

Using the seven conversations in supervision

Introduction

While most textbooks refer to the coaching conversation as if it were a single, discrete dialogue, in practice both coach and client carry out reflective dialogues in their minds before, during and after the spoken conversation. Each of these additional dialogues has an important role to play in the nature and the effectiveness of the coaching conversation. Within supervision, the seven conversations provide a practical method for bringing different perspectives to bear on how both coach and client approach the learning dialogue and the learning relationship. They also focus attention on the thoughts and behaviours of both parties in the coaching relationship.

The seven conversations of coaching were originally conceived as a means of deconstructing the coaching dialogue, with the aims of identifying where the dialogue was most and least effective and helping coaches raise their awareness of what was going on in both their own minds and that of their client (and to a lesser extent what was occurring in the space between). The stimulus for development of this approach was that coaches frequently became “stuck” in terms of translating a general sense that a coaching relationship was not working properly, or that they were not delivering sufficient value to the client, into clarity about what was going wrong. Very often, for example, they assumed that the problem lay with how they were engaging with the client within the coaching session, when the real issues related to unconscious conversations either they or the client were having internally before the formal coaching session. Expanding the coach’s perspective of where the coaching conversations were taking place offered an alternative and arguably faster method of exploring the relationship and conversational dynamics.

The seven conversations have proved to be a practical and flexible tool within the supervisor’s toolbox. Among the reported benefits:

- It provides a structure, against which to explore elements of the coaching conversation
- It helps coach and supervisor identify issues for reflection between supervisory session
- It provides a framework, on which to hang a wide variety of techniques and approaches

It shifts the emphasis of reflection and analyses away from what the coach said or did, and towards the dialogue between the coach and the client – and hence permits more of a systems approach to understanding the conversational dynamics.

Description of the model

For those unfamiliar with the seven conversations, they are:

1. The coach's reflection before dialogue (their preparatory thinking before the coaching conversation)
2. The client's reflection/ preparatory thinking before the dialogue
3. The coach's internal, unspoken reflections during the dialogue
4. The spoken dialogue
5. The client's internal, unspoken reflections during the dialogue
6. The coach's reflections after the conversation
7. The client's reflections after the dialogue

Most coach development and support focuses on the middle of these -- the spoken dialogue. Yet the effectiveness of the spoken dialogue depends heavily on the other six conversations. Building our competence in each of the conversations is essential in mastering the coaching role.

The coach's initial inner dialogue

The purpose of this dialogue is to ensure that the coach is mentally prepared for the coaching conversation. The quality of the conversation is dependent, to a significant extent, on the quality of thinking both coach and coachee put into their preparation – although spontaneity of dialogue still plays a major role, too! In this dialogue the coach considers how they have helped so far and in what ways. Inevitably, this leads them to reflect upon their own emotions and motivations (e.g. Are they trying too hard to help? Do they care too much?). Other issues they reflect upon might include:

- *Context.* What is the “big picture” for this client? What metaphors might I use to describe the client's situation? What metaphors does the client use? Do I understand what drives the client and why? Who else is present in our conversations and in what ways?
- *Avoidance.* What issues or emotions is this client avoiding? What issues is the coach avoiding? What collusion may be happening between them?
- *Attitude.* How the coach feels generally about this relationship can have a major impact on the subsequent conversations. Useful questions to ask include: Am I looking forward to this meeting? (If not, what's the issue and what should I be doing about it?); What are my responsibilities in this relationship?

Of course, there are many other powerful questions the coach can ask. But considering this kind of question in advance of the coaching session seems to help free up intuition, by raising awareness of the conversational and relational dynamics. It also helps prevent distracting thoughts of the “I need to articulate this in order to file it away” variety intruding into the main coaching conversation – they have already been dealt with. And it gives the coach ammunition, with which to address concerns about the relationship and the client's authenticity, which might otherwise have been lost in the ebb and flow of the main conversation around the issue the client brings to the table.

