

# ACTIVE SUPERVISION

Supervision is a "Way of Life" says Robin Shoet (2020) and we wholeheartedly agree. When we engage in supervision, we bring our whole selves and not just our professional persona.

Supervision is where the transformation occurs when we reflect on our identities and shift our perspectives on how we work, think, feel and live.

Hawkins and Smith (2013), focusing on the process and relationship, define three functions of supervision which allow supervisees to:

- Explore their work, develop their skills and capacities and build their own learning journey (the developmental function).
- Deal with the impact of the work on them and take care of themselves and their emotions (the resourcing function).
- Ensure they operate according to best practices and ethical standards (the qualitative function).

Supervision provides a safe holding place for dialogue, reflection and experiencing where the supervisor "dances" with the supervisee and is a role-model for qualitative meaningful work, vulnerability and compassion.

Caroll (2011), asserts that "In the learning environment called supervision, it's the supervisor who accommodates, who moves, who adapts to the individual learning needs of supervisees. Flexibility continues to be one of the most highly rated supervisor characteristics".



We believe that this agility can be best achieved through the development of psychological flexibility, a transversal skill. Psychological flexibility needs to be developed both by coaches and supervisors alike as this is the key that unlocks fulfilment, enhances the quality of practice, and promotes thriving in our increasingly complex and uncertain world.

Our work and research draw heavily on ACT (Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, also referred to as Acceptance and Commitment Training in business settings).

This is honouring the role that ACT and its founders and contributors played in the development and research of psychological flexibility.

We acknowledge that other approaches and practices also contribute to cultivating psychological flexibility, and that the most suitable approach may depend on the client or the coach and their specific needs.

Research has shown that it is the practitioner and their relationship with the client that contributes to the efficacy of coaching (De Haan, 2013). Our aspiration is to contribute to the development of the practitioner by enriching their presence, awareness, and reflective practice capabilities.

# WHAT IS PSYCHOLOGICAL FLEXIBILITY?

Psychological flexibility, including a range of intra- and inter-personal skills, is seen by many as the pinnacle of mental health (Doorley et al., 2020) and has been shown to enhance well-being, resilience, and performance in various domains of life. It is defined as the ability to think and feel with openness, to be aware of private experiences in the moment, to choose directions that are important, and build habits that allow individuals to live a life in accordance with values and aspirations (Hayes, 2019; Harris, 2019).

Psychological flexibility is a key skill for coaches and supervisors to cultivate, as it allows them to be present, open, and adaptable in their work with clients as they are willing to challenge their own assumptions and beliefs.

## PSYCHOLOGICAL FLEXIBILITY- OUR FINDINGS

### Psychological flexibility in coaches

Despite the importance of psychological flexibility in coaching, there is a lack of research on the self-practice required to develop and maintain this quality.

A study by one of the authors, Anny Bodenstein (2022) explored the lived experience of ACT-practicing coaches during the pandemic to understand coaches' own psychological flexibility and the influence on them and their coaching practice.

A qualitative approach was used to analyse semi-structured interviews of 12 ACT-practicing coaches from the UK, USA and Canada, Australia, Spain and Austria. Three particularly content-rich transcripts of more experienced ACT coaches (>5 years) were selected for interpretative phenomenological analysis after a full thematic analysis was completed. This dual analysis achieved depth and breadth in the exploration of emotional reactions to the pandemic, the nature of self-practice, what psychological flexibility means to coaches and the influence of ACT on the coaching practice.

Coaches displayed varying degrees of psychological flexibility in dealing with the challenges that the pandemic presented. It was highlighted that coaches' helpful actions can sometimes be motivated by a need to avoid uncomfortable emotions and thoughts (experiential avoidance), necessitating the need for self-practice and awareness.

It was confirmed that self-practice developed psychological flexibility and enhanced the wellbeing of coaches during the pandemic.

The findings also showed that coaching that develops psychological flexibility, shares qualities with what has been described as 'advanced coaching' in the literature. This 'advanced coaching' can be ascribed to psychological flexibility.

The study highlighted that developing psychological flexibility can benefit coaches in several ways.

