

Chapter 8: Findings—Co-creation and stewardship of the garden

“Gardening is learning, learning, learning. That’s the fun of them. You’re always learning”.

Dame Helen Mirren (Bang Showbiz N.Z., 2020)

The Garden of Supervision

My inquiry:

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?

It is a complex, multi-faceted, and challenging endeavor to supervise virtual small groups. To convey what happened in the room; to open the doors and windows of the virtual rooms requires articulation of the relationships, processes, structures, and dynamics. Clandinin (2016, p.51) wrote “Final research texts do not have final answers...These texts are intended to engage audiences to rethink and reimagine the ways in which they practice and the ways in which they relate to others”. I describe my findings and conclusions, in three Chapters, as a starting point for others to inquire about their own practices, and as contribution to the knowledge base of the lived experiences of the coaches and supervisors in virtual small group coaching supervision.

Introducing the garden metaphor

I have two inspirations for this metaphor. The first is that I am a gardener. There are feelings of satisfaction and joy in cultivating and tending the garden, the bountiful blossoms, thriving shrubs and trees, and the number of living creatures who come to share the space. There are the disappointments when pests or weather decimate parts of it, when plants die from over pruning or lack of rain. All that happens in the garden is intertwined and many elements are outside the control of the gardener. This is a useful metaphor as the elements of the supervisory space are intertwined, and many are outside the control of the supervisor. The supervisor can provide structure, process and

possibilities for the container; she cannot create it on her own. I have walked the Royal Botanic Kew Gardens in London as a supervisee, with my supervisor, integrating reflections on my supervision work with my gardener's knowledge, senses, and heart.

The second inspiration is the book *A Princess and her Garden* (Adson, 1999). Using the garden metaphor, Adson writes a fable of a Princess who is raised to take care of the gardens of others, but not her own, and discovers, through the disappointments of life, that it is not rewarding or satisfying. She seeks out the "Wise Woman Wizard" (ibid., p.22). From her, she learned to take care of her own garden and maintain its boundaries so that she and the garden flourished. She no longer cares for the gardens of others; nor did she seek others to care for her garden. Adson used the fable as a metaphor for cultivating one's growth and surroundings in life while maintaining appropriate boundaries, both around one's endeavors and with others by neither trampling nor caretaking their gardens. These themes—tending to our own development as coaches by cultivating our gardens, and seeing our clients as fully competent, capable and able to take care of their gardens is work that is addressed in the gardens of supervision. I have invited the "Wise Woman Wizard" to join us in this chapter.

Adson (1999) has "Wise Woman Wizard"; all of the supervisors in this research are women. Therefore, throughout the findings and conclusions I use "she". My intent is not to exclude others; I use "she" for convenience.

[The Principles of Good Practice in the garden](#)

The living container, the community garden, was co-created by the supervisor and the coaches through development of their relationships and connections, supervisor-led contracting for the structures and processes, and the actions and interactions of each member of the group. It was not created and held solely by the supervisor. Imagine the supervisor was the soil— for the plants to take root in solid ground, for nutrients and water to gather and nourish the garden. The supervisor was also the Wise Woman Wizard who was more omniscient, noticing and adapting to whatever happens in any given moment, seeing-all so that she can help guide the group through it. And as the master gardener, the supervisor was the guardian who ensured that the sessions were in

service to reflective practice and the learning and development of the group members. The coaches were visiting gardeners, who actively tended the collective garden while sharing stories of their own gardens. Their action and agency were pulling weeds, pruning, harvesting fruit, changing the irrigation rhythm, offering shifts in the garden design or the plantings, learning about pests, pollinators, composts, native and invasive species. Their levels of active engagement in the garden enabled reflection and learning about their own gardens. The vitality and vibrancy of the garden, as the metaphor for the space which held the supervision sessions, ebbed and flowed moment to moment in the sessions.

I first describe the location and structural components of the garden. Next, I write about the discovery of the five Principles of Good Practice, four that contributed to the development, health and beauty of the garden; and a fifth that recognized there were circumstances or occurrences that negatively impacted the garden; some were lasting, and some were momentary. None of these had to be implemented with perfection. There needed to be an overall consistency, and repair when implementation was insufficient in the moment.

[It begins at the very beginning – location and structural components of the garden](#)

Our shared background as supervisors and coaches certified by the Sponsor contributed structural elements to the garden. We had shared methodologies, language and histories. Supervising under the umbrella of the sponsor brought to the garden goodwill emanating from the coaches' prior positive experiences.

The creation of the possibility of the garden began with the first interactions as individuals entered the coach training certification program offered by the Sponsor. The learning and developmental experiences with faculty, administrative staff and selected alumni led to affinity with the organization that continued for many years. As members of the supervision center, my colleagues and I had the benefit of positive feelings for the Sponsor, in addition to any of our previous relationships with the coaches.

This community garden was situated in the virtual space. Many of its characteristics were established in the commercial arrangements for the supervision groups.

We were not starting from scratch—the alumni brought their prior life, educational and work experiences, including their coaching practices, and the culture of the Sponsor. These provided major structural elements in the garden:

- The mature trees: the foundational philosophy of adult development incorporating the recognition of stages and phases of life (McLean, 2012; Hudson, 1999).
- The welcoming of gardeners into the garden: the embracing of andragogy principles (Mezirow, 1991).
- Variety of different areas in the garden, including the fruit orchard, nursery for seedlings, flowers, shrubs, topiary, hedges, and beds, pond and bird bath areas: commitment to experiential and transformational learning (Kolb, 2015; Mezirow, 1990).
- The greenhouse: utilizing the required ICF core competencies as a minimum standard (International Coaching Federation, 2019).
- A viewing platform in the treetops for the group to gather and view one another's stories about their gardens from broader perspectives: focused on the coach as an instrument of the work and challenge to open their inquiries to what was going on for them – their life narratives and internal dialogues (McLean, 2019).
- The stone benches, teak chairs and the multiplicity of paths which provide a contemplative ethos: encouragement of ongoing reflective practices (Schön, 1983).

The coaches committed to visit regularly with their supervisor in service to the cultivation of themselves and their gardens.

