

Professional Supervision in Groups and Teams

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In this article, we would like to show possible **results of professional supervision in teams (1)** and also we would like to point out how a team and its organisation can profit by an intervention like this. We will also specify various **occasions and reasons (2)** for a professional supervision. We will explain diverse **forms of professional team-supervision (3)** and give definitions for **keywords** appearing in this context **(4)**.

In chapter **(5)** we will deal with the **different stages of group development** that all teams automatically must go through. Subsequently, we will demonstrate how **practice transfer** can be established **(6)** by using questions based on action theory (how, why, which, what etc.). In conclusion we will indicate the qualifications needed for professional team-supervision. In addition, we will add a further detail: **How to deal with power-structures in team-coaching-constellations (7)**.

This article presumes that professional supervision is a qualified instrument in quality management, -development and quality assurance of the potential of working-groups and teams.

(1) The results of a successful professional supervision

A) These could be possible results of a professional team-supervision:

- There has been an increase in the team's ability of self-diagnosis in specific situations, for example when dealing with the challenge of new assignments, tension occurring within a team or when it comes to the integration of new team-members etc.
- The team is able to find its own solutions for current problems, complex questions and assignments - the team's qualification for solving problems is on the rise!
- In between the individuals of this team, differences (on personal or professional basis) have been accepted. In addition, the team has even made an interesting observation: different individuals can complement each other - this contributes to team-work in a very positive and sensible way - there has been an increase in the ability to practise dialogue and it has become easier for the team-members to show each other appreciation.

- The fundamental values of the organization and their consequences will be reflected by the team and will be put into action in future-teamwork.
- The loss of friction on the interpersonal level, laterally as well as vertically in hierarchy, for example due to power struggles, has been reduced drastically. The ability to establish contact and to build trust has increased, especially in difficult situations.
- Meeting social needs in the context of the job (for example, personal orientation of significance, affiliation, social acceptance, and trust) is possible.
- Team-roles, competences and division of tasks are all clear.
- The efficiency of team-cooperation has increased a great deal.
- The problems nature within the accomplishment of tasks has been recognized and precise plans of action in order to find the right solutions have already been developed.
- Having the knowledge about group dynamics helps to arrange daily team-work in a relaxed manner.
- Mobilizing useful tools, imparted in professional team-supervision, to help make team-work, meetings and across-the-board teamwork within the organization better, more efficient, more creative etc., becomes self-evident. A reliable competence in the field of methods is now available for the team.
- A team will also become more qualified in multi-professional contexts and will be able to cooperate much better in multidisciplinary fields.
- In general communication has improved remarkably in the participants of the professional supervision. They have acquired the ability to give feedback in a constructive manner, the ability to trust and to live an open culture of communication.

B) The benefits of successful professional supervision for an organisation:

An organization and its overall concept, its values and goals is reflected by its team.

Professional team-supervision -

- can guarantee a smooth work flow
- can improve communication inside of the organization for example in between departments, different projects and management
- can empower innovative and creative forces within teams, which have a positive impact on the entire organization
- will boost the employees' corporate identity, loyalty and motivation towards the organization.

The goals of professional team-supervision:

Team-supervision as a method of intervention can make the following possible:

- The reflection of the style of working relating to a teams productivity and achievement potential.
- A survey on the effects and side-effects of the style of working and terms of communication relating to the team itself as well as the entire organization.
- The purpose of consolidated knowledge of theoretical concepts and techniques of practical intervention is the ability to analyse concrete situations and to present alternative approaches.
- During a professional team-supervision, ways of improvement in quality and quantity can be found, tested for their efficiency and subsequently be deepened in practice.

Definition:

Professional team-supervision is the reflection of the team's own style of working. Mostly, it is a form of methodically guided counselling with the purpose of reflecting job-related behaviour, focussing on the person, its role and the organization.

