



Towards a Model of Clean Supervision

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This article is aimed in large part at readers with some knowledge of Clean Language. I hope will also offer something to those with a more general interest in coaching supervision.

As a coaching supervisor, I have sometimes been conscious of an ambivalence towards what I bring to a supervision session.

On the one hand there is the pleasure taken in simply knowing something about coaching from so many hours of doing it and reflecting, reading and writing about it; and that this knowledge might perhaps be of use to a fellow coach. On the other there is a feeling of humility and even uncertainty; a reluctance to imply that what I bring to the session is somehow of greater value and insight than whatever the tentative, stuck or curious supervisee might bring. And then, of course, there lurks the warm feeling for my vanity that the sharing of my insights may stimulate.

In some ways, the ambivalence simply concerns whether to do or to be - or about how much to do and how much to be. I have found a way of working with this ambivalence through the metaphor of placing myself alongside the supervisee with the invitation to look with them into their practice, in the hope that in the looking they will see something new or rediscover something helpful. In this standing alongside, this getting out of the way, the application of Clean Language offers a powerful way of supervising, of releasing the supervisee's capacity for reflection and indeed for calming the anxious supervisor's soul.

What follows is an attempt to apply Clean Language to the work of coaching supervision. At its simplest, Clean Language questions can be used to gather information and can be integrated usefully with other approaches to coaching and to supervision based on quite different psychological underpinnings (e.g. Arnold 2014). Broadly speaking, weaving Clean Language questions into a dialogue constructed on a pre-existing model of supervision can be described as a top-down approach. I want to consider here how we can instead engage in supervision as a bottom-up modelling process, in keeping with the principle of client self-modelling at the heart of Clean Language facilitation.

Clean Supervision - supervising bottom-up

I believe Clean Supervision is possible because we can say, perhaps a touch provocatively, that supervision is about the supervisee. This is provocative because, at first glance, a method of supervising that places the supervisee's self-modelling at the core of the supervision conversation may seem to sit uncomfortably, or certainly unevenly, with what are generally seen as the functions of supervision: the normative, formative and restorative functions described by Proctor (1986), for example, and the later elaborations of them in slightly different terms by Hawkins and Smith (2006). That a key distinction between coaching and supervising is often said to reside in the supervisor's having a greater regard to the total system within which the coaching - and indeed the supervision - takes place, might

also seem to push away from applying Clean Language and its principles, and from placing the supervisee at the centre of supervision consequent upon employing them. Seeing the ultimate beneficiaries of the coach's interventions as the client, their sponsor and others around them, would also seem to refute a supervisee-centric focus in supervision.

While it is certainly valid to propose such a range of beneficiaries, there is perhaps a paradox here, in that supervision must start with the supervisee and the supervisee's perceptions - otherwise how else can it be coaching supervision? Used in a supervision context, Clean Language is a process of pointing, of directing the supervisee's attention to their perceptions of their coaching experience and to the relationships between the component parts of those perceptions (Lawley 2013). If we are to take a truly systemic approach to supervision, where the function of something is not what it is but its relationships (Bateson 2000), then we have an opportunity to invite the supervisee to model the coaching relationships they have within the total coaching system; in order for those relationships to evolve further into whatever is desirable, possible or needed. In supervision, we can touch one part of the system and then allow the rest to unfold.

And is there a relationship between ...?

From a systemic perspective, the supervisee will have a number of direct relationships which they can be facilitated to self-model through the use of Clean Language questions (fig.1). These relationships are:

- with *themselves* - this concerns how they are when they coach, their state of mind, emotion and motivation, and connects with the notion of "who you are is how you coach" (Murdoch 2010)
- with *their practice* - this concerns the what, the why and the speculative effectiveness of their interventions, the intellectual underpinnings of their practice, their preferred coaching models, the nature of their connection to their chosen models
- with *their client* - this concerns what they notice about their client, how they experience them, the nature of the client's agenda, what impact these have on them and what this awakens for them, whether it be variously troubling or thrilling.

This is itself, and inevitably, a simplified top-down model of the supervisee's relationships through which the total coaching system plays out, indeed through which the total system manifests itself to the supervisee. There will additionally be relationships between these relationships; perhaps most obviously, perceptions from the first relationship will weave into perceptions from the third. The starting point remains the invitation from the supervisor to the supervisee to answer the question: "And what do you want to have happen?" There is no need at the beginning of a supervision session to specify in the question which relationship they desire to change or investigate, as the supervisee will undoubtedly signal which one they want to start with.

