

**Applying the Cyclical Model in coaching supervision**

First published in 1994, the Cyclical Model was originally developed as a model for counselling supervision. The authors (and others) have since used it successfully in supervising a range of practitioners, including social workers, managers, health care professionals, teachers, coaches, organisational consultants and group facilitators. It has also been adapted for use as a model of mentoring (Brockbank and McGill 2006) and academic supervision (Brockbank and McGill 2007).

This model is designed as a framework to describe a typical pathway through a supervision session as well as including all the components that may need to be considered during the lifetime of a supervisory relationship. Harris and Brockbank (2011: 168) have described this feature of the cyclical model as ‘holographic’ in that ‘it may represent the shape of an individual supervision session, and it may also represent the shape of an entire supervision cycle, over a year or more’.

In this paper the stages and steps of the Cyclical Model have been summarised and adapted to apply to the supervision of coaches, be that life coaches, business coaches or executive coaches. To avoid confusion, the person supervising is consistently referred to as ‘supervisor’ and the person being supervised is referred to as ‘coach’, although he or she is also the supervisee. This paper is written from the perspective of one:one supervision, the use of this model when supervising in groups is explored in Page and Wosket (2014).

## Stage 1: Contract

Contracting in supervision, as in coaching, performs a vital function in underpinning the entire process and relationship. A contract is an agreement entered into by both parties (or three , when the employing organisation is also included) that contains, supports, gives structure, establishes informed participation by those involved and provides direction and purpose to the work undertaken. A clear and specific contract sets the agenda for the task and process, reduces anxiety by helping to de-mystify what will occur and lays down the ground rules. Contracting should occur at the beginning of any supervisory relationship. It can also occur as re-contracting throughout the ongoing work, and the fact that re-contracting is occurring at various intervals is usually the sign of a healthy and growing relationship and a developing task.

Objectives

Issue

Presentation

Priorities

Approach

**Focus**

**Contract**

**Bridge**

**Space**

**Review**

Feedback

Grounding

Evaluation

Re-contracting

Assessment

Boundaries

Ground rules

Accountability

Relationship

Expectations

Information giving

Consolidation

Goal setting

Client’s perspective

Action planning

Investigation

Collaboration

Challenge

Affirmation

Containment

***Figure 1*** *The Cyclical Model (taken from: Page & Wosket 2014)*

The five Steps in Contracting are:

**Groundrules** – a shared understanding of the procedural issues that ensure smooth running of supervision. These include: timing, frequency, duration (of the supervisory relationship and each session), location where meetings take place, fee levels and the terms under which charges are made (e.g. payment for cancelled or missed sessions), ethical framework within which the coach and supervisor each work, arrangements for contact between sessions and any charges that are applied.

## Boundaries – the boundaries between supervision and training, coaching or therapy, limits of confidentiality, role boundaries between being supervisor and colleagues, business partners, co-trainers or friends and the dynamics of any such role overlaps and potential conflicts.

**Accountability** – is in five layers: the coach’s clients; supervisor and coach; direct stakeholders and third parties; the coaching profession; the public.

**Expectations** - of the coach, the supervisor and other stakeholders. Expectations include the aims, goals, functions and purposes of supervision, alongside the preferences, anticipations and responsibilities of the parties concerned.

**Relationship** – for effective supervision to be possible there has to be a ‘good-enough’ relationship between supervisor and coach in which both feel safe enough, trusted and trusting enough and respected and respectful enough to work together and take risks together. This ‘basic affective relationship’ will have the characteristics of empathy, respect, genuineness and concreteness.

## Stage 2: Focus

The focus of a supervision session is the subject or material under consideration at that particular point or stage of the supervision process. Focusing normally starts with the coach presenting some aspect of their work for the supervisor and coach to explore together. The function of the focus is to ensure that supervision starts with a significant issue for the coach and is relevant to their client work. Focusing as a process develops the coach’s responsibility for making the best use of the supervision opportunity. It encourages intentionality (direction and purpose), reflection and ensures that the coach has prepared for the supervision in advance of the meeting.

The five Steps in Focus are:

**Issue** – the material that the coach (normally) is bringing to discuss and explore. Often one or more pieces of current client work, an organisational concern or a developmental edge for themselves as a practitioner.

**Objectives** – defining what benefits the coach is looking for from the supervision session, or more widely the supervision contract.

**Presentation** – the means by which the coach will present the issue in supervision, for example verbally from memory and notes, by re-enactment, through a recording or using a creative medium such as a drawing or sculpting.

**Approach** – defines how the supervisor will supervise; their model and theoretical orientation, techniques they will use and types of interventions.