The five Principles of Good Practice that were contributors to the creation and stewardship of the garden, were interwoven. They can be grouped in four areas of

positive contribution—the supervisory relationships, contracting, stewardship, and time and a fifth area of tending to circumstances or situations that could eliminate a sense of safety or trust. These were:

1. The supervisory relationships were the most important ingredients that contributed to a meaningful supervision experience. This is the healthy root system.
 - a. The qualities, presence and approach of the supervisor was instrumental in the creation and maintenance of the supervisory relationships. This was the soil.
 - b. The supervisory relationships were composed of a multiplicity of relationships, each of which needed tending.
 - c. Self-disclosures by the supervisor—were a kind of rare blossom that delighted the gardeners and became pivotal stories of the garden.
2. Contracting—the agreements provide the overall landscape design as well as the design of the garden’s hardscape – the fences, gates, pathways, and the borders of each section of the garden.
 - a. The initial agreements on the commercial and logistical arrangements were the first level of contracting with the group. These were the overall design elements.
 - b. Developing the group process was the second level of contracting. It was important to contract with the coaches on their needs, to explore what they knew about how they learned and to explore what that meant for processes that would serve the group. These were the fences, gates, pathways and borders.
 - c. Contracting within each session was necessary and continuing; interventions were permission based. This was the third level of contracting. These were the ways the gardeners were agreeing on who would do what in the garden when they gathered.
3. Stewardship was a collaboration among the supervisors and group members. This was the coordination of the tending to the garden, the utilization of the capabilities and skills of each gardener, the rotation of responsibilities, and the attention to the shared purpose of growth and development.

- a. The supervisor had multiple roles; she was the soil (supervisory relationships), the Wise Woman Wizard (manager of group dynamics), and the master gardener (guardian of reflective practice).
 - b. Expansive acceptance—just as gardeners anticipate and accept the changing of the seasons without irritation at the bleakness of winter, or the heat of the summer sun.
 - c. Shared vulnerability—water is an essential element to the garden; little grows without it.
 - d. Challenges and possibilities—the fertilizers and composts spread on the garden nourish the plants, shrubs and trees with the hope they contribute to greater growth, health and vigor.
 - e. Empathy and gratitude—the pollinators make possible the flowers in the garden.
 - f. Experimentation—many gardens have experimental areas for the introduction of new plants or trees; the gardeners may experiment with different pruning, watering, or fertilizing schemes.
4. Time together as a group—a well-tended garden improves each year, barring catastrophic events, and as the plants, shrubs, and trees grow through the months and years the garden matures.
 5. The recognition and tending to the presence of circumstances or occurrences that negatively impacted the qualities and conditions within the garden. Most of these were outside the control of the supervisor or the full group.
 - a. Topics that were socially or culturally taboo—a knowledgeable gardener would not plant invasive species or maintain a lawn in a long-term drought.
 - b. Our own stories are the pesky pests in the garden—such as the gophers, rabbits, deer.
 - c. Events proximate to the session could be as destructive as a hailstorm.
 - d. Events within the session, when an individual reacted as though stung by a wasp or pricked by a thorn.

- e. Events within the session, when the group lost trust or safety when there was an unintentional trampling of a section of the garden or of one of the gardeners.

These Principles of Good Practice were instrumental. Not everyone was present in every session; yet, over the course of the year their existence became visible. In the balance of the Chapter I describe these Principles based on the findings from the five groups.

[Principle of Good Practice #1 Supervisory relationships —a healthy root system](#)

[The supervisor: soil, “Wise Woman Wizard”, master gardener](#)

The supervisor had three primary roles: cultivating relationships which created the soil; leading the group as the “Wise Woman Wizard”; and enabling reflective practice and learning as the master gardener. The qualities, presence and approach of the supervisor was instrumental in the creation and maintenance of the supervisory relationships. It was essential, but insufficient, as will be discussed in the sections on contracting and stewardship.

There were requisite skills, presence and ways of being that the supervisor possessed that provided enough that the group was able to engage in the consideration of their coaching practice. The supervisors took on a variety of roles, including the primary relationship with the coaches which was the soil; the leader of the group as the “Wise Woman Wizard”; and as the master gardener who enabled reflective practice and learning. I was also the researcher. The roles were explicitly named in Chapters 5, 6 and 7. In these two findings Chapters I write about the three supervisor roles as researcher.

[Cultivating the soil: presence](#)

The supervisor’s presence, an openhearted, intentional attention to the group, was an essential component. It was being with the group without her own agenda, to embrace what came, to explore, consider, inquire without moving to solution or persuasion. It was

a tangible quality that one could feel. *"Each individual has a spark that is amplified by presence. This presence transforms our experience of our self and others. It removes preconceived limits and opens our minds and hearts to new possibilities"* (Dorsey, 2017).

The supervisors cultivated presence throughout their personal and professional development which included mindfulness, reflective practice, intentionality, supervision and, at least for one of us, therapy. We had sufficient emotional intelligence: self-awareness, self-regulation, empathy and capacities to be in relationship with others (Goleman, 2013). We created empathic resonance chambers for the groups (Whitehead, 2015). Our presence was nourishing minerals within the soil of the garden.

Cultivating the soil: supervisor's warmth, care, grace, and positive energy

The supervisors' ways of being contributed to the fertility of the relationships. These qualities of warmth, care, grace and positive energy were identified by various supervisees as a contribution to the relationships and their sense of safe and trusted space. These were identified as facial expressions, smiles, the warmth conveyed, lightness in tone and tenor when challenging, the number of times permission was sought from a group member to pause, to inquire, to notice, or to shift. Our relatively consistent calm. These observations echoed consistently across the groups.

Wise Woman Wizard: group facilitation

The supervisor needed well developed emotional intelligence and facilitation skills and capabilities. These qualities were identified by various supervisees as a contribution to the relationships and their sense of safety in the sessions. Examples included keeping the session within purpose, developing good relationships with and among the coaches, facilitating so that every voice was in the room, and honoring the contract with the presenting coach. It included taking actions to repair when there was some disruption in the group. These skills were represented by the Wise Woman Wizard in Adson's (1999) fable.

Certified and in supervision for supervision

Each of the supervisors was in supervision of her supervision. The nurturing, care and tending of the supervisor was as important as the nurturing, care and tending of the garden.