For the supervisor, the three relationships offer a meta-framework for choices about where to invite the supervisee to place their attention. In this regard, it can be helpful for the

supervisee during the course of a supervision session - when they have talked variously about problems and remedies and the moment has come to invite (possibly again!) a desired outcome (Tompkins & Lawley 2006) - to point to one of the three relationships according to what the supervisee's narrative suggests is the one to attend to, e.g. And when XX (supervisee's words), what do you want to have happen for the coaching relationship with this client?

Similarly, as a way of closing a supervision session, the supervisee's outcomes (see fig.4) can be captured at its conclusion by asking one or more of:

What do you now know about:

- how you want to be as a coach?
- what actions can you take with and for this client / what information you would now like to explore for your practice?
- how you would like this coaching relationship to be?

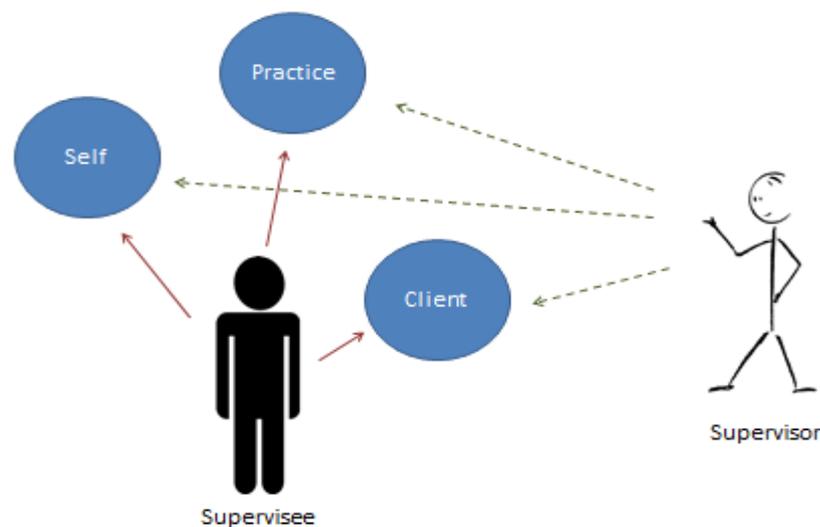


Figure 1: Supervisor directing attention to the supervisee's relationships

And when there are relationships like these, what happens to ... the “wider system”?

This supervisee-centric focus is not to put aside the wider system, attending to which some would argue is the critically different focus the supervisor is obliged to bring. Clean Supervision, however, would contend that the wider system will emerge into the supervisee's (and supervisor's) view through the modelling of these three relationships, in particular through the metaphorical content which will signal the context of the work and be a core part of the supervisee's meaning-making (fig.2). This is because the relationship with the wider system containing the sponsors of the coaching, and other stakeholders in it, will of its nature be indirect. The extent to which it is an indirect relationship may vary

depending on whether the coach is internal or external, but how the supervisee perceives, feels the effect of and plays their part in creating the wider system, will be conveyed through these three key relationships.

This is for the simple reason that the supervisee would not, after all, have the particular relationship with the sponsor and / or organisation which they have, were it not for the fact that the coaching work is undertaken and experienced through the three direct relationships that form the substance of the supervisee's self-modelling. In the same way that, in the coaching conversation, the coachee carries with them the shadow of the wider context, so the supervisee can only bring a filtered representation of the wider system into the supervision conversation. Objectifying the wider system, to give it a greater, top-down primacy and to seek to influence it directly, is to fall prey to the fallacy of conscious purpose - a smaller part wanting to determine a larger whole (Bateson *ibid*); as the supervisee's and the supervisor's perceptions of the wider system are inherently limited to a only small section of it at any one time.

It's pertinent here to note that ethics are a function of the collection of relationships within a system, bearing in mind that the development of ethical maturity is often described as one of the qualities which supervision seeks to engender in coaches (Carroll and de Haan 2012). These relationships, and what is felt to be necessary and beneficial for them, can push and pull against each other, which is why ethical decisions can be hard. In working on ethical issues in supervision it may well be that there are points of information that need to be considered, e.g. organisational policy, the lawfulness of what is being observed or proposed. Nonetheless the component parts of an ethical problem, the relational and other factors that make it problematical, can be self-modelled by the supervisee; and this includes the bind which keeps the problem entangled as well as the values of the supervisee on which the resolution of the problem, or the conditions for how to address it, are founded. (Lawley & Tompkins 2012)

And when there is Clean Supervision what happens to ... the "use of self" by supervisor?

