

# Creating the Container for Reflective Practice in Virtual Small Group Supervision

A thesis submitted to Middlesex University in partial fulfilment of the  
requirements for the degree of Doctor of Professional Studies  
(Transdisciplinary Practice)

Publication to the Middlesex University repository is forthcoming.

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APRIL 2021

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## ABSTRACT

### Creating the Container for Reflective Practice in Virtual Small Group Coaching Supervision

**I am a coaching supervisor based in North America. My primary practice is supervising virtual small groups of executive coaches. Coaching supervision is a developing practice; there is little research in the field of individual coach supervision, and almost none in the context of small group supervision. My overall purposes were to influence the adoption of coaching supervision within North American, where supervision is only beginning to be utilized; to make contributions to the practice of small group coaching supervision by elucidating what actually happened in the groups; and to contribute to addressing the gap in research-based literature. Over the 18 months of research with the North American based supervision groups, the aims of this project were addressed through two inquiries: What are the qualities and conditions that create enough safety in the supervision relationships within a group to enable self-disclosure, reflection and learning? How are these qualities and conditions designed and brought forth?**

This thesis opens the doors and windows to the virtual rooms in which small supervision groups convened, adding to the collective knowledge about the artful craft and challenges of supervising; the development of the supervisory relationships; the groups' processes and learning over a year; and the complexities that were present in virtual small group work. Five supervision groups, consisting of 21 coaches and 4 supervisors, participated over 18 months. I was the practitioner-researcher and supervisor for two groups, and for the first time in coaching supervision research<sup>1</sup>, a full year of recordings of the actual supervision sessions were collected as field texts. The study was further enriched by the collection of the coaches' monthly journal entries and three action learning meetings that addressed the overall process of the supervision engagement and three groups, supervised by colleagues, which participated in monthly journaling and focus groups about their supervision processes.

The research makes two contributions to the knowledge of practice. The first is the effectiveness of virtual small group supervision—when a supervisor and coaches come together virtually in a small group, they learn and develop in their own unique ways, personally and professionally, through integration of inquiry, reflection and action. The second is a number of practitioner accounts which enables practitioners to contrast and compare with how they engage in their work. These stories are instrumental in inviting coaches with little or no supervision experience to consider how they might utilize supervision in small groups to deepen their reflective practices. This is the invitation to North American coaches. More experienced practitioners are able to engage in multi-dimensional conversations to explore and enrich the practice of small group supervision.

The contributions to theory are to the understanding of the dimensions of the supervisory relationship within the small group context, as the primacy of the supervisory relationships in the group setting were identified. The supervisory relationships included the individual relationships among the group members and the supervisor: the supervisor with each individual coach, the supervisor with the group as a whole, and the coaches with each other. This research contributes to the knowledge of the qualities required for the creation and stewardship of a safe and trusted container with a small group engaged in reflective practice. Key findings include the articulation of the process for the supervision engagement, a model of the elements the supervisor is holding, a model of reflective practice and learning opportunities, and a model of the overall supervision session.

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<sup>1</sup> I have been unable to locate any coaching supervision research that utilized the recordings of the actual supervision sessions over an extended time period.

## Dedication

To my stepsons and daughters-in-law, my grandchildren, nieces and nephews, their spouses and significant others, and my great grandchildren. Thank you for enthusiastically embracing my going back to school. Your continuing delight that I was a student steadied me on this journey. With gold stars to Joy Duggan, Sarah Smith, and Shannon Flake for many late-night sessions studying together virtually.

## Acknowledgments

I am delighted to have Dr. David Adams as my academic advisor—we were matched randomly, and it was a serendipitously brilliant pairing from my perspective. Dave’s warmth, positive affirmations, strong challenges and good humor were just what I needed.

It was rewarding to work with Pat Marum, who ably served as my substantive content advisor. Her directness, challenge wrapped in encouragement, and her willing sharing of stories and experiences as the first certified coaching supervisor living and working in North America enriched me.

I am grateful to my coaching supervisors, Dr. Pamela McLean, Edna Murdoch and Dr. Alison Hodge; they have inspired and nurtured my ongoing personal and professional development.

I have been enriched by all of my coaching and supervision colleagues with whom I have engaged in a variety of learning communities, from formal to ad hoc. They have inspired me, challenged me, served as role models, pointed out strengths, challenged blind spots, and served as beacons of light along the way.

I am indebted to Hudson Institute of Coaching (the “Sponsor”) for sponsoring this research. I have been inspired by Dr. Pamela McLean’s commitment to research about executive coaching and coaching supervision. Working with the leaders at Hudson was a collaborative and collegial endeavor that was graced by the presence, thoughtfulness and determination of Toni McLean. I am blessed and grateful to have had her energies and persistence on behalf of our agreement.

I appreciate and am grateful for my coaching and supervision clients, who trusted me to work with them, and taught me richly about my professional endeavors in the context of the fullness of our lives.

Thank you to the research participants who volunteered and wholeheartedly engaged in service to our profession.

I am especially thankful to my closest friends: the late Dr. Patricia Adson, Tricia Backelin, Jo Birch, Martha Goldstein, Caroline Hansen, Dr. Bonnie Hill, Cindy Levine, Dr. Carol Pearson, Jennifer Reitz, Dr. Ana Pliopas, Kathleen Stinnett, and Carol Tisson.

To Dr. Joanne Moran, in acknowledgment of the path we have travelled together:

*"Oh, the comfort, the inexpressible comfort of feeling safe with a person, having neither to weigh thoughts nor measure words, but pouring them all out, just as they are, chaff and grain together, certain that a faithful hand will take and sift them, keep what is worth keeping, and with a breath of kindness blow the rest away".*

*(Craik, 1859, pp. 270-271)*

Three notes of special thanks and appreciation: to Kelly Hudson, my writing coach extraordinaire and capable illustrator; to Amina Fahmy, for her consistency and wizardry with this document; and to Shannon Flake for her insightful proofreading.

## Glossary

### Coach

An individual trained and certified by the Sponsor, often also certified by the ICF (International Coaching Federation), who works primarily with executives and leaders within organizations in a coaching relationship. The coaching fees are often paid by the client's organization. A few of the coaches were not yet in coaching roles; they were in transition from other careers. A few of the coaches had retired or moved to other endeavors; in both situations they were no longer coaching.

### Group size

The size of the group is stated in terms of the number of coaches in the group. If there are six coaches in a group with the supervisor, the total group is seven, and the group is described as a "group of six".

### Presenting coach

The coach who is presenting the case/issue/theme at that moment in the group.

### Supervisor

The person who is being paid to supervise the group. This person has multiple roles including being in relationship with the individuals and the group, manager of the group dynamics and reflective practice guardian.

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