

Leadership supervision: reframing coaching for turbulent times

Master coaches and supervisors **Simon Cavicchia** and **Martin Vogel** ask what ways executive coaching can respond to turbulence and support leadership by drawing on the practice of supervision. Is there space for a practice we might call 'leadership supervision'?

The 21st century has been punctuated by a series of shocks, which cumulatively have upended our assumption that we live in an orderly, predictable, manageable environment.

Discourses on leadership and executive coaching routinely refer to the volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous nature of the working environment (Stiehm, 2002). But, at least until this year, business has carried on broadly as usual. Now, leaders are confronted with the experience of not knowing and at the same time having to act.

Traditional views of coaching can be seen as a response to an outmoded view of leadership from the modern/ industrial era when management held a short-term focus on pre-determined goals on the assumption these could be achieved as intended.

Our times call for new constructs of what it means to lead and, therefore, what it means to develop leaders. We must pay closer attention to how leaders are being impacted by the situations they face, how they make meaning from these experiences and how these meanings inform choices regarding action to be taken.

How can executive coaching find ways to respond to turbulence, and support leading by drawing on the practice of supervision? Synthesizing traditions of reflective practice, holding complexity, collaborative meaning-making and acting intentionally and ethically, supervision offers a perspective on executive coaching which can respond to the realities that leaders inhabit.

Potentially, it offers a way to loosen attachment to some legacy views of leadership that still inform coaching.

AFTER MANAGERIALISM

Leaders and coaches have been shaped by a worldview, managerialism, that for three or four decades has been the organising ideology of corporate leadership and subsequently of Western society in general.

Managerialism is not the same as management. Conventional management theory owes a great deal to its roots in the production line of the industrial era. The analogy of the 'organisation as machine' took hold, with management construed as a linear, positivist endeavour of managing predictable resources with predictable outcomes. This fostered a highly individualist view of leadership: the manager as lonely hero; ever ready with 'solutions'; under normative pressure to be 'world class'. This was the ground from which grew managerialism.

As described by Robert Locke and J.-C. Spender (2011), managerialism is the discourse of a self-serving caste who (consciously or not) pursue their own enrichment at the expense of the broader communities of which they are part. Managerialism has become the lingua franca of our age, to the extent that its privileging of logic-based self-interest – the movement of factories to the locations with the cheapest sources of labour, the disavowal of responsibility for negative externalities and so on – came to be seen as neutral, almost natural, forces.

Managerialism was enabled by, but is different from, the shift to free market nostrums ushered in by Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s. As Thomas Klikauer (2015) puts it:

'For managerialism, managerial techniques are the guiding principles, for neo-liberalism the guiding

principle is the free market. . . Inside the neo-liberalist project, democracy and politics remain important. Inside managerialism, no democracy and no politics exist. For managerialism, there are no democratic solutions to problems, only managerial ones.'

FROM COMPLICATED TO COMPLEX

The twin forces of free market capitalism and managerialism, whatever their downsides, undoubtedly fuelled an era of technological and logistical development and unprecedented advances in standards of living around the world. The factory-inspired model of leadership remains appropriate in what Snowden and Boone (2007) describe as complicated settings where linear logic and expert advice can still lead to controllable outcomes.

The problem is that, as a result of societal and technological changes, most organisations now inhabit complex settings, where the boundaries between interlocking enterprises are blurred and where linear predictability breaks down. Complexity is defined by Snowden and Boone by its very unpredictability. It is not possible to know in advance how to get from A to B, and any causality there might be can only be seen in retrospect. This calls for a very different kind of leading.

Complexity is defined by its very unpredictability ... This calls for a very different kind of leading

Consider the disruptions of the first 20 years of this century: the terrorist attacks on the United States in 2001 and the rise of Islamist networks; the financial crash of 2007 and the subsequent national populist backlash; the twin ruptures in 2016 of Brexit in the UK and the election of Donald Trump in America; the dual crises of climate change and the decline in biodiversity.

In 2020, the disruption has intensified. The Covid-19 pandemic has given us a crash course in how quickly social and economic life can be dislocated by natural forces beyond our control. The casual killing of George Floyd by a police officer in Minnesota ignited protests of pain and anger across America and a re-examination of racism around the world.

The complex, interdependent global society and economy we inhabit is not amenable to the pseudo-certainty of management-think

Democracies look incapable of resolving their evident systemic dysfunctions. There is little incentive for politicians to make the argument for long-term strategies given the outcomes would only be realised several electoral cycles beyond the timescales in which today's political leaders might gain credit. In this US election year, there is widespread anxiety about the future of American democracy. It is not just populism that has made democracy look fragile. The adoption of surveillance capitalism (Zuboff, 2019) to finance the development of tech businesses has enabled networks to grow beyond the capacity of their owners to regulate them, leaving democratic systems open to subversion by bad actors.