As noted in the opening Chapter, the four supervisors were certified as coaches and supervisors. We engaged in supervision of our supervision throughout the research. Three of us were in group supervision and experienced group dynamics as supervisees. These contributed to our wisdom.

Many relationships

The supervisory relationship was composed of a multiplicity of relationships, each of which needed tending.

The supervisory relationships were more complex than the dyadic relationship between the supervisor and the group. The *supervisory relationship* emerged as including the individual relationships among the group members and the supervisor – the supervisor with each coach, the supervisor with the group, and the coaches with each other. The calculation of dyadic relationships is 22 relationships¹⁹ in the group of six coaches; four relationships within the group of two coaches. There were more relationships possible than just the dyadic ones in the larger groups, as other relationships across more than two individuals could exist. In the figures below, the blue lines represent the dyadic relationships, and the gold lines conceptually represent the container.

¹⁹Dyadic relationships equation: $((S*C1)+(S*C2)+(S*C3)+(S*C4)+(S*C5)+(S*C6)) + (group*S) + ((C1*C2) + (C1*C3) + (C1*C4) + (C1*C5) + (C1*C6) + (C2*C3) + (C2*C4) + (C2*C5) + (C2*C6) + (C3*C4) + (C3*C5) + (C3*C6) + (C4*C5) + (C4*C6) + (C5*C6)) = 22$ supervisory relationships

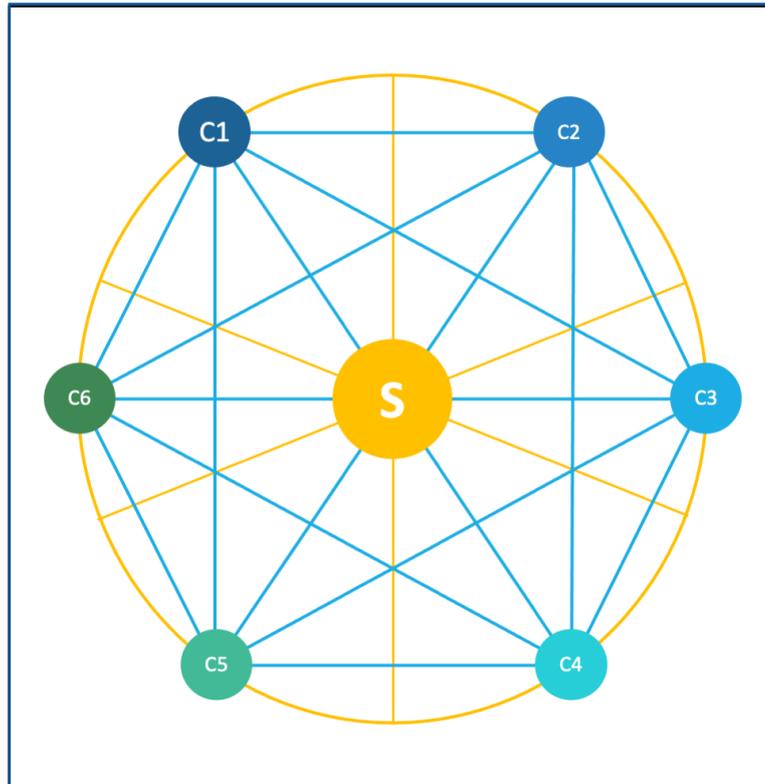


Figure 21: Relationship Diagram II

Relationships nourished by small acts

The supervisor attended to the relationships through many small actions and gestures; she ensured the voice of each coach was in the room.

The connections with each group member were variable; they differed based on prior relationships and the interactions within the group. I was very intentional and aware of my desire to welcome and attend to them with an evenness. I welcomed each coach, in each session, and through the email correspondence with positive regard. I attended to them in small ways such as remembering details of their lives, their aspirations for the supervision experience, their life stories, and prior interactions within the group. When a coach let the group know they could not make a session, I typically sent an email, reply to all, with appreciation for the notice and said they would be missed. If a coach let the group know about developments, personal or professional, in between sessions, a reply to all was often appropriate. These micro connections nourished the bonds among the group. These examples were not specifically in the field texts for the three colleague groups, however, the tone, tenor and interactions within the focus group meetings suggested similarly careful attention to the smallest of interactions.

The supervisors ensured each voice was in the room through facilitation which conveyed equal opportunity for each coach's experience and views, although members' responses were valued and weighted based on other factors. Expansive acceptance and empathy, appreciation and gratitude, explored in later sections, were integral to the relationships among the coaches and the supervisors.

Relationships served by shared purpose

Our shared purposes were participating in a learning community, in service to our individual and collective learning and development, and to contribute to our profession by volunteering to participate in formal research.

We had a shared purpose to show up together in the community garden and contribute to its care and both individual and collective learning and development. The commitment from the coaches to their personal and professional growth, to a specific group, and to engage with a designated supervisor were the initial declarations of shared purpose. The willingness to volunteer to participate in the research was the second declaration. Preparing for and participating within the sessions, the research debriefing meetings and the peer learning sessions were continuing commitments, as were the submissions of monthly journaling. This shared purpose continued over time; it was a full year's commitment with additional contributions several months later.

Normalizing relationships with parallel process

The identifying and naming possible parallel process (Tracey, Bludworth, and Glidden-Tracey, 2012) strengthened the container. In the community garden, a coach may have noticed aphids had invaded the roses in the client's garden; in return to their own gardens, the coaches may have gone looking for aphids on their roses. In discussing this situation in supervision, the supervisor may have gone looking for aphids as well. The idea of parallel process is that what the coach feels in the client coaching session may be in parallel to what the client is feeling in their system; in supervision, the supervisor may feel or act in a way that is in parallel to the struggle of the coach with the client.

Parallel process was referenced as a positive in four of the five groups. It was likely present in the fifth group, but there is nothing in the field texts that reference it. The coaches talked about how it normalized their behavior and feelings. It reassured them that they had not been doing something wrong, and that the noticing of their behavior and feelings had the potential to inform their work with the client.

Self-disclosure by supervisor was a catalyst

Appropriate self-disclosure by the supervisor of their struggles or work with a coaching client was a catalyst that significantly strengthened the dimensions, flexibility and vitality of the container.