The client's initial inner dialogue

Preparation by the coachee is equally important and can be equally demanding. At least an hour's quality reflective space is typically required to prepare for an intensive coaching session. Particularly useful themes include:

- *What they have learned since the previous session, by conscious or unconscious consideration of questions raised by the coach, or by letting insights they gained within the session percolate.* Useful questions here include:
 - What has happened to me and my thinking since our last meeting? How have I and my perceptions changed?
 - How have I made use of the insights I gained?
- *What issues they would like help with, in the next session and why.*
 - What issues have been resolved and what new issues have arisen?
 - What's the relationship between these issues and my overall goals?
 - What thinking have I already done around these issues?
 - How do I want my coach to help?
 - What information can I provide to help the coach understand the issue?
- *Their own attitudes and motivations towards the coaching conversation and coaching relationship.*
 - Do I really want to resolve this issue? What are my motivations for introducing it *now*?
 - How do I feel about this relationship?
 - How prepared am I to be challenged on this issue?
 - Am I looking forward to this meeting? (If not, what's the issue and what should I be doing about it?)
 - What more could I do to help the coach help me?

Having this dialogue – even if they address only one or two of these questions – helps the coachee accept their responsibilities in the relationship. It's very easy to allow coaching to be something to be done to you. Being coached can have much in common with being entertained. It also helps them to structure their thinking, so that they are better able to articulate the issue and how it affects them. And it reinforces what might be called “conversational honesty” – the openness that underpins mutual positive regard.

The coach's inner dialogue during the spoken conversation

This inner dialogue takes place in parallel with the process of listening and asking questions. Sometimes called “reflection-in-action” (Schon, 1983), it requires us to both participate fully in the conversation and observe it as dispassionately as

possible. In some ways, it's like the running commentary advanced drivers use, when they talk themselves through how they observe the road ahead of them.

The focus of this inner conversation shifts intuitively, in response to verbal, physiological and other triggers. At times the focus will be inner-directed; at others outer-directed. Inner-directed conversations relate to "How am I helping?" and might address questions, such as:

- What is the quality of my listening? (Am I fully focused on the client?)
- What am I observing/ hearing? What am I missing?
- Is my intuition turned on?
- What assumptions am I making? How might these be acting as a filter on my listening and my understanding?
- Am I spending too much attention on crafting the next question? (Is this affecting my ability to be "in the moment"?)

Outer-directed conversations, in contrast, raise awareness of issues, such as:

- What is the client not saying?
- What is the quality of the client's thinking?
- How am I feeling in the moment? If I feel uncomfortable, what is making me so?
- How is the client feeling at this moment?

I am not suggesting here that the coach articulates such questions in their mind and then tries to answer them. What happens appears to be much closer to the advanced driver analogy. The driver does not say to himself "I wonder if that cyclist is going to turn across the pedestrian crossing". Rather, he or she allows a small part of their attentiveness to recognise the possibility and consider it, while maintaining close attention to the road ahead and preparing for a sudden stop if required. In the same way, the effective coach has rehearsed these questions in so many ways, and at so many times, that they are able to manage this sub-conversation at a largely intuitive, instinctive level.

The spoken conversation

This is the part that attracts the most attention. It's also the easiest conversation and therefore highly beguiling. Inexperienced or inexpert coaches frequently are aware only of this conversation, and oblivious to the inner conversations going on simultaneously in themselves and the client (if they have an inner conversation at all!). Effective coaches maintain awareness of all three, while instinctively reviewing the dynamics of the spoken conversation, asking themselves questions such as:

- Is there consonance between what is said and our body language?
- Is there a logical pattern of development to the conversation?
- Are we exploring issues from multiple perspectives?
- Who is doing most of the talking/ coming up with most of the ideas?

- Who is asking most of the questions?
- Is the pace sufficiently varied (e.g. is there space for both quiet reflection and rapid building on ideas?)
- Are we both engaged in the conversation?
- Are we exploring issues in sufficient depth?