(2) The initial situation and reasons calling for professional supervision

Professional supervision can be an adequate intervention on the following occasions:

(This listing is a selection of typical situations, which of course does not include all situations possible):

- When changes are coming up in an organization, it will affect the team (changes in the organisation regarding composition and procedure, new target groups, new regulations by law, new products, fusions etc.)
- When a team forms entirely new.
- When conflicts within the team interfere with the effective work flow.
- When a team has difficulties cooperating with another team, for example when failure always leads to a permanent search for the ones responsible, the ones whose fault it is and eventually the search for a scapegoat to blame for everything and also, when team-cooperation is mostly accompanied by mutual reproaches.
- When it comes to problems on the structural level of an organization and what seems to be an attempt of a possible solution, is only the attempt to define “responsible people” who are “in charge” (displacement of conflicts upon teams or individuals).
- When cooperation has become so much of a routine, that people tend to meet upon the lowest „common denominator“.
- When individual team-members feel, that in spite of trying very hard, they can’t apply their skills and qualifications adequately.
- When the same thing happens all the time and quality never changes.
- When you need euphemizing language to describe reality.
- When life in an organization is determined by contradictory values.
- When the same opinions seem to prevail most of the time.
- If the team is very successful and intends to stay that way.

(3) Forms of professional supervision

There is the classic form of **professional case-supervision**: For example a group of social workers in a children's home reflects the way each pedagogue deals with particular children in specific situations and how they can do it differently. This enhances the ability of self-diagnosis and the competence for finding solutions for specific and concrete situations.

Project-supervision

In this case a project-group allows itself the luxury of having the opportunity to reflect their style of work as well as the results, with the intention of realizing project-achievements more efficiently and more effective.

Continuous professional supervision as a way of controlling accomplishment and quality requires new definitions constantly. In **professional supervision of organizations**, groups and/or organizations use the opportunity in order to review procedures, operating expenses, results, productivity, quality and also the outside impression (customer satisfaction) and in order to keep all of these sections on a high level constantly.

Professional supervision of supervisors: professional coaches and supervisors meet on a regular basis to reflect the effects and side-effects of their interventions as well as those of their individual professional preferences.

(4) Defining keywords:

Lewin¹ defines the **Team** as a group of individuals, forming a context of interaction determined by the relationships of its members related to a specific subject area. These relationships are not steady, but change in the course of time. These changes are triggered by internal forces relating to the individual and the group and also external forces relating to the organization.

This description implies three crucial aspects of teams:

- a) The individual
- b) The group/team itself
- c) The process of change and learning in the context of the organization in which it occurs. However, the structure of command as a context of the organization will not be paid attention to.

Organization:

We will observe the organisation from the perspective of systems theory. An organization is a social system, a context of communication (functional systems theory) with emergent properties and human beings are components (members) of social systems.

Professional supervision / team-counselling² is the intentional attempt coming from the in- or outside to encourage, support and accelerate a process of learning within a team:

When speaking of **professional (team-) supervision** we mean a process of self-conscious learning in groups in the job-context of an organization, which is organized, guided and controlled intentionally by a neutral authority: The process holds a possible chance for the team-members to develop skills giving them the ability to optimize their working capacity and to react to change and challenge in a productive manner.

¹ Lewin, K.: (1953): Die Lösung sozialer Konflikte. Bad Nauheim (Christian)

Lewin, K.: (1953): *Solving social conflicts*. Bad Nauheim

² We use the terms professional team-supervision und team-counselling as synonyms.

Learning:

We understand professional supervision as a continuous process of learning for people working in organizations. As we conceive the act of learning from the perspective of the organization, we come to the conclusion, that team-learning is always a bipolar activity:

- One of the “poles” is the conflict area towards the organization – how successful or how well adapted or rather how open or self-contained may a team be in order to have real success;
- The second “pole” is the conflict area between a team’s function and its assignment and also the possible options and/or needs of the team-members.

Therefore **learning** never happens without dealing with contradictions and vice versa learning is made impossible, if solutions or stages of development are merely reduced down to one of these poles of contradiction.