Self-disclosure was through a variety of actions, including the sharing by a supervisor of her own struggles, of a client case that she was challenged by, of a recording of a client session, and of her coaching capabilities by coaching as part of live-action coaching.

Principle of Good Practice #2 Contracting - multiple levels required

Contracting—the articulation of the logistics, structures, processes and agendas—was a requisite part of the co-creation of the container. At different levels, there were varying amounts of negotiation; deviations in implementation were mostly permission-based. There were three levels of contracting: the initial level of logistics; the second level of the overall process and structure for the group; the third level, what happened in a session. The contracting for the research requirements occurred within all three levels.

Level one: the initial contract

The initial contract, of logistical matters, included the overall landscape design carried through in the design of the garden's hardscape. There was no negotiation of these; they were established by the Sponsor and accepted by the coaches who registered. The research asks were set out in the Informed Consents; there was no negotiation of these provisions either.

The essential elements of the initial contract were logistical: group membership, selected supervisor, number of sessions over a predetermined time period, technology platform, length of sessions, dates and times, fees payable in full in advance, and the registration process.

Level two: the group operating agreements

The master gardener, the third role of the supervisor, was to enable reflective practice and learning, came to the forefront in contracting, and as discussed later in this Chapter, stewardship of the garden.

The process and structure were co-created and invited coaches to bring their work into the sessions, either a particular client case, an issue or theme, or whatever was on their mind or in their heart. The self-exploration provided space for them to bring issues of stress, depletion, burn-out, and other concerns.

The agreements for process and structure included rules of engagement, expectations for working, playing and learning together, and respective roles and responsibilities of the supervisor and the coaches. There was a dichotomy in needing granularity and allowing for emergence in the process.

The second level, the group operating agreements, included both hardscape features—e.g., the fences, gates, pathways, fountains, and bird baths—as well as the rules of engagement. How would the visiting gardeners engage with each other, with the garden, and with the master gardener? The agreements were how they anticipated working, playing and learning together, what their respective roles and responsibilities would be, and what the rules were for their work in the garden.

The essential elements of the group's processes and structure were contracted collaboratively and are set forth in Table 11 below. The full list of these elements, broken into 12 categories is included as Appendix 11.

Twelve Categories for Contracting Processes and Structure
1. Perspectives on supervision and articulating shared purpose
2. Confidentialities
3. Recording of the supervision sessions
4. Zoom (technology platform)
5. The process and structure
6. Reflection questions
7. Rituals
8. Ethics: what codes of ethics would we reference
9. One on one communications outside the group
10. Resources
11. Rescheduling
12. Supervisor's supervision

Table 10: Categories for Contracting Level 2 Processes and Structure

We crafted the structure and processes based on the coaches' prior experiences. We periodically revisited many of these provisions and amended or revised them as we learned about how we interacted as a group and how each of us learned.

While I used the phrase "contracted collaboratively" at the beginning of this section, the level of collaboration depended on the strength of the container at this early point in the year. If the coaches were relatively new to supervision, their confidence could be less in the contracting, which then was more supervisor led. If the coaches had more confidence in knowing what they needed in groups, and in the supervision process, there was more collaboration. The re-contracting through the year was increasingly collaborative as the coaches had experience with what was working for them and what was getting in the way of their participation.

Level three: the session contracting

Contracting within each session was necessary and continuing; interventions were permission-based.

The third level of contracting had to do with what was to happen in a session—what was on the agenda and how those items would be organized; what inquiries the presenting coach wanted to explore; how the inquiries would be conducted; and whether we would experiment. This happened throughout the session; the process was mutually agreed. In the garden setting this would be about what the tasks were—e.g., would we focus on planting, pruning, harvesting, fertilizing or pest control?

Proctor (2008) identified five levels of contracting; my first and second levels align with her first two levels. Where we diverge is that I utilize one level for contracting within the session and Proctor delineates what happens in the session into 3 levels of contracting: the agenda for the session, the moment-to-moment management of session which she identifies as the “shadow” side, and the contract with the presenting group member for reflective practice (Proctor, 2008, pp.55-56). I elaborate the moment-to-moment management within the frameworks of the supervisory relationships and the ebb and flow of the container, beyond the contracting. Her fifth level of contracting for the reflective practice is explicated in my reflective and learning practices model, which is articulated in the following chapter.

[Contracting tailored to each group](#)

Each group designed the container uniquely to meet their individual and collective needs. The contracting had distinct attributes. Each group specifically developed their process; a variety of processes were utilized. The supervisors considered the opportunities that arose for contracting, what contracting actually happened, how it influenced the reported sense of a trusting space within the group, and the shifts in their approaches as supervisor throughout this project. “Every garden is unique, each with its own micro-habitat and micro-climate” (Avis-Riordan and Robinson, 2020, n.p.).

[Principle of Good Practice #3 Stewardship](#)

A master gardener surveys the garden, keeping tabs on the larger architecture, as well as noticing the smallest of details such as a new pest in the garden. She holds a super view of the garden – from a microscopic bacterium to the overall scheme, design, weather and

season. The supervisor has similar responsibilities – to notice the abundance of nuance, complexity, multi-dimensionality and emergence within the field and tend to them in the service of reflective practice and the personal and professional development of the coaches. Stewardship calls on the other two roles of the supervisor: cultivating the soil to ensure healthy root growth in the relationships, and as the Wise Woman Wizard facilitating the group. The three roles are interwoven.

Expansive acceptance

“We know the truth, not only by reason, but also by the heart”.

(Pascal, 2016, p.118)

Expansive acceptance invited and encouraged coaches to cross a threshold into a place of showing up just as they are.

Gardens change through the seasons, subject to the weather that comes, whether it is destructive freezing temperatures, or fierce winds and heat, or the gentle spring breezes and light rain. The gardener can prepare the plants and trees for the seasons. As a supervisor, it was important to greet how the coaches arrived, and interacted within sessions, with similar equanimity.

When a group was uniquely depleted, the structure and process needed to be adapted. The adaptation was the movement of acceptance; it accepted them just as they were. The move stayed true to our shared purpose and offered bountiful learning. It mirrors the gardener who wraps roses in straw, burlap and twine to prepare them for winter frosts.

