

Return of the ‘Three Amigos’: Applying the Functions of Supervision in the Executive Coaching Context

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Abstract

Supervision’s ‘Three Amigos’, viz. the developmental, support and qualitative functions of supervision have been a prominent feature of many helping professions including social work (Kadushin & Harkness, 2014), therapy (Bernard & Goodyear, 2014; Carroll, 2007), counselling (Proctor, 2000), and most recently coaching (Hawkins & Smith, 2006). In a previous article, Armour (2018) discussed the emergence of supervision functions, the context in which functions have been applied, and their translation from social work to therapy and more recently coaching. Despite extensive use in other fields, little is known about the extent to which functions of supervision are used in executive coaching supervision, highlighting an opportunity for further research. Recently completed doctoral research considered the relevance and application functions of supervision in the executive coaching context. Findings from the research support the relevance of the developmental and support functions in executive coaching supervision, while raising further questions as to how these are applied. Responses related to the qualitative or quality assurance function of supervision for executive coaching were more complex, raised further questions as to how this function can be applied or measured.

Keywords: Supervision functions, executive coaching supervision

Introduction

This paper expands on an earlier discussion of *Supervision’s Three Amigos* (Armour, 2018), and offers insights from recent research on the application of the development, support and quality assurance functions of supervision in the executive coaching context.

Discussion of functions in supervision has been continuous since originating in the field of social work to support the work of largely untrained volunteers. Dawson (1926) described supervision as a managerial or administrative process with a specific focus on “harmonious relationships”, education and support (Dawson, 1926, p. 293)¹. Maintaining quality standards in the Charity Organisations Movement, a precursor to Social Work, helped deliver an efficient and effective service according to Kadushin and Harkness (2014). Therapeutic disciplines also adopted the use of functions in supervision. In particular, Proctor (2000) addressed the use of functions in counselling suggesting their application was for the benefit of the supervisee. This view contrasted with the need to ensure the smooth running of the agency suggested by Kadushin (1976) in the context of social work. The notion of functions appears to have been readily adapted as coaching has continued to emerge as a stand-alone function from its root disciplines (Brock, 2008). The continuing adaptation of functions through various ‘helping professions’ (2006) uses a different

¹ The author is indebted to Emeritus Professor Daniel Harkness, Ph.D., LCSW, for providing me with a copy of Dawson’s (1926) article.

terminology to describe each function. Nevertheless, a consistent view remains that the development, support, and quality assurance functions of supervision are also applicable within the domain of coaching.

One area of contention relates to the qualitative or quality assurance function of supervision. Lawrence and Whyte (2014) comment that it is difficult for coaching supervision to provide a guarantee of quality, given the lack of direct observation of executive coaching sessions. In contrast, (Sheppard, 2017) suggested that recording coaching sessions could help executive coaches engage in their own supervision by reviewing what took place and identifying areas for improvement. Bachkirova et al. (2011) provided an additional view, arguing that even though business and psychology practitioners may engage in supervision from distinctive perspectives, the support and development process offer a measure of value and quality of the coaching services to organisational stakeholders.

A brief history of the use of functions in each of the helping professions provides further background as discussed next.

Functions of supervision: history in the helping professions

The notion of ‘helping professions’, including coaching, was first mooted by Hawkins & Schwenk (2006). The discussion of functions in relation to supervision has been continuous for the past century, although the terminology has been adapted to address the specific requirements of each domain of practice. The table below as reiterated from an earlier paper (Armour, 2018), provides a view of the functions of supervision from each domain, the context in which they are used, and the terminology describing the functions in each case.