There is perhaps something of a tension here, between a Clean Language approach to supervision and the explicit use within a supervision conversation of how the supervisor experiences the supervisee. This use of self appears widely in the literature on and trainings in supervision, e.g. mode 6 of Hawkins' and Smith's 7-eyed model (Hawkins & Smith *ibid*) and can indeed provide rich information in a supervision session. In coaching (and psychotherapy) Clean Language, however, aims to get out of the client's way; to reduce the influence that the facilitator's assumptions about the client and about the world may have on the client's capacity for generating outcomes, actions and new knowledge that are fully owned by the client. In Clean Supervision, the same would apply: the supervisor still aims to stand out of the supervisee's way. How can a supervisor do this while still being open to and using, for the benefit of the supervisee, the information offered through this use of self?

The extent to which the impact of the supervisee on the supervisor can be used "Cleanly" would seem to be problematic. To dismiss the relevance and usefulness of the impact of the supervisee upon the supervisor, however, would be to go too far, as by extension we

would need to dismiss the third key relationship listed above, which we are inviting the supervisee to self-model. In Clean Supervision, how the supervisor experiences the supervisee may indeed inform the facilitator's decisions about where to invite the supervisee's attention in modelling their experience, as long as the invitation is aimed at what is most beneficial for the supervisee to attend to in their self-modelling, not at what is of most curiosity to the supervisor.

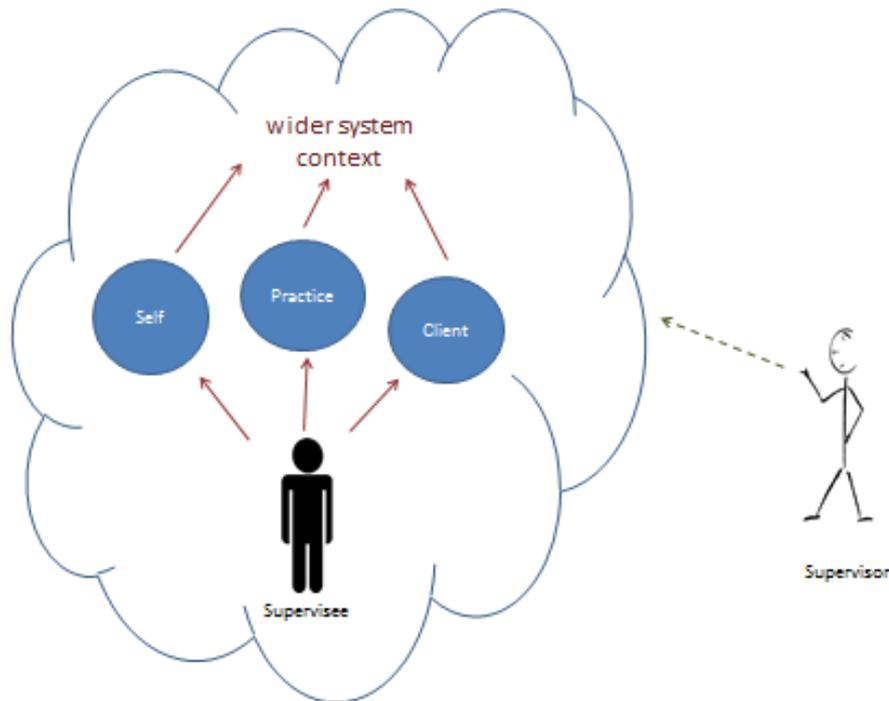


Figure 2: the wider system comes into view

Nonetheless, in the same way that some coaches are “Clean-ish”, stepping away from what might be termed a more therapeutic rigour and pragmatically varying the full Clean Language syntax and occasionally introducing more discursive episodes into the coaching conversation; so it is possible to take a pragmatic and “Clean-ish” approach in supervision, with regard to working with parallel process and other transference phenomena; and still place the supervisee's experience at the heart of the matter. The critical factor is to remain working from a modelling perspective and with the supervisee's relationships as the landscape for investigation. This calls for considerable self-awareness on the part of the supervisor with regard to: firstly, their intention behind the information they are introducing, e.g. are they teaching, wanting to find out more, or placing their information between themselves and the supervisee as a collaborative exchange; and secondly, to the real nature of the supervision relationship they wish to create, e.g. is it an equal relationship or are they finding themselves pressed towards holding authority over the supervisee. (Tompkins & Lawley 2005)