Another example of expansive acceptance is the use of the phrase: “Don’t you see it’s all perfect” (Dass and Das, 2013, p.104). I consistently, but not perfectly, embodied the phrase in the acceptance of how the supervisees arrived, the acceptance of the human condition when there were work challenges, health and family issues, fatigue and overwhelm, as well as coaches feeling good, resourceful, happy, and expressing appreciation within the groups. As I held a calm inner peace, an acceptance that

whatever came into the room was just what we needed, holding lightly the group. The coaches noticed, and it felt as though it made the space safer for them to bring the messiness of their coaching.

What place is there for accountability in expansive acceptance? I inquired of Sally, in the last Action Learning meeting, how she might have responded if I had required, in some way, she bring a recording. She replied she may have moved to compliance, but more likely her “3-year-old toddler” self would have emerged and said, “you are not my boss”. The line between offering and inviting as a supervisor and requiring is an important discernment. It was important to be mindful of the power held by supervisors within the contextual nuances of the group.

Shared vulnerability

Shared vulnerability strengthened the dimensions, flexibility and vitality of the container. It lessened the sense of isolation experienced by several of the coaches. The opportunities for shared vulnerability were diminished when members of the group were not yet or no longer actively coaching.

All organisms in the garden need water. The water in the groups was vulnerability – the courage and willingness for the coaches to share their stuckness, their struggles, their fears. Vulnerability invited vulnerability. When coaches shared their concerns and self-judgment, the group responded with empathy, and the space within the container for vulnerability increased. The increase resulted in large part from the recognition that the struggle was common to most of us; it was very normal. The coaches often noticed how reassuring it was to have learned in the group they were not alone with the client dilemmas; it lessened their sense of isolation that was often a part of having a solo practice.

Vigilant inquiry into one’s practice was challenging. This self-inquiry required a balancing of curiosity, courage to explore, opening one’s self to feedback, to puzzle about, to notice, to challenge one’s beliefs and ways of being, to steadily excavate one’s stories, to cultivate self-compassion, self-kindness, and perspective. The opportunity for growth

required an acceptance that with curiosity and inquiry one may choose to continue to deepen their understandings of the profession. The commitment to shape and re-shape one's self and one's practice was the key to move toward mastery (Dweck, 2016; Kegan and Lahey, 2009; Mezirow, 1991). It required bringing the self as the instrument to the foreground; self-awareness was a frequent focus of inquiry. McLean (2019) challenged us to this work: "to know one's self requires a fierce and courageous willingness to explore the many layers of one's inner landscape, a territory that can be elusive and enigmatic, confusing and paradoxical" (p.3).

There was a continuum of vulnerability with several factors in the equations of where a coach landed on that continuum. One factor in these dynamics was whether the coach viewed themselves as worthy of contributing, worthy of sharing. If they did not, they were less vulnerable. Another factor was whether the coach was actively coaching. If they were not, they did not have the opportunities to step into vulnerability by sharing their work. Another factor was when the coach lacked insight or courage and did not self-disclose any failings. Another was the type of intervention being utilized. For example, with respect to bringing part or all of a recording to the group, some coaches readily did so; some coaches did; many coaches did not or could not. Some of the coaches were able to be consistently vulnerable; for some the level of vulnerability shifted.

Water is essential; vulnerability is essential. Inviting and role modeling vulnerability within the group was a key responsibility of the coaches and the supervisor. The boldest role modeling of vulnerability by a supervisor was through self-disclosure of their coaching practice.

Challenges and possibilities

The container was healthy enough that in the inquiry with the presenting coach, there were challenges, and the offering of different perspectives and possibilities. The amount of challenge varied with the strength of the relationships between the presenting coach and the others.

“Use compost. Compost is great for making healthy, nutrient-rich soil, perfect for plants and wildlife. Make your own compost with your garden waste to naturally recycle nutrients” (Avis-Riordan and Robinson, 2020, n.p.). The challenges and explorations of possibilities with the presenting coaches were the compost for their reflections and learning. The shared purpose of individual and collective learning necessitated challenge, differing perspectives, and opening of possibilities. The amount and directness of the challenges were dependent on the group members’ relationships with each other, and with the supervisor. When the group member was committed to the growth of the other, there were more challenges, and the challenges went beyond facts, to who the coach was and how was that potentially impacting the work with the client. To the extent the relationships were more distant, and weaker, there were fewer times of challenge. It took a good working alliance for challenges.

I held a question about when and how often to challenge in every session, and across the arc of the year with each group. The elements that went into my analysis were my intuition, the strength of the working alliance of the presenting coach with me, and within the group, whether there were potential ethical issues, the level of shame, if any, that was in the space, and the fuller context that formal assessment was not part of my role. Often, I felt the degree of challenge was appropriate; on occasion I felt it was too much or too little. As with each of these principles, I was never perfect, yet I was good enough; the group interactions were never perfect; they were good enough.

Empathy, appreciation and gratitude

“Belonging feels like it happens from the inside out, but in fact it happens from the outside in. Our social brains light up when they receive a steady accumulation of almost invisible cues: We are close, we are safe, we share a future”.

(Coyle, 2018, pp.25-26)

The interactions among the group members were abundant with appreciations, gratitude and empathic resonance which nurtured vulnerability, self-disclosure, experimentation

and reflection. Imagine the gardeners walking together to admire the pruning by one, the arrangement of plantings by another, the newly constructed stone border or the abundant summer blossoms.

There was consistent courtesy and acknowledgment among the coaches for the sharing they did collaboratively and in service to the group's learning. These actions were the pollinators, the bees, butterflies and hummingbirds of the garden. These elements were not explicitly contracted; they were cultural and social assumptions of our community, as alumni of the Sponsor. My actions and interactions rested unconsciously in these assumptions; they became conscious during this project.

The empathic responses, expressions of appreciation and gratitude started in the how are you arriving session and continued throughout the session. A presenting coach would thank the group, often by name, for what they had offered during the inquiry. When the coaches were responding to my inquiry about what they had learned about themselves from the other coach's case, they would appreciate particular elements of the case that resonated with them. In concluding the session, the ending reflections were frequently of appreciation for the relationships and the learning.

The interactions and engagements within the groups during the focus groups had these qualities and characteristics. They appreciated each other, built upon what the others were sharing, disagreed or distinguished their own experiences with care and honesty. The empathic connections among the group and the supervisor were apparent.