Inexperienced coaches often tend to feel they have to keep the conversation going, which puts them in the driving seat. More experienced coaches allow the conversation to find its own path and help the client make choices about which direction to follow, when there are forks in the road. An analogy is an orchestra, where the players decide what the tune will be and the conductor merely holds them together. Allowing the conversation to happen in this way enables the coach to notice so much more – the choice of words and phrases, the tone and energy of the conversation, non-verbal communication, particularly at the level of micro-expression, and the structure of the client's reasoning.

One of the biggest barriers to attending to this conversation can be the need by some coaches to constrain the conversation within a predetermined model or process – for example, GROW (Whitmore, 2002), clean language (Sullivan and Rees, 2008) or solutions focus (Jackson and McKergow, 2007). If the constant, unspoken question is “Am I keeping this conversation on track?” or “Am I doing the process right?” then the coach's focus tends to be on the process, not on the client. It's difficult then to attend to the spoken conversation, let alone to the more subtle, observant inner conversation.

The coachee's inner dialogue during the spoken conversation

The coachee can contribute more to the learning dialogue, if he or she is also process-aware. The management of the conversation and its direction then become a shared activity.

It's unlikely, however, that many clients will be aware of their own inner conversations. Yet at some level they will be making choices about what they say, how honest they will be with the coach and how much attention they are paying to their own words and emotions. Part of the coach's role is to act as a mirror on this inner conversation, helping to surface unspoken thoughts and to heighten the client's self awareness. Using approaches such as Gestalt can be very powerful in this context.

However, there is another aspect, which I find few coaches have considered – the coach's responsibility to help the client develop their own skills of self-observation. It may be more difficult for the client to reflect on their inner conversation in the full flow of the spoken conversation, but frequent pauses for reflection provide opportunities for them to consider questions, such as:

- What assumptions or filters am I applying in answering the coach's questions?
- How am I feeling about the conversation? If I feel uncomfortable, what is making me so?
- How is my coach feeling at this moment?
- What are the opportunities for learning in this conversation?
- How am I helping the coach understand my issues?

The coach's inner conversation after the meeting

"Reflection-on-action" is also a critical part of the coach's continuous improvement and personal growth. While the meeting is still fresh in his or her memory, the coach should review the five antecedent conversations, asking themselves questions about:

How I helped

- What insights did we create together? What did I do to enhance the quality of the client's thinking?
- Was I appropriately directive/ non-directive?
- Did we create a "bias for action"?

What choices did I make?

- What insightful questions did I ask, which might be useful in other learning conversations?
- What questions did I withhold and why?
- Was I sufficiently challenging?
- Did I give the coachee sufficient time to think?

What did I learn?

- What patterns can I discern from this and previous conversations with this client?
- What would I do differently another time?

What concerns do I have?

- Where did I struggle?
- What negative emotions am I aware of?
- Am I still looking forward to the next meeting?

I advise coaches to create a list of questions that works for them, personally, and to keep in mind as they answer them the over-arching question "What can I usefully take to my supervisor?" Capturing these thoughts is important – memory fades quickly! – and it can help to record and describe not only the issue, but also significant language and emotions. (Emoticons can be a helpful prompt here!)

The client's inner conversation after the meeting

One of the advantages of holding coaching sessions where the client has to travel subsequently is that it gives them space for reflection in the immediate aftermath of the coaching conversation. This post-meeting reflection is vital in terms of translating good thoughts into practical action. Failure here is often, in my experience, associated with coaching relationships where the client talks endlessly about his or her issues during the session, but makes little progress between sessions.

The coach's responsibility extends, in my view, to helping the client develop the skills, ability and motivation to reflect purposefully and hence gain full value from the session. This may mean discussing with them, how and when they will reflect and contracting with them that they will do so.

Critical areas, on which this conversation can usefully focus include:

Learning

- What new ideas and insights have I gained?
- What do I need to think about more deeply?

Intention

- How am I going to put this learning into practice?
- What do I want to explore with other people?
- What changed expectations do I now have of myself? How do these align with other people's expectations of me?

Process and behaviour

- Was I sufficiently open and honest?
- What could I have done to extract more value from the conversation?
- What will I do differently in preparing for the next coaching session?