If we take the relationship the supervisee has with the supervisor as the fourth for inclusion in our emerging Clean Supervision model (fig.3), possible Clean interventions, grounded in the kind of self-awareness just described, could be:

And when X (the part of the supervisee's narrative which has prompted the supervisor to draw on their response to the supervisee):

- what do you want to have happen for how we work together
- what do you want to have happen for this supervision relationship
- what happens to the way we are working together now
- what do you notice about how we are working together (slightly less Clean as "notice" may not be linguistically congruent with how the supervisee processes their experience)
- what just happened
- this supervision session is like what?

With the supervisor continuing to draw on and feedback the supervisee's language, this form of questioning would seem to be consistent with Clean principles, while seeking to utilise the supervisor's own perceptions of the relationship with the supervisee, in service of the latter.

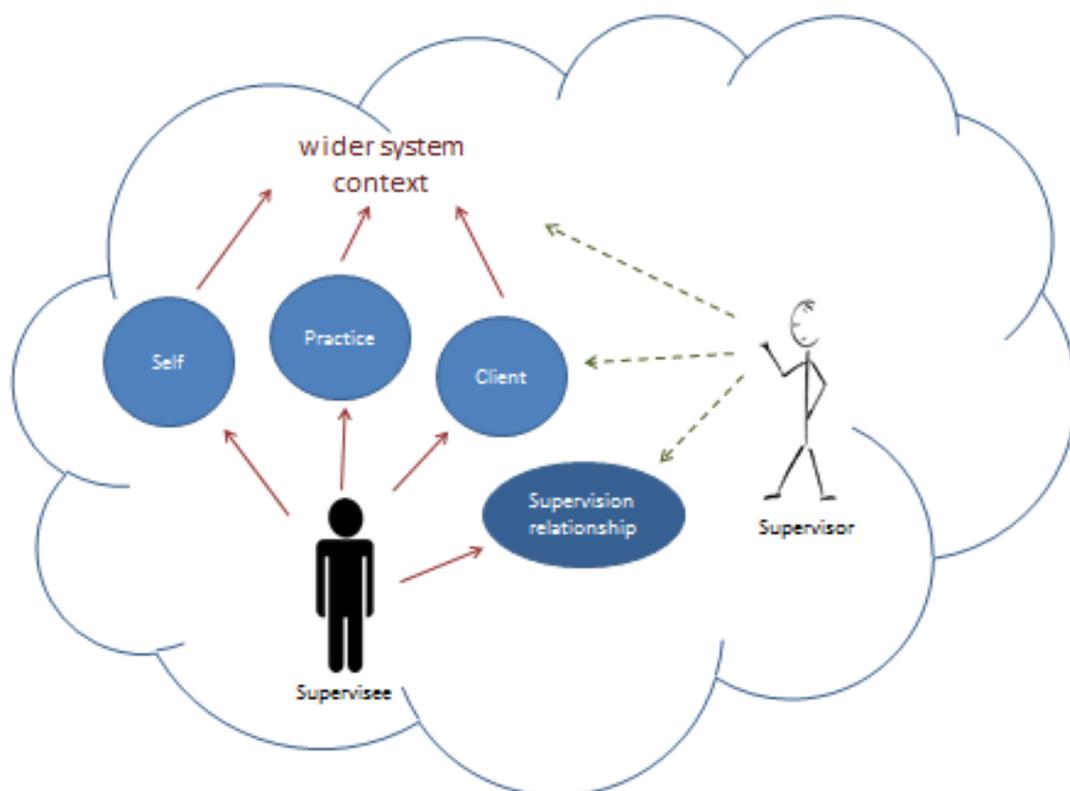


Figure 3: a fourth relationship within the system

An alternative Clean-ish approach would be to let go of the usual Clean Language question construction and move into a more obviously conversational style, which would, while maintaining a modelling perspective, require a still more stringent application of the kind of

self-awareness described above. And occasionally it may be possible to use a third and perhaps more challenging approach, where the supervisor weaves their perceptions of the supervisee into the modelling of the latter's experience while still using their language and Clean Language syntax. This is where supervisor's perceptions suggest a parallel process and judges it most beneficial to the supervisee to sustain the momentum of the latter's self-modelling at the same time (see case illustration below).