Table 1: Supervision Functions by domain and context - adapted from (Newton, 2012, p. 104)

<i>Author</i>	<i>Kadushin (1976)</i>	<i>Proctor (2000, 2008)</i>	<i>Hawkins & Smith, 2006</i>	<i>Newton, 2012</i>
<i>Domain</i>	<i>Social Work</i>	<i>Counselling</i>	<i>Coaching</i>	<i>Transactional Analysis</i>
<i>Context:</i>	Role of Supervisor	Supervisee benefit	Process	Transformation
<i>Functions</i>	Managerial Supportive Educational	Formative Restorative Normative	Qualitative Resourcing Developmental	Accounting Nurturative Transformative

There is considerable overlap in the terminology used to describe each of the three functions. Common elements include an educational or developmental function, a restorative or supportive function, and a focus on the managerial or qualitative aspects of supervision. The qualitative function is common between social work, coaching and transactional analysis, while the developmental or educational function is strongest between social work and coaching. Distinctive aspects of each function relate to the context in which they are applied, and emphasis given to each function, depending on the context. In social work for example there is a strong focus on the managerial aspect. Whereas in counselling, a key

focus is on the restorative function of supervision. In coaching, the emphasis appears to be more of a hybrid of other terms, with a clear focus on processes that are considered helpful in providing coaching supervision. Further information about the functions of supervision in each domain can be found from a variety of sources including Armour (2018); Bernard and Goodyear (2014); Kadushin (2014); Newton (2012); Proctor (2008); Tsui (2005), to name just a few.

Despite the adaptation of functions in the domain of coaching, there has been a gap in our understanding about the relevance of supervision functions and how they are being applied in practice in the executive coaching context. The research for this article was focused on the relevance of functions in the context of executive coaching supervision, although many of the insights could be equally applied to coaching in general. The following sections provide an overview of how this research was undertaken, choice of research methods and selection of participants. Findings from the various respondent groups will be provided, identifying areas where similar and contrasting views are apparent. Several limitations will also be considered such as sample size, time required to complete a Delphi study, and survey fatigue.

Research on Functions of Supervision and their Application in Executive Coaching

A qualitative research methodology was chosen for this research to understand the view of respondents on the topic of coaching supervision theory and its application in the executive coaching context. Specific questions about each function described the developmental function as being related to skills and capabilities, while the resourcing function included support, reflection, and feedback. The qualitative function addressed issues of quality and ethical standards. These terms were not meant to be exhaustive but served as a focus point for research participants to consider each function from a wider perspective.

Exploring the application of function of supervision was part of a broader research question on the application of theories of supervision in the executive coaching context. This paper addresses one component of the research, viz., the functions of supervision, their relevance and application in executive coaching supervision. The choice of research methods was influenced by a number of factors. Firstly, gaining enough respondents who would be willing to take part in this research. The potential for survey fatigue (Fass-Holmes, 2022; Field, 2020; Matzdorff et al., 2020), was identified as a significant issue in considering research the methods that could be used and questions that could be included in the research. Secondly, gaining a range of views from different groups in the coaching community would provide a richer perspective on this topic and an opportunity to compare and contrast responses from each respondent group. Finally, due to the fact that many respondents were situated in the Northern hemisphere, the most likely approach to gathering information would be via online surveys.

The research was carried out in two phases. Phase 1 employed a Delphi study to gain the views of an expert group of academics and authors who teach, publish or present conference papers in the area of coaching supervision. The aim of a Delphi study is to gain a consensus of views through a number of rounds of questions and feedback to respondents. The expert group for this research was defined as academics and authors who teach or write books or journal articles or who present conference papers on the topic of supervision. Phase 2 of the research sought the views of executive coaches and coaching supervisors, to

understand if practitioners espoused similar or different views to those of the expert group. An online survey was used to gain responses to encourage as many responses as possible from a broad spread of geographical location and experience. In contrast to the Delphi study which used 2-4 rounds of questions and feedback towards a consensus of views, the research with the executive coaches and coaching supervisors was carried out through a single survey questionnaire. SurveyMonkey® was used to gather responses and with many of the same questions used in each of the studies, the question streaming function allowed the use of one survey instrument with specific questions to each group. In addition to questions specifically for executive coaches or coaching supervisors, a third option was included for those who were both executive coaches and coaching supervisors.