And so the wheel turns...

Seven conversations in practice

Some specific benefits of this approach have been explored above, but a more general proposition can be put forward that coaches often need help in understanding how the conversational dynamics have influenced the conduct and outcomes of specific coaching interactions and relationships; and in building their own ability to reflect in action.

A technique I use frequently in one to one coaching is "scripting", when clients appear to have repeated dysfunctional conversations with the same individuals or in similar circumstances. Scripting involves recording the conversation, the emotions, the physical reactions and, if possible, any other instinctive responses that occur during the course of the conversation and in anticipation of it. Sometimes the script

begins with events or conversations well before the conversation where things go wrong for the client – for example, there may be a series of minor niggling interactions that build up a reservoir of irritation, lack of self-belief or other unhelpful emotions. Ideally, we try to capture at least two separate scripts of similar conversations. Not surprisingly, there is usually a lot of similarity between the words, phrases and emotions that appear in the two versions.

It becomes very clear in analysing this data that language, emotion, physical posture and outcomes are closely linked. (Seiler, 2007) Raising awareness of these links allows the client to make choices about which elements of the script to change, and how.

Occasionally, I may use the technique “changing the script” (Meggison and Clutterbuck, 2009, p 166-7) to further explore one of the seven conversations with a coach. However, more generally, helping the coach to focus on the coaching conversation and its antecedents enables them to adopt a relatively objective (though not always dispassionate!) perspective on how they and the client engage. It could be argued that any method of objective deconstruction of the coaching conversation is valuable within appropriate supervision situations.

What might such circumstances be? Some examples are:

- When the coach feels in some way inadequate or that they have “failed” the client
- When the client procrastinates constantly, leaving the coach frustrated
- When the coach feels too close (intimate), or too distant from the client
- When the coach has a sense that there are unidentified others in the room
- When conversations are repeated, with no sense of significant progress in the client’s thinking or behaviour
- When the coach simply has the intuition that they are “missing something important” in the conversation or the relationship
- When the coach feels there is a moment (or longer) of disconnect in the conversation but can’t pin down what was occurring (Clutterbuck, 2008)

Analysing the conversation helps the coach firstly to identify the point in the conversation, where they first became consciously aware of their concern, then to work back in the conversation(s) to try to identify earlier points, where there are clues to what is coming. These clues may, of course, be other than verbal – a conversation is made up of much more than just words. The discipline of conversation analysis (which aims to “reveal the organized reasoning procedures, which inform the production of mutually occurring talk” – Hutchby & Woolfitt, 2008 p2) has much to offer here in terms of technique and process, although it is not essentially for the supervisor to be highly versed in analytical techniques.

It also important to keep in mind that conversations are about a lot more than simply imparting information. According to Gee (2005, p2): “The primary function of human language is ... to support the performance of social activities and social identities and to support human affiliation with culture, social groups and institutions”. Sounds a bit like a definition of coaching!

Used mechanistically, however, like most other approaches within coaching and counselling, the seven conversations framework has the potential to become constraining and perhaps even stunt insight. While most difficulties within a coaching relationship are likely to be reflected in the quality and content (presence or absence) of the conversation, some issues – for example, a lack of trust between coach and coachee, or pressure being exerted on one or both of coach and client by an influential third party – may not be recognised or acknowledged by either.

There is also a challenge for coaches in the potential conflict between attentiveness and reflection-in-action. If the coach is to be fully engaged with the client, can they at the same time allow part of their mind to be analytical and almost observing as a third party? It seems from dialogue with coaches, both within supervision and more generally, in group training sessions, that people have widely differing abilities to do this. One simple technique that works for some people is to use different senses for different simultaneous observations. So, for example, I find that I can close my eyes and intensify the quality of my listening to a client, while at the same time “seeing” the conversation through the eyes of my alter ego, who is tuned in at an intuitive level. For deeper analysis, stimulated by an intuitive insight, it is sometimes necessary to stop the conversation temporarily; or to make a note for subsequent reflection – I can’t attend fully *and* try to deconstruct in detail what is going on in the conversation at the same time.