**Priorities** – on rare occasions the supervisor may identify a matter of priority, which needs to take precedent over the coach’s agenda for the session. This could be an issue of risk to the coach or their client, a boundary issues that requires management, or an unacknowledged aspect of the coach’s personality that is interfering with their work.

## Stage 3: Space

Creating and holding a space is at the heart of the supervision process. It is the place where the coach is held, supported, challenged and affirmed in his or her work. Space is where movement and insight can occur as a result of the exploratory work undertaken by the supervisor and coach. It is also the place where ‘not knowing’ and confusion are accepted and tolerated in the belief that time and attention given to the client and to the coach are beneficial to the coaching endeavour, even when a comfortable resolution of issues may not be achieved. It is also where most supervision time is likely to be spent for, as Scaife (2010) points out in discussing the Cyclical Model, ‘issues brought to supervision are sometimes given insufficient “air space”, there being an apparent degree of urgency to reach a destination. This model emphasises the “space” as the part of the session that is likely to take up the most time. The space is the primary stage in which reflection can take place.’ (p. 83). It is perhaps here that the difference between coaching and supervision is most apparent.

The five Steps in Space are:

**Collaboration** – the collaborative relationship between the coach and their supervisor needs to be sufficiently strong to maintain the working alliance when unconscious dynamics, such a projection, transference, counter-transference and parallel process emerge between coach and supervisor, enabling these dynamics to be acknowledged and explored together.

**Investigation** – supervisor and coach need to be able to kick around ideas, think out-loud, offer hypotheses in a context of enquiry, each testing and consider the possibilities of what may be occurring with a client or in an organisational context, not leaping to conclusions or assuming that if one of them has an idea it must be correct.

**Challenge** – can take many forms and is essential for keeping supervision ‘alive’. Effective challenge will take the coach further in their work and will support their growth.

**Containment** – at its best being in supervision and the experience of the supervisory relationship allows the coach to feel safe enough to fully experience and articulate their uncertainties, doubts and fears about their work, as well as their successes and delights.

**Affirmation** – at a specific level confirms that the coach has done a good piece of work or handled a difficult situation skilfully. At a general level the coach feels valued and worthwhile through the manner in which their supervisor relates to them.

## Stage 4: Bridge

The function of a bridge in supervision is to provide a way back into the work the coach is undertaking with the client. It is a process that, at its best, ensures that learning and awareness from supervision are integrated and applied with caution and sensitivity in the coaching work. Just as the coach is asked to come to supervision with a focus to make sure that the supervision work is relevant to the client work, so too the coach is helped to go away from supervision with the recognition that the process will have made a difference. Even if the difference is simply awareness that nothing tangible needs to change.

The five Steps in Bridge are:

**Consolidation** – the point at which the coach, possibly by invitation, steps back from the exploratory free-flowing ‘Space’ into considering what (if anything) they will do differently as a consequence of what has emerged.

**Information Giving** – supervisors are often inclined to pass on information, particularly to inexperienced practitioners. We suggest that this belongs here, in the Bridge stage, so that information given by the supervisor does not stem the reflective flow in the Space stage.

**Goal Setting** – as a result of reflection the coach may find it helpful to set themselves one or more goals, with a particular client or more generally for their practice. These may be practice related, learning goals. Sometimes the supervisor may also identify goals that they wish to set themselves that have emerged from the session.

**Action Planning** – that will create the pathway of actions that lead to the achievement of identified goals.

**Client’s Perspective** – when the coach has identified some changes they plan to make in the way they work with a particular client, or their clients more generally, it is a useful check to consider how their client(s) might experience what is proposed.

## Stage 5: Review

Review in supervision may take the form of evaluation or assessment of the coach’s work. If this is so, it should not be the only review that is happening. Whether or not the supervisor has some formal assessment role to fulfil in relation to the coach’s development, there should also be regular, ongoing mutual feedback taking place. At best this will happen to some extent in every session at a micro-level. It should also occur at the macro-level at regular intervals where the supervisor and coach stand back from the immediate work to evaluate progress and the current state of their relationship and joint task. Building in review as an integral part of the supervision process ensures that both partners actively reflect upon and monitor the standard and quality of their own professional practice and their mutual endeavour.

The five Steps in Review are:

**Grounding** – in this context is the moment of stepping away from the original Focus of the supervision into taking a perspective on how the supervisory process unfolded, moving into a reviewing mode.

## Feedback – this is the point for good quality feedback to be given, by the coach to the supervisor and by the supervisor to the coach, about the part they each played in the supervisory process.

