, '*is an inquiry into practice. It is a compassionate appreciative inquiry... In supervision we re-write the stories of our own practice... supervision interrupts practice. It wakes us up to what we are doing. When we are alive to what we are doing we wake up to what is, instead of falling asleep in the comfort stories of our clinical routines.*' (p. 44).

Supervision is a form of experiential learning. Supervision is reflection-on-action, or indeed, reflection-in-action to result in reflection-for-action. In the present we consider the past to influence the future.

Lane and Corrie (2006) summarise what they see as the benefits of supervision for counselling psychologists. In my view, one or more or all of these benefits are true equally for all supervision:

- it offers protection to clients (cases are reviewed);
- it offers reflective space to practitioners (so insights for improvement);
- it helps practitioners identify their strengths and weaknesses;
- it helps learning from peers

- it offers the opportunity to keep up to date with professional developments. (p. 19)

I would add some further benefits to the above:

- it alerts practitioners to ethical and professional issues in their work and creates ethical watchfulness;
- it provides a forum to consider and hold the tensions that emerge from the needs of various stakeholders in supervisee's work (the organisation, the client/s the profession);
- it allows practitioners to measure the impact of their work on their lives and identify their personal reactions to their professional work;
- it offers a 'third-person' perspective (feedback) from the supervisor who is not part of the client system;
- it is ultimately for the welfare and better service to the client;
- it creates a forum of accountability for those to whom the practitioner is accountable (organisation, clients, profession etc);
- it updates workers to the best in innovation, insights and research in their chosen areas of work.

Lane and Corrie (2006) quite rightly point out that effective supervision should lead automatically to communities of practice (action-learning groups of individuals working together to help each other provide better services). In such communities of practice the development of excellent work becomes the project for all the members who use the community as a forum for reflection. Team supervision and small group supervision can become learning communities and networks of learning for the development of the work (Wenger, 1998).

## Learning from the past

Our usual way of preparing ourselves to return to our work more skilled and more engaged is through reflection on the past. We stop our work, we reflect on it, mull it over, and hold it up to the light. We make sense of what happened from a number of perspectives: that of the client, the client in context, the organisation/s involved, various stakeholders, professions and supervisors. In making sense we understand, in understanding we learn, and in learning we do it differently (*'to know and not to act is not*

*to know*'—proverb).

In the conversation we call supervision, which is a 'conversation about a conversation', we make meaning of events and behaviours. The method we use to make meaning and sense is reflection—critical reflection. In opening our minds and hearts we begin to perceive, to see, to understand and to make sense of what has been and, in turn, we hope to learn what to do next. With open minds and open hearts comes open action. The process is clear: the experiential learning cycle becomes the process through which reflection on past work leads to new learning that is integrated into future practice.

Another way to view the Experiential Learning Cycle is the AAR, the *After Action Review*. This learning methodology was devised by the American Military as a way of learning from doing. Garvin (2000) reports on how, before heading back to barracks after a military operation, commanders gathered their troops in small groups of 9–10 soldiers and lead them briefly through the following questions:

- What did we set out to do?
- What happened?
- What went well?
- What went badly?
- What have we learned?
- What will we do differently?

In learning from the past, we sit at the feet of our own experience and allow that experience to speak to us (Zachary, 2000). We are students of the work itself. In being open to the hidden voices, in preparing to listen to what might come, we prepare ourselves for surprises.

However, the trouble with learning from the past is precisely that—that we learn from the past. The positive side is that we learn and do not repeat mistakes; we find new and creative ways of working. The down side of learning from the past is that we repeat it—in just another format. We do what we have always done, we think as we have always thought, and we feel what we have already felt. We continue to do and think and feel that which confirms what we know rather than disconfirms it (Scharmer, 2004). We see what we want to see, we observe what we are prepared to observe. We go in circles of learning

and information. The mental maps, the theories, the filters we bring to our learning do not change. We learn more of the same. This is called reactive thinking. We redefine our judgements and confirm what we know. We stay where we are. At its very worst it results in fundamentalism—the need to maintain the status quo: at its best it adds quality to what we already do.

Reactive learning is governed by downloading habitual ways of thinking, of continuing to see the world within the familiar categories with which we are comfortable. We act to defend our interests. Our actions are re-enactments where we reinforce existing mental models. At best we get better at what we have always done. Many people live their lives and do their work this way. It is secure, it brings some certainty and we are in control. Find your theory and apply it. Learn from within the frame, within the box.