Radical accountability movements – such as #MeToo, transgender rights, and the narratives of privilege and intersectionality – have established new progressive standards. But they have also contributed to a cancel culture whereby social norms around the civil mediation of differences are replaced by intimidation of those who don't conform. Leaders are afraid of taking the initiative for fear of transgressing the diktat of a social media mob. These are not the conditions in which to lead reflectively, still less with vision.

Responses to the Covid pandemic, exemplify many of these issues. Britain's hesitant response encapsulated the cost of denigrating managerial expertise with a simultaneous lingering attachment to managerialism's propensity to conjure apparently simple but abstract solutions to complex problems. Absent a strategy, the UK Government's (mis) handling of the crisis was characterised by grand declarations of intent that they were unable to effect (such as the delivery and distribution of PPE, the attempt to replace national exams with an algorithm or the promise of a 'world-beating' test and trace system, when one that is even properly effective has yet to be put in place).

MANAGERIALISM AND THE HUMAN PSYCHE

This highlights what managerialism has been denying for decades: that the complex and interdependent global society and economy we inhabit is not amenable to the pseudo-certainty of management-think. Managerialism's abstract simplicities ('Brexit means Brexit', 'Move fast and break things') can achieve top-level results at speed. But it is extremely weak in managing the complex outcomes of its initial designs.

Managerialism provides a legitimising and reinforcing context for the narcissistic processes in the human personality which are focused on projecting, shoring up and defending self-images of competence and greatness. These processes exist in everyone to varying degrees. They act as defences against inevitable feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt in the face of complex reality. But their adverse impact can be seen in politicians with strong, sometimes extreme, narcissistic traits. Leaders such as Trump, Johnson, Bolsonaro, Putin, Duterte and Orban trade in simplistic messages which blatantly deny multiple and complex data that might threaten desired images of greatness or undermine the ideologies and actions that reinforce them.

THE INTERREGNUM

Coaching as a practice has colluded with the positivist construct of leadership – binding itself to linear cause-and-effect logic and a privileging of pre-determined goals. This has encouraged the profession to join in the affected apoliticism of managerialism – with coaches uncritically aligning with the organisational objectives of their sponsors and reticent about referring to externalities or wider societal considerations.

However, we seem to be in an interregnum between the passing of managerialism as the dominant organising force and a new determinant that has yet to come into shape. Managerialism was discredited by the 2007 financial crash. Since then, corporate interests have been on the back foot – brushed aside, for example, in Britain's decision to back the unspecified idea of Brexit without properly debating the implications of detaching itself from the complex integration of Europe's supply chains. Even so, managerialism still informs constructs of leadership in many organisations – particularly, corporations and state bureaucracies.

Faced with a reality that is multi-layered, complex, socially constructed, ambiguous and problematic, leaders need to be able to relax attachments to idealised self-images of their own competence and greatness. Instead, they

might try to manage the unrealistic expectations of their followers and tame their own egos (no mean feat, and one which is actively deprecated in current dominant approaches to leadership development).

In what ways might coaching assist leaders to develop in this way?

THE CHALLENGES OF LEADING IN COMPLEXITY

When the route from A to B cannot be discerned in advance, leaders must be experimental and adaptive – using intuitive sensing alongside logical analysis. If they are called to set a direction in the face of the unknown, leaders will routinely need to work on becoming more comfortable with uncertainty. This will mean finding the psychological safety to be less fearful about admitting error, so that they can change course if they realise they have taken a wrong turning. Leading occurs at what Cavanagh (2006) calls 'the edge of chaos' – where there is enough instability to encourage discovery and invention but not so much that the system collapses over the edge into chaos itself. To be a leader at the edge of chaos is unnerving. It demands self-awareness, humility and an openness to one's own and others' vulnerability that is not well supported in most corporate environments.

As citizens we expect more stewardship, wisdom and compassion of leaders... We will demand honesty about the difficult trade-offs ahead and to be invited into adult-to-adult discussion of them

Complexity expands the expectations placed on leaders. They are held to account not just on their performance against self-interested corporate objectives but by a wide range of stakeholders regarding societal needs. Many citizens will expect more stewardship, wisdom and compassion of leaders as we emerge from the Covid-19 crisis. They won't indulge leaders in simplistic fantasies about the way forward. They will demand honesty about the difficult trade-offs ahead and to be invited into adult-to-adult discussion of them. This is already evident

in, for example, the demands of Extinction Rebellion for politicians to 'tell the truth' about climate change and to engage society in an honest deliberation of the options through a citizens' assembly.