And then what happens ... to the three functions of supervision?

In using Clean Language a supervisor makes decisions about where to invite the supervisee to place their attention; decisions that are governed by what the supervisor notices in the revealed structure of the supervisee's experience. In terms of process, it is, as with other forms of facilitation, purposeful. In terms of content, supervision using Clean Language is essentially non-directive. Although writing in the context of groups, Walker (2014) puts it very well when she says, Clean Language questioning "requires you to engage in ego-less leadership, holding your clients to their own outcomes rather than to yours; trusting the wisdom in their system over your desire for them to change in specific ways." As such it aligns well with the formative and restorative functions, engendering deeper reflection by the supervisee on their practice, on themselves, on their perceptions of the client and the impact of the client on them.

Where, for some, the formative function encompasses teaching, Clean Supervision would not align so closely. The importance of this is connected with one's view of whether teaching should form part of supervision or whether it constitutes a different form of coach CPD, with a very different dynamic based on the imparting of information operating in a more emphatically cognitive domain.

More obviously, Clean Supervision would not seek to carry out the normative or qualitative function, as this would be to contradict the principle of trusting the supervisee's own system to find the wisdom he or she needs. The exception, and hopefully a rarely encountered one, is where "the supervisor may take the view that the supervisee's system is not sufficiently developed to consider the safety of the client" (Lawley 2014); and even here the supervisor would need to bring into play their awareness of what the supervisee may be evoking in them and whether that is more to do with their (the supervisor's) own work in progress. Clean Supervision otherwise sees the supervisee as an adaptive, self-managing, open system. While the importance of the normative function is often loudly proclaimed, some writers on supervision (e.g. Thomson 2011) uphold a different position. Instead, they contend that it sits uncomfortably with the other two functions, and that the expectation or expression of qualitative judgements can only be damaging to the rapport and trust essential to the supervision relationship. This is a significant observation given that coaches are encouraged to come into supervision voluntarily, with an invitation to share their joys and their vulnerabilities as practitioners.

The normative function is essentially concerned with assessment and accreditation and, in the case of internal coaching and of groups of external coaches working collective on a talent programme, for example, a matter of programme management. The specific context of the practice of supervision and pressures of economy may in some, or indeed currently in

many, cases require all three functions to be carried out by the one supervisor but this is not to deny the problematic nature of doing so. Should coaching move towards becoming a regulated profession, the latent tension between the three functions is likely to become more conspicuous.

And when there is Clean Supervision, where is ... the supervisor?

In the workshops I run introducing coaches to Clean Language, some participants have contended that using Clean Language lessens the coach's presence, with the facilitator simply working to a set menu of questions and thereby leaving themselves coldly outside the working relationship, behind a glass wall. This is an understandable first response by coaches and supervisors who prefer, and are deeply accustomed, to working interpretatively and to bringing more external content and conceptual frameworks into their coaching and supervision conversations.

Presence is something of an elusive construct. When it comes to coaching and supervision I suspect that practitioners would generally agree that it has less to do with what might be called a charismatic impact and more to do with a deeper experience of connection and being listened to; something that arises from our own mindfulness - or perhaps our own mindlessness, as we let go of our prejudices and preferences through a prior, deeper examination of them. Presence is both a quality of attention and an experience shared. Though it does not quite do justice to their various nuances, one might say that when you are mindful, you are present with yourself; when you are present you are mindful with others. For me, there is no contradiction between this notion of presence and how we work as facilitators using Clean Language, as we listen openly to lead a supervisee's attention towards aspects of their perception. My own experience as client, coach and supervisor, and something shared I know by others, is that Clean Language, with the particular quality of attention it engenders in clients and facilitators alike, often leaves the client feeling constructively challenged and profoundly listened to.

And when there's a supervision conversation ... what do you want to have happen?

Coaches and supervisors, while choosing one particular school of thought as the platform for their practice, often look at a range of models and theories in developing as practitioners, selecting diverse elements to enrich and sustain their work in what Clutterbuck and Megginson (2009) call a managed eclecticism. Clean Supervision offers another model to add to the mix. For those supervisors for whom the formative and restorative functions are uppermost in their practice or those drawn to a non-directive stance, and for coaches looking in particular for a safe, reflective space; Clean Supervision offers an appropriate and effective option. From a developmental perspective, if we view increasing coaching capability as the capacity for working ever more flexibly with increasing levels of complexity, then Clean Supervision as an approach which invites the coach to find and explore their key coaching relationships through the metaphorical content at the heart of their meaning making, would seem to have much to offer.