Both phases of the study were designed to ensure anonymity for respondents. In the case of the Delphi study, anonymity was essential due to the small number of respondents so that the views of one or two respondents were not overshadowed by the views of others. In both phases of the study the anonymity of respondents was ensured

Each phase of the study involved identifying and selecting participants that would meet the criteria for the study, and those who would be likely to respond to the research questions. The selection process for each phase of the study is detailed below.

Delphi Study: Participant Selection

According to Linstone and Turoff (1975), a Delphi panel could be anywhere from ten to fifty people, or several hundred, and still offer worthwhile findings. The potential target was identified by reviewing existing books and journal articles, searching University websites, and individuals who provide executive coaching or coaching supervision services. Some potential respondents were also known to the researcher. A target group of respondents (n=46) was assembled for the Delphi Study. Of these, two indicated that they did not wish to take part in the research. Six individuals withdrew after Round 1, and a further 2 withdrew after round two, leaving a total respondent group of 36 individuals. There were ten respondents in Round 1 and nine respondents in round 2 and 3 of this study representing 20% of the overall target group.

Although the number of respondents overall was small, the value of the Delphi method lies in the quality of the responses from the expert group and the goal of gaining a consensus of views. The tables below show the breakdown of respondents in the Delphi study by location and role.

Table 2: Respondents in the Delphi Study by Location

Delphi Study Data		D-Round 1	D-Round 2	D- Round 3
	Total Respondents	<i>(n=10)</i>	<i>(n=9)</i>	<i>(n=9)</i>
Gender	Female	6	6	2
	Male	4	3	7
Location	UK	6	6	6
	EU (excl. UK)	2	2	2
	Africa	1	1	0

	North America	1	0	1
Participants	Partic. Round 1	10	5/9	N/A
	Partic. Round 2	-	6/9	5/9
	Partic. Round 3	-	-	4/9

Table 3: Delphi Respondents by Role

Delphi Study: Participants Current Role for Each Round				
Delphi Round	Academic	Non-Academic	Author	Total Respondents
Round 1	5/10	4/10	5/10	10
Round 2	2/9	5/9	6/9	9
Round 3	5/9	3/9	7/9	9

Executive Coach and Coaching Supervisor: Participant Selection

Phase two of the research used an online survey using SurveyMonkey® to gain the views of coaching supervisors and executive coaches. The challenge in identifying the target group for this phase of the study was twofold. First, individuals were approached with the support of each of the coaching associations including the Association for Coaching, (AC); European Mentoring & Coaching Council (EMCC); International Coaching Federation (ICF); and Worldwide Association of Business Coaches (WABC). A direct approach was also made to executive coaches or coaching supervisors who were known to the author or identified as potential respondents from their websites. The second challenge was the size of the potential target group which could have been several thousand, given the number of executive coaches and coaching supervisors who were members of one or more coaching associations or a few hundred. A more realistic estimate was that there would be approximately 100-300 respondents in total.

In the executive coach and coaching supervisor study there were 131 respondents in total, of which 106 provided valid responses. Based on the sample size in this research it is not possible to generalise or suggest that these results are representative of all respondents. However, the results offer new insights, particularly in exploring the views of three different groups of respondents. Table 4 below shows the number of respondents in each role and their location.

Table 4: Respondent Numbers by Role and Location

Respondent Role	Location	Africa	Asia	Cent. America	EU (Excl. UK)	North America	Oceania	South America	UK	NIL	TOTAL
Academic/ Author		1			2	1			6		10
Executive Coach											62
Coaching Supervisor											5
Executive Coach & Coaching Supervisor											32
Total		7	8	1	19	33	9	4	23	2	106

Several themes were explored in the research including the relevance of theories of supervision and to what extent these were applied in practice in the executive coaching context. The length and frequency of coaching and supervision sessions was considered along with questions related to ethics, confidentiality, and administrative issues. These responses are beyond the scope of this paper and will be addressed in future publications. In this article, the focus is respondents' views on the relevance and importance of the development, support, and quality assurance functions of supervision and how they are applied in the executive coaching context.