The tension between allowing intuition-stimulated awareness into the conversation and parking intuitions is central to coaching conversation management.

The seven conversations process enhances the seven-eyed model (Hawkins & Smith, 2006). It examines the conversation from the perspective of the client, from the strategies and interventions used by the coach, and the relationship between the coach and the client. It can help contextualise the conversation and the coaching relationship, by revealing and exploring conversations the client is not having, or conversations that are antecedents to those occurring in the coaching session. It can also be used by the supervisor and supervisee to deconstruct their own conversations – for example, when the supervisor reflects back to the coach their feelings and observations about what is being said and how it is being said. I sometimes find myself asking “Which bits of the conversation with the client have you transposed to *this* conversation, between us?”

I would argue that the seven conversations framework also adds a dimension to the seven-eyed model – the coaching conversation itself. Coaching conversations have a life of their own. They are (unless the coach is robotically following a coaching model,

such as GROW or CLEAR) unpredictable, wayward, peripatetic, curious, instinctive, and infinitely variable in colour and tone. They are a product of the participants, and of the interaction between them, but they also exert an influence on the participants at both a conscious and unconscious level.

Supervising with the seven conversations

So how can the seven conversations be used to good effect?

Choosing whether to attend to observations from each of the conversations, and whether to draw the client's attention to them, requires a combination of intuition and judgement. In supervision, I make similar choices. However, most of the dialogue using the seven conversations framework comes from the coach's post-hoc recognition of unconscious observations, revealed by reviewing the conversations.

I find myself constantly experimenting with different ways of using the seven conversations to help the coach gain insights. Typically, I might begin by asking the coach questions such as:

- What is it about this particular coaching relationship that gives you a sense of unease or that something is not quite right?
- How clear in your mind is this feeling? How clear to you is what causes this feeling?
- What is at the edge of your awareness about this relationship?
- Does your concern relate just to the most recent conversation or does it arise from several conversations?

I might then try to add further context – for example, by using CLEAN language questions to isolate and define the nature of the concern the coach is bringing to supervision, if I feel the coach is struggling to describe it. As with a coaching conversation, it's important, I find, not to jump into a presented issue, but to allow awareness of the issue to emerge as part of the initial settling into the supervision dialogue. This provides a richer context, against which to analyse those of the seven conversations, which the coach elects to focus on.

Having identified the source of concern (which may simply be a general, unfocused feeling at this stage) we work through the seven conversations in whatever order the coach wishes. If I sense that they are avoiding reflecting on one of the conversations, I voice what I'm feeling and invite them to consider what they want to do with that piece of information. Sometimes they acknowledge the avoidance and change the order, in which we review each conversation; sometimes we "park" the observation and agree to review it at a later point in the supervision dialogue.

A process I often use is to ask the coach to describe the selected conversation. I might prompt them with questions, such as:

- Envision being in the coaching conversation now. What is happening? Who else is there?
- Where do you feel most and least grounded?
- What's going on in your mind?
- What's missing? What's out of place?

It often occurs that the coach's recollection of the conversation focuses immediately on a point some way into it. I typically listen while they explore this point, then, when the time feels right, ask them what drew them to attend to this element, rather than start at the beginning. Sometimes – and particularly in relation to the first two, preparatory conversations, the coach needs to spend time reflecting where the beginning actually is. Similarly, for conversations three, four and five, we may explore:

- How prepared for coaching are you/ they?
- What baggage have you/ they brought into the conversation (but not necessarily articulated)?
- What expectations do you have (of the client, of yourself, of the conversation)?
- What happens in the “meeting and greeting” time before the conversation(s) get going?

For example, it is quite common for the coach to sense a power differential between them and the client, as the conversation progresses. (Garvey, 2003). When that happens, it can be helpful to reflect upon how and where this differential comes from. In many, if not most cases, it begins with specific words or behaviours by one or both parties, in the initial niceties before the coaching conversation proper even begins.