My intention in setting out a model of Clean Supervision is not to place it dogmatically in opposition to other approaches to supervision but rather to go beyond interweaving Clean

Language with them as an additional form of information gathering; and to look instead at how its application can create a distinctive approach to supervision of itself and remain closer to the principles embedded in David Groves' work. Defining the kind of supervision that a coach is seeking remains, of course, a matter of contracting and personal preference; and different coaches at different stages of development may well seek different kinds and qualities of supervision. Coaches choosing a supervisor may be looking for a variety of things, e.g. knowledge of psychological theory, of organisational systems, of a variety of coaching approaches. In Clean Supervision a supervisor can bring all or any of these into the work, using them to inform their musings on the structure of their supervisee's experience and in deciding how and where to lead the supervisee's attention, always with the supervisee's own language and metaphor landscape as the substance of their collaboration. It is this placing of the supervisee's experience, relationships, precise language and autogenic metaphors at the heart of supervision, and in trusting in the supervisee's own emerging wisdom, that gives Clean Supervision its particular flavour and spirit.

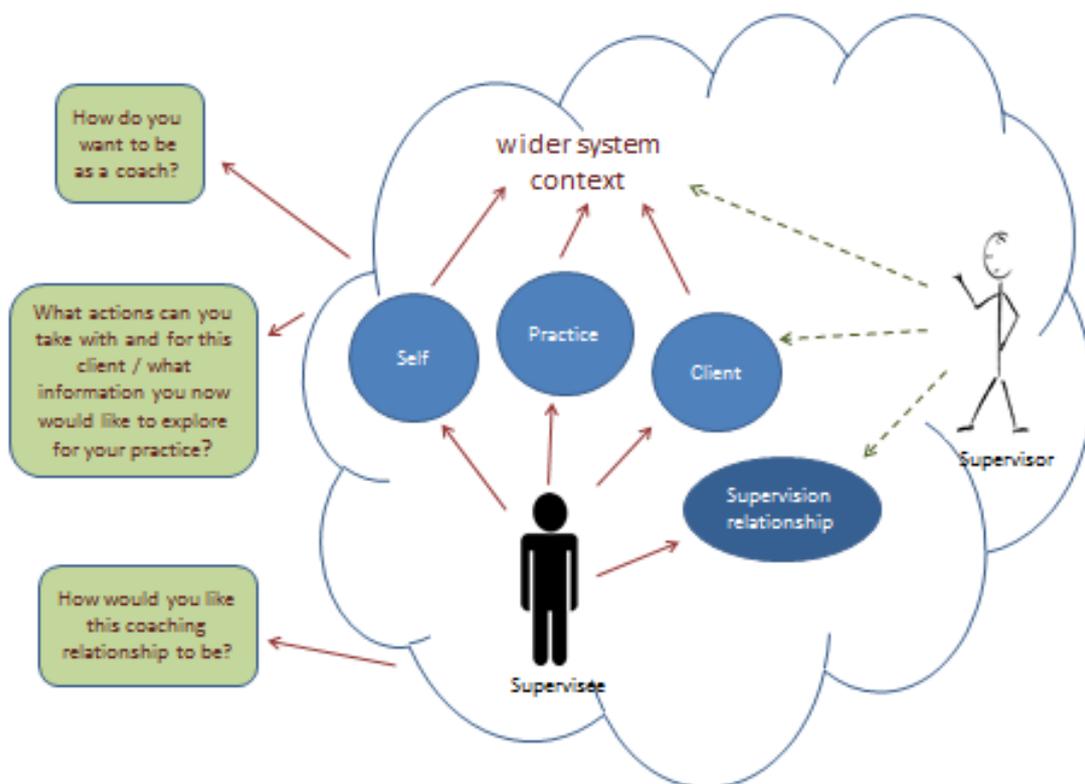


Figure 4: The relationships and outcomes of Clean Supervision

Case study

The following is extracted from a supervision session with a relatively new internal coach. It is annotated to illustrate some of the points made in the foregoing.

K: And what would you like to talk about this afternoon?

A: Well part of it is I'm struggling to find clients and some of them are just one-off sessions. It kind of all leaves me feeling under-confident. *Relationship with self*

K: And struggling to find clients and feeling under-confident. And when under-confident, is there anything else about that under-confident?