Responses from participants in each phase of the study are addressed next, followed by a comparison of the views from each of the respondent groups.

The Delphi Study: Views from the Expert Group of Respondents

Respondents in the Delphi study were defined as an expert group of academics who teach coaching supervision, authors who write books and journal articles or individuals who present conference papers on coaching supervision.

Despite the small number of respondents in each of the three rounds of the study, there is clear evidence in the literature that a sample size of 10 or more experts can offer valuable responses (Linstone & Turoff, 2002). In addition, there is no evidence to suggest that hundreds of respondents will provide any better information than a small number (10-20) experts from a specific field (Avella, 2016; McPherson et al., 2018).

Delphi respondents indicated that:

- The key tasks of executive coaching supervision were to provide development, support, and quality assurance
- The developmental function of supervision was seen as 'Extremely Important' and 'Extremely Relevant' to the supervision of executive coaches and the support function was seen as 'Extremely Important'
- Only half of the Delphi respondents agreed that the qualitative function was 'Extremely Relevant' or 'Extremely Important'.

Executive coaching supervision as a process for development, support, and a place to reflect was seen as 'Important' by the Delphi respondents. In addition to reflection and

feedback, coaching supervision was described as “helping the executive coach establish their identity as a coach” (Delphi Respondent). No specific information was provided about the importance of establishing the coach’s identity. However, the notion of “a narrative construction” (Bachkirova, 2020, p. 38) suggests that identity is related to the words and images we use to understand ourselves in a particular context. In other words, we have to imagine ourselves in the role of a coach as well as being in this role. The old adage ‘fake it till you make it’ may have a ring of truth in terms of building identity. Nevertheless, holding this view of identity is more like a house of sand in comparison to the development of knowledge and skill required to be an effective coaching practitioner. 1

Aside from the three main functions described in this article as ‘the three amigos of supervision’, respondents were asked if they considered any other functions to be relevant in executive coaching supervision. Responses to this question did not offer any new thinking. One respondent reiterated that the descriptions used by Proctor (2008) being formative, restorative, and normative, as shown above, were other functions that were important. Given that these functions were addressed specifically in the context of counselling, the question of relevance to the field of executive coaching is uncertain. In this respect, there is little evidence to support or challenge the relevance of Proctor’s (2008) description of functions in executive coaching supervision in contrast to the descriptions proposed by Hawkins & Schwenk (2006).

The responses provided by the executive coaches and coaching supervisors offered both supporting and contrasting views as discussed next.

Executive Coach and Coaching Supervisors’ Views

In the second phase of the study, executive coaches and coaching supervisors considered all three functions to be ‘Highly Relevant’ and ‘Extremely Important’ in executive coaching supervision. Overall, 94% of the executive coaches and coaching supervisors indicating that the resourcing or support function was ‘Highly Relevant’ to executive coaching supervision.

A number of differences were noted as to which of the three functions was the main focus of supervision sessions. Neither of the groups responded that the quality assurance function was the main focus of their supervision sessions. A higher percentage of the coaching supervisors revealed that the support function was the main focus of their supervision sessions and that it opened the door to further development. In contrast, the developmental function was the main focus of supervision sessions for a higher number of executive coaches.

Little additional information was available to explain these differences, although several respondents suggested that the choice of functions may depend on the coach, the assignment they were undertaking and more importantly, what the coach brought to the supervision session. Again, care should be taken in interpreting these results due to the small number of respondents overall. As to possible reasons for the quality assurance function appearing to be less used in coaching supervision sessions, the development and support functions may address more immediate needs, while quality assurance issues may only arise if a problem exists. It remains a significant challenge to understand how quality assurance

can be observed or measured, offering a further view as to why the other two functions are applied more consistently.