The learning-process within the team, from the organizations perspective, is focused on the adjustment to influences from the environment, which requires the initiation of changes. From the team’s point of view, team-counselling can be regarded as **a consolidated learning-process**

- in which all members can satisfy their needs much more adequately than before
- in which they can introduce their skills more tightly focused and
- work together as a group much more smoothly with better success
- and therefore optimize their ability to connect to the organization

The **principles of work of a professional team-supervision** are based on action –not on causes. Professional supervision stresses the participants’ personal responsibility. Joint learning includes being aware of and accepting the strengths and weaknesses of each individual and of the team as a whole, willingness and ability to change and the realistic chance for progress.

Professional supervisions take place on a regular basis and under various terms, they are part of the professional quality assurance and quality development in most organizations.

(5) Dynamics in teams

When working with teams, we meet people in the context of their collective experiences, expectations, demands and constructions of reality. The way of looking at a hierarchical group as a whole, is different from the traditional way of seeing human beings as individuals.

There is often a habit of encountering humans individually and therefore individualizing group-phenomena. Thus, for example, one will pay attention to the reactions of A to the behaviour of B... etc. This often leads to ways of solutions on a personal, individual level.

Dealing with the dynamics of the group as a whole requires a different kind of apperception – for example regarding the following central question – how can an open and high-performance working-atmosphere blossom within this team and in which way must the individual contribute to this? A helpful tool for training this kind of apperception is to pay attention to the different stages the groups are in at the particular point of time.

In literature one can find various schemata describing and naming the **development phases of groups**.³

The basic idea in all schemata is similar: Groups go through different phases – analogue to human development.

Team-counselling means to be able to distinguish and to reflect patterns of behaviour and forms of experiencing in the particular stages and to provide the results as a learning-opportunity for the team.

The following description is based on the five stages of Bernstein and Lowy (1969).

³ Thus we find three, four or five group-stages:

- Forming, Storming, Norming, Performing. According to Tuckmann
- Unfreezing, Change, Refreezing. According to Lothar Gassmann
- Orientation and exploration, dispute and power struggle, bonding and familiarity, decision and consolidation, closure and reorientation. According to Peter R. Wellhöfer
- Stage of orientation, stage of clarifying roles and position, stage of familiarity, stage of differentiation, stage of disengagement. According Bernstein, Lowy³

The first stage: A phase of orientation and getting to know each other

Even groups that have been working together for quite a while have not necessarily passed this phase just yet. In this phase there must be “official” space for the occupation with the following questions:

- What is my attitude towards work and towards this team?
- What are my perspectives, when it comes to my profession? What stage of my career does my current job represent?
- What kind of topics and assignments am I confident in, which of them are challenging and interesting for me and which are simply a bore?
- What gives and takes motivation in my job?
- Which styles of working apply to me and give me the chance to exert my qualifications?
- How would I like to be guided relating to my assignments⁴?
- On which territory would I like to be responsible personally?
- What kind of contact do I need with my colleagues?
- Which roles can I take over in a team?
- Who could be influenced by me?
- Who may be able to have an impact on me?
- Which of my personal needs can be appeased in this team, how can I contribute to my own satisfaction and to the others' ability of meeting their own needs?

In the course of answering these questions, team-members and executives get to know each other. They build a basis of trust and find a corporate orientation within the team.

⁴ Assignment-related leadership designates a new direction in management, away from generally aligned classical leadership (imperious, laissez-faire and democratic), which is based on orientation towards situations, objectives and the employees competences. In that way an employee can accomplish an assignment single-handedly and can do without instruction, whereas he still may need some guidance when it comes to a different objective.

Relevant literature: Blanchard, K., Zigarmi, P.: (2000): Der Minuten Manager: Führungsstile. Reinbeck bei Hamburg

Blanchard, K., Zigarmi, P.: (2000): The minute-manager: leadership. Reinbeck near Hamburg

The second stage: stage of clarifying positions and roles, power struggle, which is also related to as an authority-crisis.