One conversation may often be influenced by another. I often find that the conversation initially selected becomes a signpost to the conversation, where the issue is “really” grounded.

When we need to go into greater depth, conversation analysis helps define more clearly what is happening. I try to avoid jumping straight into the words said, or the verbal content. Rather, I help the coach relive the conversation in the light of more contextual factors, such as the following:

- Atmosphere: temperature, bright/dull, colour
- Flow: pace, energy, direction, purposefulness
- Efficacy: what changed or what foundations were laid for change?
- Openness: self-honesty, instinctive responses, body language
- Identity: self-awareness, authenticity, awareness of perceptions by others
- Ownership: coach directed, client directed, jointly owned, jointly disowned
- Creative thinking: multi-perspective, constrained / unconstrained

- Attentiveness: awareness of nuance, unspoken meaning, unspoken communication, being “with” or “holding” the client
- Focus: convex or concave (i.e. were we focusing in on a very specific theme or widening out and more discursive; or moving backwards and forwards between these foci?)

The aim of the analysis is not necessarily to pinpoint where things are going well or badly (although that frequently occurs), but to deepen and broaden the coach’s awareness of the conversation as a dynamic exchange.

If we feel that an analysis of the verbal content would potentially be useful, an additional question set comes into play. These questions include:

- What words or phrases captured your attention then?
- With the attentiveness of recollection, what words or phrases capture your attention now?
- Do these words or phrases echo those from previous coaching conversations with this client? (Or – often even more revealing -- with another client?)
- What makes these significant for you?
- What makes them significant for the client?
- Is the client aware of this significance?

Of course, analysis can be seductive and could potentially even be an avoidance tactic – focusing on the detail to avoid larger implications. It’s a matter of judgement when the coach has acquired sufficient understanding of the conversational dynamics and their choices – both then and in future conversations – to move from deconstruction to construction.

It’s also useful to apply the seven conversations to the supervision process, too. (Great fleas have lesser fleas ...) In reflecting on supervision sessions, I use the model as a check on my own thinking and choices. For example, if I suggest some form of experimentation, asking “what was it about the conversation at that point that led me to make that choice?” helps separate my issues from those of the coach and their client.

Case examples

In the case below, the coach came to supervision with a specific client in mind. The stimulus for applying the seven conversations was a combination of an intuitive sense by the coach that the coaching relationship was not working as well as it could and a difficulty in pinpointing what the problem was and /or where the source of the problem lay. The initial dialogue explored what the coach’s intuition was telling them both at the current time (as they sat in the supervision session) and as they recollected from the session(s) with the client. The decision to use the seven conversations as a framework for exploring this issue was taken jointly – suggested by the supervisor and agreed to by the coach, in the spirit of experimentation.

The coach felt a level of frustration that, while the dialogue with the client was open, energetic and positive, very little of substance emerged at the end. She felt that the client was not taking the relationship seriously enough. The spoken conversation was energetic and enjoyable, but the client seemed reluctant to commit to any firm course of action.

Two conversations gradually emerged as having particular significance. One was the client's reflections before the coaching session. It emerged that gathering information about the issue had been driven by the coach. The client's starting point was a general feeling of unease about his progression in the organization. He felt no urgency – he had brought the issue simply because the coaching session provided an opportunity to explore it.

The other conversation, which coach and supervisor explored in depth, was the conversation in her mind, during the coaching session. She had experienced increasing frustration at his apparent reluctance to engage with ideas about how he could move his career on, for example by being more proactive in managing his reputation.

The coach decided to work on the first of these conversations to begin with. An initial question was whether the client had even had this conversation. The coach had assumed that, because the client had chosen this issue, he had given it some thought already, but the recollected conversation suggested this was not so. A lesson the coach extracted here was the importance of identifying what pre-thinking a client has done, before plunging into the coaching dialogue.