Finally, the executive coach and coaching supervisors were asked if any additional functions were employed in executive coaching supervision. From a list of five additional functions, exploring challenging scenarios, gaining perspective, and gaining insight were seen as the most relevant by the majority of respondents. Oversight as a function of supervision, was considered relevant by less than half of those who responded, despite the notion that oversight might contribute to quality assurance.

Distinguishing Between the Function and Purpose of Supervision

An additional factor was considered in this research, viz., whether there is distinction between the function and purpose of supervision. This distinction may seem unimportant. However, in the context of executive coaching supervision, the answer may be more complex than first thought, suggesting further consideration of this conception.

There is little in the literature that distinguishes between the function and purpose of executive coaching supervision. The purpose of supervision in this context can be described in broad terms as ensuring that the needs of the executive coach are met in the most effective and appropriate way. Further distinctions suggest that the purpose of supervision for coaches is either “developmental, to increase skills and provide some assurance of quality; transformational, enabling change to help the coach get ‘unstuck’; a way to mitigate risks and protect against unethical practice or lack of skills; or a way to increase the coaches’ confidence” (Moyes, 2009, pp. 164-165).

Moyes (2009) offers an additional distinction between purpose and function, asking whether the purpose of executive coaching supervision is more for the protection of the client, or the benefit of the executive coach and the profession of coaching as a whole.

According to Lawrence and Whyte (2014), the quality assurance function of coaching supervision remains contentious due to the difficulty in measuring or ensuring quality. Research participants questioned whether quality assurance should be included as a function of supervision, given that “we only know what the supervisee (executive coach) chooses to talk about” (Delphi respondent).

Respondents were also asked to rank a list of nine items describing purpose of supervision in order of priority. The top three purpose statements identified in the Delphi study were to help the executive coach reflect and gain insight, gain perspective or for development. Quality assurance and oversight as ways to describe the purpose of executive coaching supervision were items 7 and 9 in a total list of 9 statements. Executive coaches and coaching supervisors also considered gaining insight and perspective to be important purpose of supervision along with exploring challenging scenarios.

Functions offer an indication of what takes place in executive coaching supervision, thereby identifying the practical focus of each session. The practical focus is dependent on what the coach brings to the supervision session. A general view would suggest that the purpose of executive coaching supervision is either development, support, or quality assurance, and in most respects this view may suffice. However, this may not fully articulate the purpose of supervision for executive coaches. Purpose indicates a broader perspective,

focusing on the outcomes of supervision. Outcomes directed at increasing the effectiveness of executive coaching practice, determining whether supervision is for the benefit of the executive coach or a protection for an organisation, as well as the capability of executive coaching practitioners may seem more aligned with purpose than the process focused functions.

A secondary outcome may be that by increasing the effectiveness of the executive coaching practitioner, executive coaching supervision has a flow-on effect of increasing the capability of the individual senior leader for the benefit of their organisation. Such outcomes could be indications of a quality assurance function of supervision. This research suggests that the purpose of supervision is more aligned with improving individual capability and protecting the organisation, while broadly enhancing the practice of coaching.

The Rise and Importance of Functions in Executive Coaching Supervision

Until now there has been a lack of discussion regarding the applicability of the functions of supervision in the executive coaching context. At the same time, there has been an increased expectation that executive coaches should undertake supervision, both for the benefits it offers, and as an expectation of membership of a coaching association.

Lucas and Larcombe (2016) identified the role of supervision to support business development for independent coaches, following the formative, normative and restorative classifications identified by Proctor (2000). According to Clutterbuck et al. (2016a) commercial realities may highlight the relevance of the development, support, and quality assurance functions supervision and that there may be less focus on psychodynamic factors than in therapeutic settings.