In this level of development the team finds adequate standards and values that also apply to those of the organization. The individual members fight over different positions and strive for the acknowledgement of their individuality and their own competences. The team learns to communicate using various roles and clarifies mutual expectations inside the team, also including the executive. Here are some questions that are helpful during this stage:

- What is the unwritten law that has great influence on the work of this team? What is legitimate, what is proper behaviour, what topics may be discussed? What is forbidden within the team, what is indecent behaviour, what are the issues that cause silence?
- What higher value does the team stand for: performance on the job or corporate identity? What roles are possible for the opposition (critics, opponent, under dog or scapegoat), which of them have established themselves and how are these roles rated by the team?
- Is there flexibility regarding these roles?
- Who obtains what kind of support, consequence, promotion and acknowledgement, by whom is this provided?
- Who claims which rights and how is this done? What is the purpose of this and at whose expense does this happen?
- What role does the executive play here?
- Is there an unofficial executive next to the official one in this team?

An appropriate, open and appreciative debate dealing with these questions will lead to clarification and gives the team a chance to obtain the next level of development.

The third stage: familiarity

In this third stage of group development many people experience a feeling of being in what they consider a “dream team”. There is a common ground, all internal struggles have been overcome, one has found a mutual basis and working in the team is characterized by efficiency and understanding. The self-devotion of the individual fades into the background and the group focuses on achieving individual and collective goals. A kind of „we“- or „us-feeling“ emerges - together we are strong and successful!

The team-members get along well and start appreciating their differences and profiting from one another.

Some questions for this stage:

- What are the factors of success that empower us to show high performance?
- What standards do we have/ do we require?
- What are important experiences which we enjoy sharing with others? (sharing best practices)
- What kind of new assignments and challenges are adequate and attractive for us?
- What can or must we do to be able to maintain and even enhance our level of high performance?

The fourth stage: differentiation

Individual skills and strengths become more distinct. The team-members may show and let out their “I’m better at that”-feeling. Experts – or specializations are appreciated and this is no longer seen as a threat to the individual qualification, like it still was in the second group stage. In this stage, it often happens that team-members leave in order to get on with their career somewhere else.

In the fifth stage of closure:

Either the team will be composed anew or there will be new topics, assignments and challenges (or the next reorganization) and the process starts over again

So much for the theory. In real life most of the work teams will not go through all of the group stages with the same “cast of characters”. And still, the perceptions of the early times in group-research have current meaning, because:

- Not a single stage can be avoided or skipped, however it is possible for every team to stay stuck in the one single stage.
- Every stage is meant to teach specific competences for the capacity for teamwork.
- Every individual in the team has an impact on the group process, has power to mold it and is responsible for it.

During the hours in which the professional supervision takes place, the supervisor temporarily takes the role of a leader, without releasing the real **executive** from his/her responsibility.

Because not only the team, but also the manager/leader of the team, is in a learning-situation, delicate adjustment between executive and supervisor will be needed continuously in order to distinguish between topics that can be learned in cooperation of executive and team and topics which the executive can learn easier on his own.

The team-counsellor needs a variety of professional **role behaviour** as well as coherent balance of authenticity and professional distance during every of group development.

Team-counselling conceived from the perspective of group dynamics demands the ability of the supervisor not to take anything a team-member says personally and simultaneously to appreciate and take the team and all its members seriously.

In the **beginning stage** he or she requires authentic and real curiosity and must allow him- or herself to ask „dumb“ questions as well („what would you do, if...“). A team-counsellor also requires the ability for amazement and imagination.

In the **stage of power struggle** (2. stage) the counsellors own power and ability to deal with conflict will also be put on trial. It is easier to start a fight with him or her, because one can get rid of the external counsellor much more easily, than the boss. What this means is that the counsellor functions as a model for the team in this stage, which it can use for testing the chances and risks of confrontation and directness and practising ways of dealing with these topics.

In the **stage of familiarity** the counsellor should withdraw from the process, share the team's happiness, support encounters, and be open and friendly and very aware of not belonging to the team.

In the stage of **differentiation** the counsellor should encourage the team-members to realize and to stress differences, to show their individuality, to be specialists, experts etc.