At this point, she expressed the perception that she would feel more confident, if she had some approaches in her kitbag to help the client take a step back and have the inner conversation, as an hors d'oeuvres to the main conversation. Various alternatives were discussed, ranging from the simple questions "What thinking have you done about this already?" or "What conversation might you usefully have had about this with yourself in preparation for this meeting?", to giving the client a sheet of paper, on which to write or draw everything they know and feel about the issue. We also briefly rehearsed a conversation she might have with the client to set expectations about his preparation for the next session.

We then moved on to her inner conversation during the spoken coaching conversation. An analogy emerged of sailing, where the direction of the wind and the angle of the rudder and sail are always partially or fully opposed and making headway is often a matter of moving sideways, rather than directly ahead. Her attempts to steer the conversation were diverted by his unwillingness to commit to a particular course. Reliving some of the points in the conversation, where she had felt this most strongly, a critical question evolved – "Whose need was it to have an outcome from this conversation?" The coach quickly realised that the urgency to find a solution was hers, driven by her need to feel that she had helped, and that the client's need was to understand their situation and their motives more fully. What the client could do about career progress was less important to him at this point than deciding whether he wanted to progress and, if so, in what direction.

From analysing this specific conversation, the coach was able to explore with the supervisor a much wider range of issues, relating to potential conflict between her

needs and those of her clients. In particular, she realised that her strong sense of responsibility for her clients and their welfare had both benefits and downsides and that she needed to manage this aspect of her practice more proactively

A critical appraisal of the approach

Although the seven conversations could be regarded as a model of supervision, I am personally reluctant to claim that status for what I prefer to regard as a useful framework, upon which to hang other methods and models of coach supervision. Feedback from coach clients has broadly been that the seven conversations are efficacious in helping them think methodically about their coaching practice and to pinpoint when and where in the coaching dialogue issues of concern may be located. Coaches I have supervised also report that they have been able to use the approach in self-analysis, particularly to identify when coaching relationships do not seem to be progressing as expected.

However, as a relatively recent concept – I first evolved the framework and began to use it in supervision in 2006 – there is neither a wide body of experience, nor any form of empirical review of how it works in practice. It is also difficult to link the approach to empirically researched supervisory practice. I hope that in future there will be opportunities to experiment with and compare use of the seven conversations in combination with more traditional approaches to supervision.

Comparison with other frameworks for supervision suggests that this approach addresses some but by no means all of the wide range of tasks associated with the supervisor role. For example, Harris (1983) identifies eight key tasks, which appear to have informed the frameworks created by Hawkins and Smith (2006), Proctor (1988), and Carroll (2004). The seven conversations framework helps the coach master specific skills (listening to the wider conversations) enlarge understanding of the client and of process issues, increase the coach's awareness of self and of their impact on the process, and help overcome personal and intellectual obstacles toward learning and mastery. However, it has relatively little impact in terms of developing understanding of concepts and theory or providing a stimulus to research. Nor does it necessarily encompass the ethical dimension of supervision. According to Carroll (2004, p66) "Supervisors do not view their task as 'teaching' ethical codes and standards, but rather as to review their implementation". Because the emphasis of the seven conversations is on understanding the conversational process and dynamics, it is possible to skim over or ignore more philosophical aspects of the coaching practice.

Experimenting with the seven conversations

If you decide to experiment with the seven conversations, the first place to start is with your own practice. I have found it informative to compare the conversations that take place in one or more of my coaching relationships with those that occur in my

supervision. I also find it helpful to think of the conversations as entities in their own right. How is each of us influencing and being influenced by them? And how does each conversation influence the others?

I have also worked on heightening my awareness of conversational dynamics by finding opportunities outside the supervision environment, when I can listen and observe. This may involve some personal reframing -- for example, my instinctive response on a train is to tune out other people's conversations, rather than tune into them! Coach training and coach assessment also provide useful opportunities. If one observer is concentrating on content and process, the other can attend more fully to the conversational dynamics.

Perhaps the most valuable advice I have given myself in using the seven conversations is not to use it as a process for managing supervision sessions, but as a stimulus, reinforcement and balance for my intuition. "Apply gently for best results!"

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