Learning from the past is helpful when the past is a good guide to the future. But it leaves us blind to profound shifts when whole new forces shaping change arise. *'Telling the future by looking at the past assumes that conditions remain constant. This is like driving a car looking in the rear-view mirror'* (Robert Heimlein). In an ever-changing world, a time when decisions are made in permanent white water—how do we sense and actualise new realities prior to their emerging? *'Relying only on what worked yesterday will not help you today; it may even hinder you'* (Handy, 2006).

While reactive learning is undoubtedly learning, and important learning, what would it be like if we could learn from the future rather than from the past? What if we could make imaginative leaps that would propel us out of the present into the future and begin to reflect from there? What if we could sit at the feet of the emerging future rather than the feet of the frozen past? Can we change our teachers from those who would have us review the past to those who would help us discern the future?

### Supervision and the future

Supervision is for the future. It is to enable supervisees from whatever profession or background, to return

to their work more knowledgeable, skilled, insightful and creative, and of more benefit to those with whom they work. Supervision prepares the future.

## *...the experiential learning cycle becomes the process through which reflection on past work leads to new learning that is integrated into future practice.*

It prepares the ethical and professional future, the accountability future, the continual learning future and the excellent practice future. It considers the future of clients, practitioners, organisations or professions. It anticipates what will happen next. How does it do that? How can we be servants of the future?

### Discernment

Many centuries ago the monks in the desert were all too aware of how easy it was to be deceived. They understood the prevalence of self-deception well before Freud thought up the term 'defence mechanisms'. They knew from experience (their own and others) that, in the aloneness and silence of hermitages, to rely only on oneself for decision making about the future was asking for trouble. So they suggested having a spiritual guide, a trusted other (an *'Anam Cara'*, a spiritual director or guide) to ensure that what you were doing and thinking was healthy. It was St. Ignatius, in the Middle Ages, who took this process of working with another and branded it *'discernment'*. Is this an even-earlier version of supervision?

By discernment he meant the ability to *'sense the new and its impact'*—to be open to new signs that indicate a lack of fit between our present models and reality. Using the head, the heart, intuitions and feelings are all part of discernment. Ignatius used the word *'indifferent'* to describe the attitude of being totally open—having inner freedom to go with what the future will ask rather than try to control it through prediction or planning. His questions were incisive: *Are you open to what might be asked from you?*

*Can you be indifferent to what it might be?* He even listed the qualities that were needed to discern openly and honestly—freedom, respect, generosity,

self awareness, critical reflection and dialogue. With these qualities in place there is hope that we can begin the process of creating the emerging future.

### Managing the future

The future fascinates us. With our insatiable desire to know the future comes an alternation between seeing the future as a fatalistic or deterministic given (*que cera, cera*—what will be will be), to viewing it as a series of possibilities over which we have some power.

There are groups of people make their living out of predicting the future: fortune tellers, astrologers, consultants, economists, futurists, sociologists, and so on. They make predictions about what will happen. And are notoriously wrong. A few examples of those who predicted badly include:

- the *New York Times* in 1903 which advised people to forget flying—there was absolutely no way the flying machine suggested would get off the ground.
- a musical expert in 1962 who predicted that the new band called the Beatles would never go anywhere—the days of three boys playing guitars were over.
- the US Census Bureau predicted in the early 1970s that the US birth rate would continue around 3 million a year. Schools that had been rushed into construction to deal with the baby booms of the 50s and 60s were closed down and sold. In 1979 the birth-rate in US began to rise to over 4 million a year. To keep up with the demand, California (which closed schools up to the late 1970s) must build a

classroom every day for the next seven years.

- Alvin Toffler, who wrote *Future Shock*, told us graphically that by the 1990s, with the advance of technology, we would all have two-thirds of our time free.

Gilbert (2006) continues this theme of prediction and examines the flaws in how we imagine our futures. For Gilbert, memory gives access to the past, perception opens up the present and our journey into the future is through imagination. But, he points out vividly, imagination has three shortcomings: it fills in and leaves out without telling us, it projects the present onto the future and it fails to recognise that things will look different once they happen, i.e., bad things will look a lot better.

So, in summary, prediction does not work and imagination—the inbuilt given for helping us create possible futures—has many flaws. Is there any mileage in pursuing supervision as one way of helping us to discern the emerging future?