**Evaluation** – consideration of the value of the work done together; is it achieving what is desired or required? This is not an evaluation of the coach as a practitioner, or of the supervisor, but rather of the supervision within which they both participate. From this evaluation, ideas for change of groundrules, boundaries, expectations, ways of relating (all in Contract), presentation or approach (in Focus) may emerge.

**Assessment** – sometimes the supervisor has a formal assessment role, for example as part of an accreditation process for the coach’s professional body or as part of a three-way contract with the organisation within which the coach is working. This requires care in order to safeguard against damaging the collaborative nature of effective supervision.

**Re-contracting** – if ideas for changing the supervisory contract have emerged, it is important that these are clarified and agreed, either immediately or at an agreed time.

## The Context of Supervision

It is important to give appropriate attention to the context within which supervision occurs (Copeland 2005); this is represented by the shaded area in figure 1. The boundary between supervision and its context has an intrinsic degree of permeability: the context has influence upon supervision and supervision has influence upon the context in which it takes place. It is also the case that much of what takes place in supervision is rightly private, known only by the supervisor and coach or coaches who participate.

Some contextual influences can have a direct impact upon supervision. Depending upon circumstances, these may include:

* The setting within which the coach works;
* The organisation within which supervision takes place;
* Whether the coach and/or the supervisor are ‘internal’ to the organisation in which they work;
* The training institute within which the trainee coach is training;
* The training institute within which the trainee supervisor is training;
* Requirements of professional organisations to which one or both belong;
* The impact of a professional complaint or dispute;
* The career or life stage of supervisor or coach (e.g. just starting out or nearing retirement)
* The personal matters of one or other, such as family demands (including caring commitments), medical conditions, or changes in financial circumstances.

When one or more of these or similar contextual influences is having an impact it is important to acknowledge this in supervision and give some attention to any consequences, boundary issues or needs that arise as a result.

Alongside these direct influences there will be other, generally more diffuse, contextual influences which are likely to pervade the background of supervision, but occasionally make their presence felt. These may be more difficult to identify as their impact may be quite subtle, secondary or less easy to quantify. Examples of this second category might include:

* Prevalent cultural, economic or political conditions;
* Debates or shifts within the coaching profession;
* Media interests which overlap in some way with the work of the coach or supervisor.

It is important to be able to steer a course that avoids either exaggerating or minimising the impact of such influencing factors upon supervisory work.

# Assumptions and Principles Underlying the Cyclical Model

The model is firmly grounded in a set of assumptions about supervision, of which the most important are:

1. The primary purpose of supervision is to enhance the value of the coaching process.
2. An important secondary function is to promote the growth of coaching competence in the coach.
3. Where the coachee’s welfare may be at risk, addressing this should supersede any other task or function.
4. Supervision is primarily a containing and enabling process, rather than an educational or coaching process (although it can also be a transformative process for both coach and supervisor).
5. Supervision is a holistic process containing embodied, affective and cognitive elements.
6. Supervision should be coach-centred and take place within a relationship where the supervisor offers the core conditions of warmth, respect, genuineness and empathic understanding.
7. Good coaches do not necessarily make good supervisors, and a coach requires training and a clear conceptualisation of the practice and process of supervision in order to function effectively in the role of supervisor.
8. Supervisors require ongoing supervision of their supervision work in the same way that coaches require supervision of their client work.

Additional to these important assumptions there are a number of guiding principles that govern our work as supervisors. These are:

• Unconscious and dissociative processes can influence the process of supervision.

• We do not have to understand everything that is happening in supervision and can accept that ‘not knowing’ is a valuable and necessary part of the process.

• Supervision, to be effective, must be exploratory. It may also be action-oriented but this is not always necessary in order for it to be effective.

• The act of the coach and supervisor reflecting together upon the coaching process in supervision is, of itself, facilitative of that process.

• Sometimes the act of reflecting in supervision appears to move the client’s process by itself—this is mysterious but observable.

• Supervision on the work with one client can free up the work with another.

• Aspects of the coach’s work with the client are often replayed in some form (normally outside of immediate awareness) in the supervision session.

• The coach will unconsciously both censor the material presented and also give clues as to what most needs addressing.

• Dealing with the dynamics of the relationship between supervisor and coach is an important aspect of the supervision process and will frequently throw light on the work with the client.

• Supervision can be experienced as very exposing for the coach.

• Supervision helps to maintain a ‘field of learning’ within which client, coach and supervisor are all learning. The maintenance of this field somehow increases the potential for the client to grow. Thus the learning of the coach can in itself facilitate growth in the client.

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