Instead of two-dimensional superhero fantasy characters, we need leaders who are multi-faceted human beings. People who can anchor themselves in modesty and moderation in order to bring to the surface their deep sense of what is valuable and true; who can regulate their stress, anxiety and power complexes in order to function even while the threat signals in their nervous system are activated. They need to combine awareness of self with high levels of relational skills and sensitivity to the complex eco-systems (Western, 2013) in which they operate.

Instead of two-dimensional superhero fantasy characters, we need leaders who are multi-faceted human beings

SUPPORTING AND DEVELOPING LEADERS

The support we propose considers not just the role effectiveness of leaders but holds up an ethical standard of leadership good practice in order that leaders can assess how they are meeting society's needs of them. Instead of an emphasis on the performance-focused goal achievement of traditional coaching, leaders will benefit from reflective space where they can feel contained in uncertainty; where they can cultivate self-awareness, creativity and systemic sensing; where they can locate themselves within pluralistic perspectives, at a distance from the specific dogmas that prevail within their networks. They need to encounter accountability in safety to pre-empt being exposed by the radical accountability that awaits them in the public sphere.

Leaders face two obstacles to responding appropriately to current challenges. Many are operating at the wrong level of cognitive and emotional development because the complexity we have created outpaces most people's perspective-taking capacity (Garvey Berger, 2012; Kegan & Lahey, 1995). This relates to the second problem: most are stuck in the linear, positivist leadership discourses which fail to account for the multi-dimensional nature of human experience.

Most leadership development focuses mainly on the individual, viewed as orchestrator of their organisation or department. Leaders need to understand themselves more broadly as located in interlocking networks, over which they have varying influence. These may be within and outside their organisation, and within and beyond their role as employee, leader or job-holder. Their insight and impact as leaders could be enhanced by integrating into their work frames of reference more of their identities as parent, citizen, consumer, activist, and so on (Einzig, 2017). Leaders need to understand their own inheritance – their family and culture of upbringing, communities of choice, and their membership of the human species, sharing the planet with other creatures. Inheritance shapes how we respond in the here and now.

LEADERSHIP SUPERVISION: BRINGING PLURALISM AND ETHICAL MATURITY TO LEADING

It is time we stopped thinking of managers as simply agents of their employers but, like all professionals, accountable to society as a whole. The practice of leading needs to integrate questions of ethics, governance and stewardship at the core of what it means to be a practitioner, not as a nice-to-have bolt-on to the real business of management.

This entails changing how we construe leadership development. Transactional interventions focussed on delivering concrete impacts may still have a place. What's missing is the normalisation of ongoing, long-term, reflective support by which individuals can draw their full personhood into their work identities, and find the ground on which they can cultivate their own sensing, judgment and discernment. We need to enable people more easily to draw out the wisdom, creativity and compassion they already possess by virtue of being human. Coaching should blend exploration in depth of the self with enquiry from a societal perspective of what is demanded of a person as leader in their specific context and beyond.

As contexts shift, expectations upon leaders expand. There is a corresponding need for approaches which support the ongoing development of leaders to evolve. Importing ideas and orientations from the field of supervision into leadership coaching and development presents a number of possibilities.

This is not about defining what a reified concept of leadership supervision is and is not. Rather, it is an exercise in revitalising and expanding existing assumptions and norms around coaching. In the same way that leaders need to be able to relax attachment to

fixed ideas about what leadership is, to make space for innovative thinking and action to emerge, the same is true of approaches to executive coaching which might then be termed leadership supervision.

Coaching should blend exploration in depth of the self with enquiry from a societal perspective of what is demanded of a person as leader in their specific context and beyond

A regular process in many of the helping professions, coaching included, supervision offers a particular kind of reflective conversation in which supervisees might come to understand better the forces impinging upon them socially, environmentally and psychologically. This space allows attention to be paid to how meaning is made from these experiences while also broadening perspective beyond familiar models and sense-making. Supervision treats meaning not as a truth but as a construct that can generate new insight. This in turn supports a greater capacity for creating and experimenting with novel strategies that might be more context-relevant than approaches based in the past.

Creating space represents a radical challenge to assumptions about time-structuring and value predicated on busy-ness and frenetic activity. For supervision to be effective, the psychoanalyst Thomas Ogden (2005) insists, supervisor and supervisee each need to feel that they 'have time to waste'.