Twelve years ago, my wife Cathy and I went to Wales and had a moment of ‘collective awakening’. We went on retreat to review our lives and our futures. We had two full-time jobs and lived in London. Is that what we wanted to do? We reflected, we were silent, we waited. We talked, we looked at options, and we drew up the pros and cons. What was being asked from us? On the third day we knew—it was as if a light bulb switched on in our joint head. It was clear. We knew it. We articulated it. We will leave our two full-time jobs within a year and will move from London. Decision made. And within a year both decisions were implemented and looking back from twelve years on it was, and remains, a great decision on our parts. How did we make it? What processes happened to allow us to create that decision. How did we allow the emerging future to emerge for us?

Scharmer (2004) captures something of this process in what he calls *Presencing*—the combination of *presence* and *sensing*. The core capacity needed to access the field of the future is presence. Presence is deep listening, of being open beyond one’s pre-conceptions and historical ways of making sense.

## The ‘Emerging Future’

Combining the ideas of Scharmer (2004) with the Ignatian concept of Discernment and Gilbert’s work on *Imagining the Future* (2006), it is possible to work out a set of stages that supervision could use to define what is being asked from us from our work and practice itself.

### *Stage 1: Suspending – seeing our seeing*

The first stage in discerning futures is the ability to suspend existing judgements and ‘truths’. This seems to involve two sub-stages. In the first we allow ourselves to go into neutral stance and leave aside (for the moment) our judgments, evaluations and ways of making meaning. We sit and we observe without forming conclusions—we stay with the pieces and don’t try to relate to them.

In stopping our habitual way of thinking and judging, in suspending, we then hit the second sub-stage—we notice the mental models and maps that make up our habitual ways of thinking and making sense of reality. We see our seeing. We notice our prejudices, our personal investments, our needs to control, our intentions and from where within us comes motivation.

*In stopping our habitual way of thinking and judging, in suspending...we notice the mental models and maps that make up our habitual ways of thinking and making sense of reality.*

Suspension requires patience and a willingness not to impose pre-established frameworks or mental models on what we are seeing. It is difficult for individuals, and even more so for small groups, to stop evaluating, judging, being critical and allowing their prejudices to cloud their decisions.

We look at how we are perceiving, we articulate our mental models. Schwartz (1991) captures this idea: *‘Its all part of a process of self-reflection: understanding yourself and your biases; identifying what matters to you, and perceiving where to put your attention. It takes persistent work and honesty to penetrate our internal mental defences’* (p.59).

Stage 1 puts us in touch with our own way of thinking and how we make meaning. It allows us to then suspend that way of creating sense of what we perceive. We are ready for Stage 2. Supervisors and supervisees can do this by reviewing how they get ‘locked into’ ways of thinking, theories they espouse and mental maps that result in rigid practice.

### *Stage 2: Redirection—seeing the whole*

Redirection is the second basic gesture in discerning the emerging future. We redirect attention to the sources and begin to think more systemically. In connecting the details and seeing the relationships involved, we allow the system to emerge. Now we develop a new relationship with the problems and the issues. We stay with our feelings, our intuitions, our reactions. But we go deeper. If Stage 1 helps us see how we see and enables us to suspend our seeing, then Stage 2 provides us with a new framework for perceiving.

In redirecting our gaze we are concentrating, we become mindful and see from within the emerging whole. We now talk of gut knowing, mind knowing and heart knowing. We are open to the

new possibilities—what we could create, what might happen. We have larger intentions, we think bigger. We are no longer confined by our ethics of duty or obligation, but by a wider commitment of trust and concern and compassion. We reflect in widening circles.

We are in relationship with self, others, world—the relationship is one of co-creating and not alienation or separation. Perhaps we need silence. We slow down. We see from the bigger picture, from contexts. We think systemically. If perceiving our old mental models is Stage 1, then Stage 2 is constructing a new mental model that

is more systems-based and deeper. In supervision we think bigger, we look for more connections and we try to create more systems.

### **Stage 3: Letting go**

In Stage 3 we surrender, we wait, open heart, open mind, open will. We give up control, security, greed, publicity, compulsions, our competitiveness, our perfectionism, our drivers and our fear. We may have to commit 'small murders' (Zuboff & Maxmin, 2002) where we leave aside our cherished loyalties to an approach, a value, an orientation. This connects to Ignatius' sense of indifference—I am truly not invested in any one outcome, any one way of doing my work, any one theory or framework. I let go. In supervision we try to give up our 'pet' theories that could be prisons rather than freedoms.

### **Stage 4: Letting come**

Having changed our way of seeing and making meaning, we now wait. We are attentive to the moment, to what is emerging. We watch, we notice, we observe, we listen. We grasp. It's there. Don't deny it. Allow it to speak. Say it. We stay with an open heart, an open mind, an open will. In supervision we wait patiently, creatively—we do not need the quick fix or the solution that helps us be less anxious.