The matter in the stage of **closure** is the ability to say goodbye, to appreciate the past and to take the chance of a new beginning.

(6) Transfer of theoretical training into practical (work) situations (“Praxis transfer”)

Subsequently, we would like to show how a supervisor can sense fully use an organizations' teamwork from the participants point of view in combination with central questions from the action theory, to support a team in dealing with its assignments, questions and conflicts.

Questions based on the action theory (how, why, which, what etc.): In order to encourage dialogue in a team and to determine, in which stage a team is in at the moment, we apply the reproduction of the aforementioned questions.

Reproduction means that all participants will be asked and in this process will go into exchange or dialogue: the team-members, the team-executive, the executive's superior and - should the situation arise - all relevant cooperation-partners of the team. And the supervisor will also be confronted with these questions and will answer them privately.

Thus, the entire complexity of the perspectives within the team and from the outside relating to the team becomes clear and all people involved can discuss the outcome with the objective of developing alternatives to present procedures by looking at the viewpoints of the other participants. (Thesis – antithesis – synthesis)

The exploration of one's own mental concepts, when being confronted with different perspectives also can establish the opportunity for innovation and „fresh“ thought as a requirement for high-quality action (synergies).

1. The question relating to the field of action: Who is involved, what other persons or groups are important for the team? Who is involved in the problem?
2. The question relating to the types of action: What is happening here? What is going on? What is the subject here? Which situations are experienced as problematic, difficult, stressful and by whom are experienced? What should be changed? Who possesses which resources in order to contribute to the solutions of these problems?
3. The question regarding the context of action: Where does the problem come from? How has it developed? Why is the present condition the way it is? What's the use of things being this way? Since when does the problem exist and how has the team and the organization tried to solve the problem up until now?

4. Questions asking for reasons and evaluation of actions: What would happen to the team, if nothing were done, if everything stayed the way it is? What should be changed? Who would have to change? What could be the goal of a professional supervision? What is not good about the situation - how should it be different - what would be good?
5. The question regarding the modalities of action (methods and techniques). How can this be changed and what resources are needed? What really must be done in the problem-situation, in the course of the process in order to achieve the intended goal objective?
6. The question about the actions consequences: What has been achieved in the team and what resources were necessary? How was it accomplished and does the result meet the target state that was planned before? What are the consequences of the result relating to other departments in the organization?

(7) A supervisor's competence:

Professional supervision is a qualified type of counselling based on profound theoretical knowledge (to know what) and justifies concrete action by professional ethics (to know why). The cognitive linkage of scientific knowledge into concrete professional steps of action is based on the supervisors competence of transformation, which he or she represents authentically in the counselling-situation. Among these competences are the following⁵:

- **Profound theoretical knowledge**, for the analysis and explanation of the situation, (psychology, sociology, pedagogics, economics, politics..)
- **Knowledge from experience** in the sense of context awareness: what makes sense, what is understood and what is possible in the specific culture of the team and its organization (knowledge about team-development-processes in organizations, experience in counselling of groups and organizations)
- **Knowledge about preferences and criteria**: what are the values an organization lives by - reflection of those values in relation to the counsellors own values and tenors based on his/her professional ethics
- A wide range of knowledge based on **action theory**, methods and techniques, which can be applied according to the situation (methods according to group dynamics, procedures based on systems theory..)
- **Evaluation-knowledge**, as a catalogue of criteria with which one can review the results of interventions considering enduring changes leading to an improvement of the teams performance.
- An individual **personality** as on of the counsellors competences, including a broad spectrum of self-confidence, a healthy dose of self-suspiciousness (awareness of ones limits), general confidence and love for the people and the whole wide world.