It helps coaches manage stress and navigate challenges in their profession, including handling difficult emotions, addressing ethical dilemmas, and prioritising self-care.

It was also demonstrated that psychological flexibility enhances coaches' skills and effectiveness by fostering empathy, creativity, and flexibility in interventions, tailoring coaching to client needs and values, and cultivating a collaborative and trusting relationship.

Additionally, and also confirmed in the literature, psychological flexibility enables coaches to serve as role models for their clients, guiding them toward greater psychological flexibility themselves (Anstiss, 2020).

Furthermore, the study showed that coaches with higher levels of psychological flexibility are less constrained by the expert role and performance pressure, allowing them to fully support the client's journey in coaching. This aligns with Hill and Oliver's (2018) view that the coach is a process expert, rather than content expert and that their role is to facilitate and promote the process of change.

## Developing psychological flexibility in coaches during coaching supervision

The ACT Matrix (Polk et al., 2016) encompasses all ACT processes and although many coaches have incorporated the ACT Matrix into their work with clients, there is limited evidence regarding its use and benefits for themselves.

To address this gap, a supervision project conducted by Nadine Hemmer (2022) investigated the impact of using an ACT intervention on coaches' psychological flexibility, personal development, and the quality of their practice.

The project involved six coaches from Australia, the United Kingdom, and the USA, selected based on their coaching experience and knowledge of ACT.

These coaches participated in six group sessions and were invited to complete the ACT Matrix before and after their coaching sessions with clients. The ACT Matrix was also employed during supervision sessions as a supportive tool for contracting and cultivating mindful presence.

The qualitative analysis of the project's results was based on observations, feedback, and reflections from both the supervisor and the coaches involved.

The integration of an ACT-informed process and the ACT Matrix in the supervision journey has proven valuable for practitioners to engage in self-reflection and enhance various aspects of their coaching practice.

It supports and sustains the alliance, enhances self-awareness, presence, and compassion for both the coach and the client.

The use of the ACT Matrix provides an effective way for building the internal supervisor, as described by Casement (2013). It offers both a compass and a lens to practitioners.

A compass to behave in alignment with their purpose and the qualities they aspire to display in general and in specific contexts and a lens to observe their moves, their internal experience, their behavioural reactive patterns and their resources.

The ACT Matrix facilitates a deeper understanding of how coaching sessions unfold, enables monitoring of the coaching relationship, aids in session preparation, and enhances awareness of parallel processes at play.

## CONCLUSION

Fiona Adamson (2011) eloquently expresses the potential of transformational supervision in exploring both our cognitive and social-emotional selves.

“We can learn to hold this wide agenda with heart as well as mind and will. As we begin to do this kind of learning we can develop insight and compassion for ourselves. In turn we then develop a good sense of the challenges many of our clients face daily and facilitate those aspects of their development that they need in order to be effective at work”.

Her words perfectly capture the contribution to the development of coaches we aimed to achieve through our two projects.

We sincerely hope that our findings will prove valuable not only to professional coach training providers but also to all coaches and supervisors.

We encourage practitioners to develop psychological flexibility in their personal and professional lives, and their practices, for their own benefit, and that of their clients.

## ABOUT US



Anny Bodenstein works as an executive and team coach globally. She holds EMCC and ICF accreditation, and is trained in supervision, action learning and mediation.

She has served in several executive and leadership roles during her career, with expertise in Organisational Development, Employee Engagement, Change Management and Transformation.

She has more than 25 years of experience in helping people grow and develop across different sectors and levels, from executives to frontline roles, and uses her coaching skills to help people have better conversations and think more clearly.

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Nadine Hemmer has 25+ years of experience working with leaders and their teams in European public institutions and companies. A qualified psychologist with a specialization in cognitive and behavioural therapy, her experience covers both business and health settings. She holds an EMCC accreditation at master practitioner level and is an accredited coach supervisor by both EMCC Global and Coaching Supervision Academy (CSA). Nadine's work is deeply informed by contextual behavioural science to support practitioners and their clients in making purposeful, sustainable, and transformational change for themselves and the systems in which they belong.

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