These are the experiences Ferrucci (1990) writes as the power of empathic connections "In addition to being a vehicle for awareness, empathy is also an instrument for transformation. It temporarily changes the structure of our being by taking us to an entirely different wavelength... empathy frees us from our private maze and shows us new and unenvisioned modes of being, greatly enhancing our imaginative and creative abilities" (p.30).

Experimentation – the introduction of something new

Experimenting with the process in-the-moment in a session, with the permission of the group, brought fresh energy, and often fun, which strengthened the root system within the soil.

The supervisors invited experimentation in the supervision process. A requisite step was seeking permission from the full group for the deviation. The groups expressed the appreciation for the mix of how they worked together. One coach described this as “there's value in disrupting and disorganizing, just changing it up...it was fun.” Just as in the garden, one can experiment with planting new flowers, shrubs or trees, or strengthen the roots with different watering or fertilizing schemes.

Principle of Good Practice #4 Time together as a group

"A garden requires patient labor and attention. Plants do not grow merely to satisfy ambitions or to fulfill good intentions. They thrive because someone expended effort on them [sic]".

Liberty Hyde Bailey, Country Life in America, 1903 (Michigan State University, 2017)

The groups developed the capacities for the cultivation and stewardship of more vibrant and vital gardens over the course of the year. They knew each other better; there was more vulnerability, more sharing, and more challenge.

Just as it takes time for the garden to develop, and its development cannot be rushed, such was the situation in small group supervision. The groups learned and developed through the year together; they claimed the significance of that time. They articulated that with the laughter, learning, exposure, and creativity came stronger relationships. They knew more about each other, about the life challenges, and the coaching challenges, they knew more about the supervisor and had a stronger relationship with her.

Each of the five groups remarked on the benefit of time together for deepening the strength of the relationships, the appreciation for what each other contributed to the experience and to their bonds.

As we considered the yearlong engagements, there was an awareness in many of us of the fragility of the space we had cultivated session by session. We remembered moments of discomfort, and of repair. We held on to the arc of the feelings of being together with the wisdom to know it was not a given. Yet we could feel it was stronger in our final sessions than in the beginning; it had developed over the seasons of our time together.

The virtual garden

It is of note that all of the interactions, the cultivation and stewardship of the supervision garden was done virtually; these groups successfully engaged in the virtual environment. Actual gardens can be visited virtually, gardening courses may be offered virtually, yet the cultivation and stewardship of the gardens cannot be done virtually. The metaphor is not quite perfect in this sense.

The authors I have looked to throughout this thesis have described three qualities in the in-person groups that were significant: in-person connections, physical touch and hospitality. How does one visit and tend to a virtual garden?

Coyle (2018) points out the importance of the physical settings for the teams, creating close proximity, and the role of touch e.g., a hand on the arm. Block (2009) devotes significant attention to the physical set-up, including room design, light, nature, and the seating arrangement. Both authors include “hospitality” in their discussions, the importance of food and beverages. These are in service to the bonding of the team or group, to the creation of the necessary conditions for dialogue.

I explored ways in the virtual realm to convey hospitality without the benefits of room design, light, physical touch or refreshments; the welcoming and hosting of the group is more collaborative. I have a number of very specific findings that may be useful to

supervisors and supervisees who may be engaging virtually for the first time. These are in Appendix 12 Key Findings: Use of Technology.

The use of a virtual technology platform, Zoom, raises the question of what the impacts and comparisons are of working face-to-face and virtually. These are not addressed in this thesis.

[Principle of Good Practice #5 Recognition and Tending to the contributors to decreasing safety and trust.](#)

“This idea—that belonging needs to be continually refreshed and reinforced—is worth dwelling on...”

(Coyle, 2018, p.24)

There were five kinds of matters that negatively impacted the safe space for at least one group member. The first was societal and cultural norms that inhibited coaches from bringing certain parts of themselves or their experiences into the group because they were socially inappropriate. Second, a coach’s life narrative impacted, and sometimes kept them, from bringing something into the space. Third, the coach had an experience proximate to the session that negatively impacted his or her sense of safety. Fourth, the coach was triggered by content, an intervention or the process within the session and was unable to regain a centered stance and be present within the session. Fifth, the supervisor or one of the group members said something that triggered the group, which lessened the contours of the container.

[Cultural and social norms – what we keep hidden](#)

There were a range of topics that did not arise in the sessions. I have a sense that the container was, as yet, insufficient to hold situations that were culturally or socially considered inappropriate or uncomfortable to discuss. In an organic garden, the discussion of pesticides, insecticides and fungicides would be limited to only those consistent with organic growing.

There are cultural and social norms that govern what we are willing to share with colleagues. Those did not come into the supervision sessions; I cannot describe what they were, although typically the harder to discuss issues are likely candidates on this list. In early 2018 when the research groups were underway, we had a new President in the White House. The impacts of his approaches had reverberations across many coaches and clients; yet these were not discussions brought to supervision. Politics were often avoided; the topics were typically quite triggering of anger, angst, anxiety and outrage. I wonder if a coach had found themselves attracted to a client, if this would have been a safe enough space for them to reflect and inquire about that? What other kinds of issues were not coming into the group?

Our own stories

Our inner critics and life experiences impacted our relationships, what we brought into the sessions and the ebb and flow of the trust within the garden.

Our life narratives influenced the trust and safety one had with one's self which carried into the sessions. If a coach felt he or she was not enough, we often knew and experienced it in the session; it was visible. In the garden metaphor these would be the pests: gophers, rabbits, or deer that show up uninvited, that we need to make peace with and manage.

The request in the research to bring observational experiences brought the life narratives into the bright light of day. There were coaches for whom it was an impossible request; and there were coaches, brand new to their groups, who brought recordings. Another coach discovered it was safer to reflect on recordings with the group than on her own. The contrasts in these reactions highlighted the distinctively individual nature of who and how we were and the influence of our own stories on our perceptions of the safety within the garden.

Events proximate to the session

Events proximate to the session can disturb presence and participation.