⁵ Sagebiel, J., Vanhoefer, E.: (2006): Es könnte auch anders sein. Systemische Variationen der Teambberatung. Heidelberg

Sagebiel, J. and Vanhoefer, E.: (2006): Everything could be entirely different. Systemic variations of team-counselling. Heidelberg

Personality as a counsellor's competence

Professionalism in the field of professional team-supervision refers to the regulation of complex systems of interaction and communication, following their own logics. In consideration of the insecure territory in which the counsellor is moving, the increasing importance of the counsellor as an individual for the effect and success of his/her interventions should not be underestimated. One can see, that only one part of professionalism in the field of pedagogics (professional team-supervisions are learning-situations) is based on acquired knowledge, methods and techniques. The other part of the profession is tightly linked to the counsellor as a person and how he or she implies his/her skills and experiences, how he or she presents him-/herself to the client, in this case the team (Self-performance), how he or she describes and rates situation and in which manner he or she takes action. This is not meant to be about the question, which characteristics turn out to be competences for the encouragement of the learning-processes and the navigation of teams - the point is rather the ability of unemotional self-reflection and self-evaluation considering the resources in the sense of competences that the counsellor has available in order to organize team-development professionally. To get to the point: Professionality consists in the counsellors' knowledge of what he or she can and cannot do. And also his or her ability to improve existent skills. This aspect of professionalism is what we would like to call a **counsellors personal competence**. This includes the following examples⁶.

- Confidence in ones own skills, in oneself and the ability to count on ones personal instinct,
- The courage to take risk, the functions of consistencies
- The ability to listen and to "wait and see", the ability to redeem oneself and to serve the team (not to attend upon the team!)
- To conserve serenity, calmness and patience even in non-structures, conflictuous situations,
- To observe oneself during the process and to remain open in order to interpret ambiguous situations and benefit from them in a constructive manner
- To confide in the resources and the learning-potential of the team-members, so they will manage changes using their own strength.

⁶ Sagebiel, J.: (1994): Persönlichkeit als pädagogische Kompetenz in der beruflichen Weiterbildung, Frankfurt a.M.

Sagebiel, J.: (1994): Personality as a pedagogical competence in vocational education. Frankfurt (Main)

- A sense of humour as the ability to laugh about oneself and to describe the funny details in situations that seem threatening, as laughter and delight make learning easier.
- To be aware of one's own emotional and mental potentials and attachments and to be able to make them available.
- Never stop nourishing, sharpening and evaluating one's own intuition.
- To be able to deal with transference/ counter transference / projection or similar phenomena.
- Fun, curiosity and showing interest in one's work
- Being aware and knowing that the counsellor as a person with his/her attitudes and way of dealing with communication designates the boundaries and scopes in the learning-situation.
- The aesthetical aspect: being aware of the impression made by clothing and therefore adapting one's own outfit to the culture of the organization.

Dealing with the phenomenon of power as a partial aspect of a supervisor's competence

The field in which team-counselling takes place is characterized by a high density of power. In order to be able to move within this field confidently and adequately, the counsellor requires consciousness, instinct and a feeling for power-constellations and the ability to play by their rules.

The power given to a counsellor during team-counselling is only a temporary „item on loan“. The counsellor could lose his/her power in every single situation during the counselling-process: let us visualize this: the counsellor's power is nothing but an ejection seat - the team/client can always push the red button. This (tempting) power of creating and controlling, which is nothing but an „external loan“, must be embraced and exploited.

In order to wield power in a responsible manner, a counsellor needs the following:

- A feeling for power; where is power located?
- Criteria for recognizing and to review the forms of power an organization lives by
- And to be able to evaluate their consequences (profit or loss).

- An accepting, reflected relationship to power, its bright sides and its dark sides, accountability and exertion of influence.
- An awareness of the forms of power with the highest influence in a particular context.

Of course the individual way of living by these personal competences is left to every counsellor and is characterized by his or her unique properties. For “everyone shall be sure to mind the path where the heart is and then chose it with all of his might“ because „Every single person is a new thing in this world and shall make his properties complete in this it“⁷

Translated by Catherine La Douceur

⁷ Buber, M.: (1986): Hundert Chassidische Geschichten. Zürich
Buber, M.: (1986): One hundred Chassidic stories. Zurich