THE FOUR DIMENSIONS OF LEADERSHIP SUPERVISION

We see four dimensions of supervision that can be applied to leadership development:

1. Leading as continuous learning in ethical practice
2. Relationship over time
3. Pluralism in the cultivation of maturity
4. Emergent process

1. LEADING AS CONTINUOUS LEARNING IN ETHICAL PRACTICE

Supervisory approaches to learning acknowledge that technical knowledge and expertise alone are insufficient for ensuring professionalism, practice efficacy and ethical rigour in a complex environment. There is a need to frame the task and the requirements of professionalism in terms of continuous improvement and learning.

Leading in this light is seen as much as craft as technique. Expertise and the precision of scientific disciplines will always have their place. Yet the Covid-19 pandemic has amply demonstrated that, in fast-moving complexity, not only do specific disciplines offer an inevitably partial picture, but the interpretation and use of expert knowledge to inform policy and practice decisions is a social process. It is mediated by unconscious dynamics, subjective assumptions, personalities, prior conditioning and ideological bias. The science might have clearly demonstrated that early lockdown was vital in containing the spread of infection but it was assumptions that determined the timing of announcements and action. For example, in the UK the assumption that the British public might not take kindly to the imposition of restrictions contributed to delay. Delay that the science is demonstrating resulted in a significant number of unnecessary deaths.

A supervisory orientation to supporting and developing leaders recognises that evidence-based data and theoretical principles need to inform thinking and decision making. But the viewing angle is widened to acknowledge, track and explore the uniqueness of leaders in their specific contexts. It brings into enquiry their personal stories and dispositions as well as the multitude of forces influencing how leaders experience themselves and their situations, and the way these shape how they think and might act.

It thus moves beyond a constrained focus on organisational objectives and brings to the surface tendencies to groupthink which can pressure individuals to behave as leaders in ways they might find uncomfortable in their identities outside work.

In the face of complexity and uncertainty, there is intrinsic value in the space to pause, reflect, and think together with a supervisor. Without it, there is a risk that, in the grip of anxiety and overwhelm, leaders become stuck in more rigid and limited perspectives and range of responses.

2. RELATIONSHIP OVER TIME

Leadership supervision offers the possibility of reframing the nature of the executive coaching engagement from a short-term, purely goal-focused engagement to a relationship developed and deepened over a longer time frame (Cavicchia & Gilbert, 2018). This enables the coach as leadership supervisor and the leader as leadership supervisee to collaborate to build and maintain the psychological safety and containment of anxiety required to support exploration of the multifaceted and personal nature of leading in complexity. The relationship as container becomes the crucible in which the formative, normative and restorative (Proctor, 1991) functions of supervision can be applied to leading.

A longer process of engagement and commitment further supports the depth of learning and development required to expand traditional leadership mindsets. It helps develop the perspectives, personal mastery, resilience and agility required for leading in complexity and taming the ego. As a further corrective to the lonely hero archetype of leadership, the supervisory relationship recognises and normalises the inevitable and ordinary human vulnerabilities experienced when navigating uncharted territory with only partial information ever being available.

3. PLURALISM IN THE CULTIVATION OF MATURITY

Supervision provides an orientation which embraces pluralism and critical reflection in relation to theoretical frames that inform meaning making and leading.

Existing theories and disciplines such as psychology, systems theory, complexity theory, organisational discourse, best practice and ethical principle might float into consciousness to inform this exploration. But the basic premise is that no pre-existing strategy or single orientation can be assumed to be an appropriate resource or response until multiple factors contributing to the supervisee's context and situation have been surfaced and considered.

This is a departure from a narrower view of managerial supervision which is primarily concerned with ensuring adherence to established protocols and best practice methodologies (which can only ever be yesterday's practice). Instead, the focus is on closely observing the process whereby supervisor and supervisee make meaning together about the situation the leader is in. It explores the challenges and questions the leader faces that are personal and particular to the context. It reaches consideration of what might be required in terms of

right action that is concerned with impacts beyond the immediate spheres of the individual and the organisation.

Leaders are supported in this process to inquire and clarify their motivation, intentions, strategies, actions and capacity to own and live with consequences. They surface and reflect on any inconsistencies between these domains of attention to ensure that they can account for their choices clearly and transparently, especially when scrutinised. As in the case of ethical maturity (Carroll & Shaw, 2013), where it has long been recognised that the same rules governing ethical conduct cannot be applied without question in all contexts, so a stance of leadership maturity approaches each leadership situation and any response in its situational uniqueness.