A sudden storm can damage a part of the garden or keep the gardeners indoors. Incidences around the time of the session influenced how one came into the session and whether it was possible to recover enough to be present, participate and reflect. “Proximate” means near enough in time to the session to impact the emotional well-being of the coach or supervisor as they were arriving for the session. Often the impacts were increased anxiety, fears or shame. There were many kinds of events that had this impact, including awaiting medical results, arriving late, not feeling prepared enough, being forced into retirement or overwhelmed. The outcome was that the coach was not fully with the group; he or she was not a full participant.

Within the session – individual diminished

Individuals, on occasion, reacted negatively to the process, interventions or the content in a session, which lessened their sense of safety or trust.

There were a handful of micro-moments, when an individual in a session reacted, sensing a loss of fullness of acceptance or worthiness; stung by a wasp, or pricked by thorns while pruning. It happened unexpectedly, with an intervention, content or process that caused them discomfort. It happened when the coach felt the supervisor inquired from a place of judgment. It happened when the coach recognized their response to the process was very different than the other group members and wondered if they “were not getting it?” It happened to the presenting coach when a colleague moved from inquiry to problem solving their case. The impact remained for different lengths of time; some were significant enough to need repair, some dissipated on their own.

Container impacted by actions of supervisor or coach

The robustness of the container could be lost for a moment, a session, or longer, by an action of the supervisor or a coach.

Continuous partial attention (Stone, 2009) is the concept that in our technology filled lives, we are seldom fully paying attention to what we are engaged in. In one of the

sessions, in mid-inquiry, a coach said, essentially, she knew just the model that needed to be used with the client and she had just found it and sent it to us in an email. My internal response was to move to judgment—I experienced her reactivity and move to action to be disruptive of the flow; I reacted and my move to action was a facial expression. My judgment flowed into the collective field by my grimace. Who noticed? Who felt similar feelings? Did my reactivity to her reactivity impact any one's sense of safety except my own? My internal dialogue was that I had trampled her and her part of the garden, unintentionally and in the moment. I believe it was felt by the group and it made the container momentarily less safe for all.

[Concluding reflection](#)

This chapter was a deep dive into the complexities of virtual small group supervision. My goal was to address the two questions in my inquiry: What are the qualities and conditions that create enough safety and trust in the supervision relationships within a group to enable self-disclosure, reflection and learning? How are these qualities and conditions designed and brought forth? The supervisor, and the group, were challenged by the interconnectedness of the significant aspects that were necessary for coaches to bring their work into a small community for inquiry. Supervision is an organic and emergent process of being in relationship with one's self, one's supervisor, one's group, one's clients and the client systems, with one's life in the context of the world. The gardening metaphor, the referencing of the many facets that contribute to the design, planting, cultivation, care and tending of a garden that is likely to thrive was useful in conveying the difficulties and opportunities. In Figure 22 I have captured the stewardship elements that the supervisor is holding.

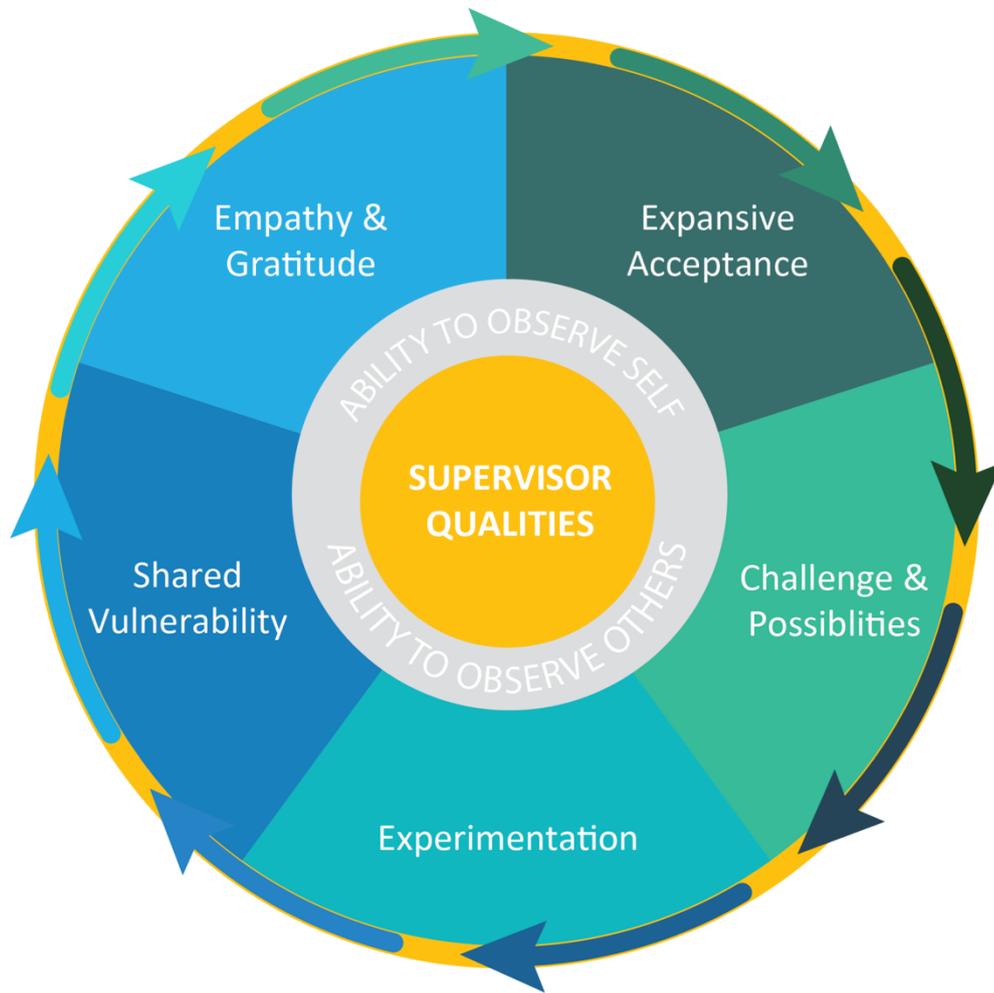


Figure 22: Stewardship Elements that Supervisor is holding

In the next figure, I capture the supervisor’s process views and areas of attentive awareness.