### **Stage 5: Capture the vision**

As we begin to envision what seeks to emerge, we also begin to attempt to say it, to capture it in a form of communication that focuses it. Often we struggle to find the words. In the conversation called supervision we begin to find those words that make the difference, the healing conversation that begins the journey from words to actions.

### **Stage 6: Implement it**

And finally we work out the emerging future in a commitment and a plan of implementation. We act to make it work. Supervision ends with *'what will we do differently next time'*.

### **An example**

The following example of Eleanor, a counsellor, will not bring us through all the details of the stages above, but will truncate them to four possible ways of

tackling the issue in supervision.

Eleanor comes to supervision with an 'ethical concern'. A client she has working with has been admitted to hospital with cancer and has asked her to visit him and support him at this difficult time. She thinks this would destroy the therapeutic relationship they have had over the past year. But she is also aware of her wanting to go and visit him as a human and compassionate response to their relationship together.

In the light of the above emerging reality, there could be four ways to tackle this:

1. 'Solving a problem' approach: the supervisor could prescribe or advise. *'In the light of your approach and ethical codes it would seem that best thing to do is not visit him.'* This problem solving approach is based on the past and learning from the past. It simply asks: what is a helpful solution to the present problem in the light of past experience?

2. A second approach would be to create a bigger picture that lets all of us understand the issue from a theoretical and ethical theory perspective. In the 'problem-solving stage' there is no need to understand. Now there is. We make sense of the issue theoretically and act accordingly. Again, Eleanor decides not to visit. In this stance, we move from problem to principle and think systemically about the various stakeholders in the counselling field.

3. In the third approach the supervisor helps Eleanor reflect on the assumptions that lie behind her practice. She reviews what is behind her thinking, articulates the mental models that keep her doing what she does. She takes responsibility for her ethical practice, looks in detail at the relationship and reviews what is being asked of her from within the helping process. Eleanor decides to visit her client in hospital. The third approach is now moving into Scharmer's stages. Eleanor is not getting tied into the past, but is liberating herself to listen carefully to the ethical and human demands of the situation.

4. In the fourth approach, supervisor and supervisee move into openness to the emerging future. They dialogue in an atmosphere of mutual influence and vulnerability, each open to discovering themselves.

The conversation changes both. What new truth will emerge, what new relationships will happen, what new action will result. They know their theory, they suspend judgement, they dialogue together, and they wait for the answer that connects to this client with an approach that is best for him.

Zohar (1997) has a vivid image that can be used to portray these four stances: *'Most transformation programs satisfy themselves with shifting the same old furniture about in the same old room (Level 1). Some seek to throw some of the old furniture away (Level 2). But real transformation occurs when we redesign the room itself (Level 3). Perhaps even blow up the old room (Level 4). It requires that we change the thinking behind our thinking'* (p. vi).

Am I saying one type of supervision is better than another? No, all are needed. What I am saying is that we may have overlooked number four.

### **Summary**

In summary, and adapting the work of Otto Scharmer (2005), there are four types of supervision based on four ways of thinking and learning:

1. *Retro-supervision*: Back to the past supervision. Retro-movement supervision or Fundamentalist supervision is based on the premise that we have found the truth and it is eternal.

2. *Status-quo supervision* stays within a way of working that is helpful. We have a well worked out theory and approach and supervision helps us maintain that approach and be creative within certain parameters.

3. *Reflective Supervision* maintains that we have an approach and we use experience to teach us how to adapt it and be flexible within this approach.

4. *Transformational Supervision* asks us to let go of old ways of individual and collective thinking and behaviour that lead us. We are open to the future and its requests and prepared to go with its demands. We think systemically, we reflect widely, we change ourselves and our ways of seeing as the beginning of working with others.

### **Conclusion**

Supervision, like individuals, has a past, a present and hopefully a future.

Like individuals too, it is alive and changing. We know supervision's past and have reviewed it briefly here. We are aware of the present state of supervision and again have tried to capture it in a summary way. Our challenge has been to imagine our supervisory future. If supervision itself prepares the professional future, can it now accept the challenge not to try to predict that future, but in itself become a method to access and create the waiting future. Perhaps future supervisors will take on the mantle depicted by Buber (2000): *'Then he intervenes no more, but at the same time, he does not let things merely happen. He listens to what is emerging from himself, being in the world, not in order to be supported by it, but in order to bring it to reality as it desires'* (p. 65).

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