Where new strategies and choices emerge in the supervisory space, the relationship with the supervisor can also support acting on new possibilities. The aim is to enable a leader to experiment with approaches that, by their necessarily innovative nature, may be difficult to contemplate if they appear alien to existing knowledge, methodologies and approaches. Supervisor and leader will consider not just the nature of the innovative action but the influencing that must be undertaken to socialise the initiative. In this way, supervisees can be supported to embody experimental attitudes and approaches to change-agency and network and relationship management.

4. EMERGENT PROCESS

By embracing the need for reflection, innovation and experimentation in practice, a supervisory frame for coaching offers an implicit and evolving research orientation to developing leaders. It reaches for diversity of modalities to disrupt perspectives and prevent routines of interactions from becoming ossified. It celebrates creative approaches, such as using artwork or found materials, to access non-verbal insights.

Supervision balances the fostering of 'considered pragmatism' for leaders with contributing to the research base informing contemporary discourses about leading. In this way, leadership supervision stands to close the gap between theoretical abstractions about leadership (as often taught on leadership programmes) and the translation of abstraction into informed experimental action for leading with impact.

JOIN THE DIALOGUE

The relationship with the supervisor stands to support leaders to regulate and manage their psychological state in the face of the impossibility of knowing what will emerge. It helps restore reflective objectivity when feelings are running high and develop the capacity to continue thinking and choosing how to respond when familiar reference points are limited or non-existent.

A supervisory approach stands to act as a corrective to the transactional orientation of managerialism, integrating reflection and sense-making with action. It creates space for leaders to step outside of stale and constraining institutionalised habits of thought and to approach the big challenges of our age with freshness and perhaps radicalism.

We offer this article as an opening statement to a dialogue that we hope will evolve to explore the potential contribution of the supervision tradition to leadership development. We will be hosting online conversations. If you would be interested in taking part in these discussions, please get in touch.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Carroll, M, and Shaw E. 2013. *Ethical Maturity in the Helping Professions: Making Difficult Life and Work Decisions*. Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley.
- Cavanagh, M. 2006. 'Coaching from a Systemic Perspective'. in *Dianne Stober & Anthony Grant (eds.), The Evidence Based Coaching Handbook*. Hoboken: Wiley.
- Cavicchia, S, and Gilbert M. 2018. *The Theory and Practice of Relational Coaching: Complexity, Paradox and Integration*. London: Routledge.
- Einzig, H. 2017. *The Future of Coaching: Vision, Leadership and Responsibility in a Transforming World*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Garvey Berger, J. 2012. *Changing on the Job: Developing Leaders for a Complex World*. Stanford: Stanford Business Books.
- Kegan, R, and Laskow Lahey L. 2009. *Immunity to Change: How to Overcome It and Unlock Potential in Yourself and Your Organization*. Boston: Harvard Business Press.
- Klikauer, T. 2015. 'What Is Managerialism'. *Critical Sociology* 41(7-8):1103-19.
- Locke, R R., and Spender J. C.. 2011. *Confronting Managerialism: How the Business Elite and Their Schools Threw Our Lives Out of Balance*. London: Zed Books Ltd.
- Ogden, T. 2005. 'On Psychoanalytic Supervision'. *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 86(5):1265-80.
- Proctor, B. 1991. 'Supervision: A Co-Operative Exercise in Accountability'. Pp. 21-23 in *Marden, Mark & Payne, Malcolm (eds), Enabling and Ensuring: Supervision in Practice*. Leicester: National Youth Bureau.
- Snowden, D J., and Boone M E. 2007. 'A Leader's Framework for Decision Making'. *Harvard Business Review* 85(11):68.
- Stiehm, J H. 2002. *The U.S. Army War College: Military Education in a Democracy*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Western, S. 2013. *Leadership: A Critical Text*. London: Sage.
- Zuboff, S. 2019. *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*. London: Profile Books.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



Simon Cavicchia is a UKCP registered psychotherapist, executive coach, coach supervisor, and leadership development and OD practitioner. He is currently on the faculty of the Ashridge Masters in Executive Coaching. He has published a number of papers on relational and systems perspectives on coaching and is the author with Maria Gilbert of *The Theory and Practice of Relational Coaching*, published by Routledge in 2018. He is interested in how coaching might evolve to meet the complex challenges facing organisations and society.



Martin Vogel is an executive coach and supervisor. A former BBC journalist, he's a founder-director of Vogel Wakefield, the Counter-Consultancy, which works with leaders who want to return business to being part of the solution to society's problems. With Hetty Einzig, he runs eco-systems supervision groups – a values-based approach which explores coaching practice within the context of wider societal and environmental considerations. He blogs at vogelwakefield.com.

To contact the authors, please email leadership.supervision@vogelwakefield.com