A: I think I need to push myself. I talk to other coaches who've been through the training and they seem to have more tools and techniques. *Relationship with self ("push myself") now alongside the relationship with practice (implied speculations about possible tools and techniques) and relationship with the wider system (implied higher standard at which other coaches are working)*

K: And other coaches seem to have more tools and techniques, and you need to push yourself. And when you need to push yourself, what kind of push is that push? *Retaining the focus (vector) on relationship with self and the metaphor "push"*

A: There's a kind of layer of fear. I don't know ... I get good feedback about the coaching I do but I still wonder about what to do ... in the moment when I'm actually with them.

K: And there's a layer of fear and you wonder about what to do in the moment. And you think you need to push yourself. And is there anything else about that push? *Push being a metaphor of force, staying with this and developing it further may bring information on A's motivation to coach - and possibly about the layer of fear!*

A: I'm pushing at the layer of fear. But inside I feel really excited. It's funny, most of the people I've coached, they show me their CV, as they're mostly looking to get promoted or find the next job, and I read their CV and I think, wow, these people are really good, they've done all these things and achieved loads ... and they're so down, as if they have loads to prove, when they're brilliant really. They just can't see it - and I'm sitting there thinking "come on, don't you realise how good you are!" But there's times when I don't know what to do with it. *Relationship with self continues, now alongside a generalised relationship with client*

K: And you feel excited and they're really down and you don't know what to do about it. And given all of that, what do you want to have happen? *Sensing a lift in A's energy ("really excited") presents an opportunity to invite an outcome*

A: You know, I feel really passionate about my coaching. The other coaches I talk to seem to have a way of expressing it, of selling it. Maybe I'd get more clients then. *A returns to the problem domain, though with a hint of a possible outcome emerging. There is also parallel process peeking out here: A talks about "down" clients and wanting them to see how good they are; and she is presenting as quite down herself and eliciting in me a desire for her to remember the good feedback she has received. I could step into a more conventionally conversational style and feed this observation back but I want to sustain the momentum of her self-modelling and the shift in her energy, so I choose to use my perception of the parallel indirectly, trying to stay with the logic of her own narrative by juxtaposing "passionate", already strongly marked by A, and "down" and by using "you" ambiguously:*

K: And you feel really passionate and your clients are so down and you're sitting there thinking, come on don't you realise how good you are. And when really passionate, where is that passionate? *It also seems important to locate the passion and offers a way for the parallel process to play out helpfully.*

A: It's pushing against the layer of fear. *More pushing!*

K: And when it's pushing against the layer of fear, what does that passionate want to have happen? *Staying with "passionate" I invite A to use it as a separate perceiver in her metaphor landscape*

A: It wants to get on with it. *A sign of change emerging?*

K: And wants to get on with it. And what has to happen before it can get on with it? *Developing the conditions for change*

A: It's something about a niche, about being able to explain what sort of coach I am.

K: And it's something about a niche. And is there a relationship between passionate and a niche? *Still developing*

A: Yeah, I need to define the kind of coaching I do, what motivates me and how people will experience me when I'm coaching. Find a way of getting the passion down on paper, a way of selling it that feels right. *Although the new "need" could be developed, A seems very engaged with this latest positive information and an outcome seems to have emerged, so I check by inviting A to develop it a little more through relating the proposed action to the original problem*

K: And selling it, getting the passion down on paper. And when passionate and getting the passion down on paper and define the kind of coaching you do, then what happens to under-confident?

A: Not a problem. I'll have a coach identity and more clarity. *Change in A's physiology signals the change is maturing*

K: And given you'll have a coach identity and more clarity and all the things you've said, what do you want to have happen now for yourself as a coach? *A little more maturing and continuing the focus on the relationship with self*

A: Rework my coach profile, which will give me a greater sense of what I'm about, stop pushing myself and let more of the passion come out. After all I've had good feedback. Maybe it's not so much about more tools and stuff, maybe it's about me knowing more about what sort of coach I want to be ... *The profile is an important artefact within the total system, in this case part of the mechanics for coach-client matching; as is the imagined higher standard of practice A perceives in fellow coaches and against which she has been comparing herself. The profile and "knowing what sort of coach I want to be" are part of the*

relationship with the wider system, gained through developing the relationship with herself as a coach.

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And finally:

"... not knowing keeps all the possibilities open. It keeps all the worlds alive."

Ruth Ozeki