The findings from this study shed light on the relevance of supervisions' functions in the executive coaching context, while also providing some initial insights into how each of the functions are applied in executive coaching supervision. Gaining the opinions of three key respondent groups provided a comparison of views and insights that have not been available previously. Expanding this research to a wider group of respondents could provide further insights that support or challenge these results, thereby providing further evidence about what works and what is needed to support executive coaching practice.

Hewson (2001, p. 74) argued that supervision is "a complex, technical, sensitive, and fairly new area of facilitating professional competence". Within the domain of coaching, supervision is an even newer process offering support and development. Schön's (2016) discussion on the reflective practitioner offers an additional perspective suggesting that supervision is both an art and a science. As the use of supervision continues to grow in the coaching domain, Schön's (2016) view that technical rationality alone will not be enough will be further enhanced through evidence-based studies of what is actually taking place in practice. Such studies will then influence the way supervision is practiced and how practice and research continue to influence future developments. An integrated developmental approach to supervision (Stoltenberg, 1997), advocates that "the supervisor has to integrate the developmental role of educator with that of the provider of support to the worker and, in most cases, quality oversight of the supervisee's clients" (Hawkins & Shohet, 2006, p. 4).

At the very least the development and support functions of supervision offer a valuable safety value for executive coaches, a way to look back as well as looking ahead, and gain insights into new or better ways of doing things. Development and support in supervision can strengthen and enhance the confidence and capability of coaching practitioners. Nevertheless, the expectation that supervision can ensure the quality of executive coaching services, remains problematic.

The practice of coaching, and arguably coaching supervision has been described as being ahead of the research studies that “test its efficacy” (McCarthy, 2015, p. 5). Even so many of the professional coaching associations support supervision as a way to support practitioners and bridge the gap between theory and practice. Without the benefit of further research, supervision may continue to teeter between being a vital development and support process, or as some have described it, a way of providing overwatch (Garvey, 2014).

Limitations and Future Research

Delphi studies are time consuming. Each of the 2 – 4 rounds of questions and responses required review and feedback to enable the design of each subsequent stage of the process. The time constraint and multiple rounds of the process lead to survey fatigue, with some respondents dropping out of the study before it was completed. The expert group who responded to this study were busy, teaching, researching, or writing about coaching supervision and may have found that the time required to complete each round of the study was a heavy burden. This may also have led to reduced numbers in each round of the Delphi process.

Gaining a consensus was not a guaranteed outcome of Delphi studies, despite being a stated goal of the method. While a consensus was achieved, based on gaining a two-thirds majority of responses to each question, the results do not represent the views of all potential respondents. The small number of participants was also a limitation in this study, notwithstanding the views on Delphi panel sizes articulated by Linstone and Turoff (2002).

Anonymity was a key benefit of the Delphi study. However, the scope of questions in the study could have benefited from more in-depth consideration and may have led to additional insights. Nevertheless, having opened the door on the application of functions of supervision in the executive coaching context, further research could explore how functions are applied in the wider coaching context. Clarifying whether a distinction exists between the function and purpose of supervision would offer further value to the emerging field of coaching.

Conclusion

Executive coaches operate in a dynamic and turbulent organisational environment where change is constant. Further complexity in executive coaching supervision derives from the fact that executive coaches work in a multi-stakeholder environment that may add specific challenges to the role of the executive coach. Nevertheless, it is apparent that providing support and development are essential functions of coaching supervision, and that these contribute to confidence and capability of the executive coaches and the effectiveness of executive coaching practice.

Respondents in this study confirmed the importance of supervision for executive coaches, arguing that for experienced supervisors, the executive coaching context does not

matter. An alternative perspective suggests that coaching supervisors need a greater understanding of the challenges and dynamics facing executive coaches, and the context in which they practice if supervision is to address the specific needs of executive coaches. Additional research will provide further insights into the role of functions of supervision in the executive coaching context.

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