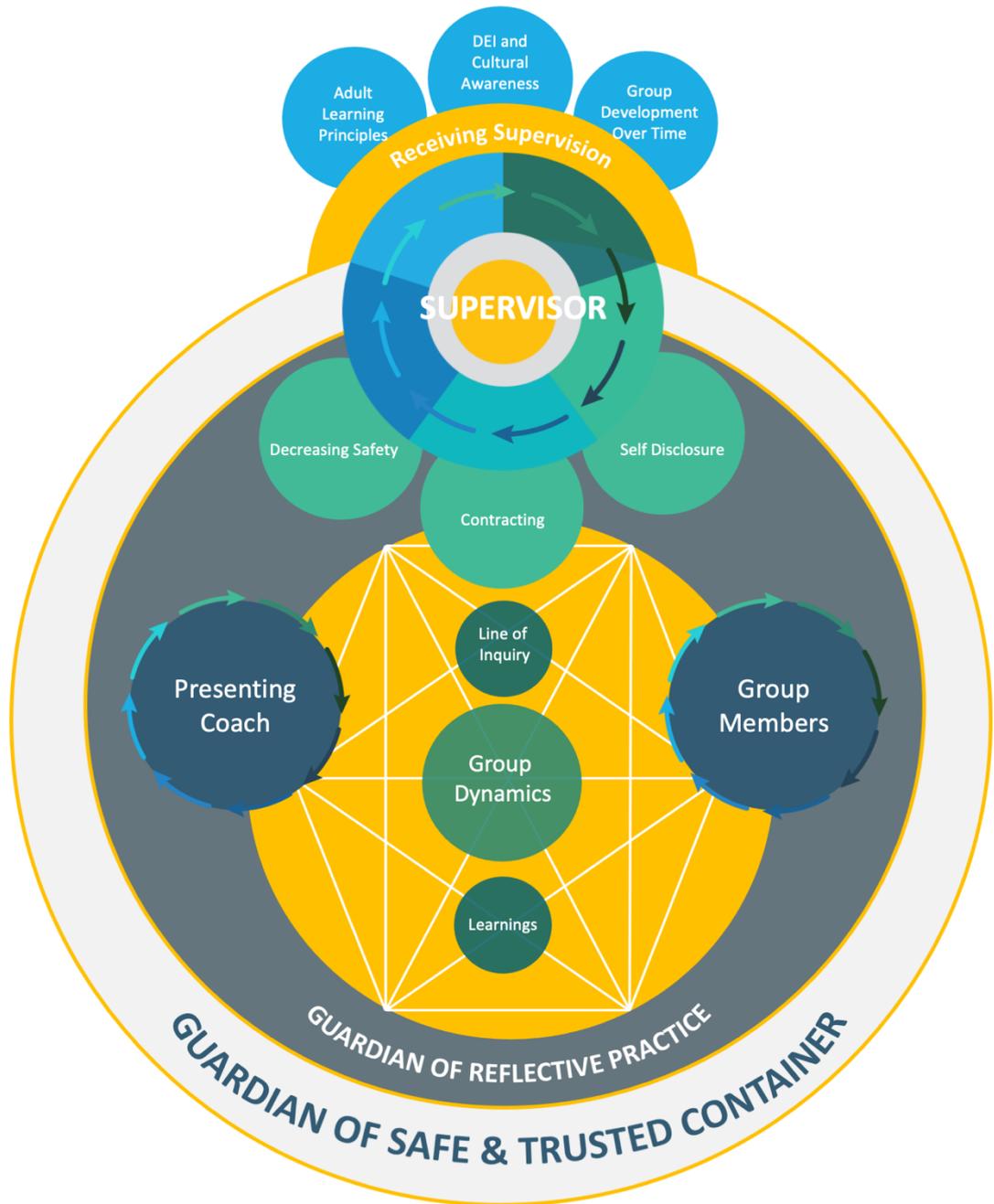


Figure 23: Supervisor's Process Views

The participants' reactions to my thinking

I shared my early thinking on the co-creation and stewardship of the container with participants and other supervision groups. In my final meetings with the five groups, I shared my beginning thinking of the creation and stewardship of the safe container, and I shared an earlier version of the reflective practice model. I asked the groups to listen for whether there was sufficient confidentiality and anonymity in what I presented and if it felt true to their experiences, to the extent they had had that experience. They confirmed that the three were true: confidential, anonymized and true to their experiences; no participant raised an issue or concern. I did not share any of the selected vignettes as I had not yet arrived at narrative inquiry.

The comments about the container included affirmations of the relationships with the supervisor, the strengthening over months and years of engaging together in supervision, the shared experiences of training, language and methodology, the experimentation in the sessions and shared vulnerabilities. Comments included:

- “When people own their accountability, they say I really want to do this and they do it as opposed to being told what to do, it’s a very different experience”.
- “The accountability is directly proportional to the depth of the relationship”.
- “It’s like any relationship, the disrupt happens, and it’s how you work through it that can be the key learning and take you to whole different depth or intimacy”.
- “The value of this collective wisdom...the connections are extraordinary as human being to human being”.
- “Each of us takes others out of their comfort zone by dealing with us. Each of us is just individual and different”.
- “It's the beauty of trusting that it's a blessing and a gift to have access to other wise practitioners, who don't tell me what to do and what not to do, but just through questions or through bringing things forward for me to consider...”

Potential Learning for Supervisors

A supervisor considering the qualities and conditions of the safe and trusted container may develop new thinking or reflection that inform supervisor development goals. These areas are

1. The significance of the relationships within and among the group and focus beyond the relationship with the group to include the relationships with each coach, and the coaches with each other.
2. The idea of self-disclosure, when and in what circumstances is it appropriate in contributing to the learning and development.
3. The ebbs and flows of the safe and trusted space, with greater awareness as to what is outside the control and influence of the supervisor.
4. Additional or alternative ways for structuring and contracting the process of the group.
5. Consider experimentation in service to lightness, fun and increased energy within supervision groups.

In the next chapter, Chapter 9, I explore the reflective practice and learning that was possible, introduce a reflective practice and learning model and address ethical issues. In Chapter 10, I state my conclusions and my current theory of practice, pulling together the models in Chapter 8 and 9, into an overall process model representative of the supervision process. In the final chapter, Chapter 11, I reflect on this part of my life's journey and its contributions to me as a human being, a coach, a supervisor, and in my many life roles.