

Reliving the moment

using audio playback in coaching supervision

The **Ashridge Supervision Research Group** conducted a year-long research study exploring the use of audio playback in supervision. Here they share its findings, and the implications for coaches, supervisors and clients.



Listening to audio recordings from live coaching conversations is a technique known as audio playback. You may have used it when you were training as a coach. However, if you are now a more experienced coach or a supervisor, we suggest you might like to consider audio playback with a different purpose: namely, to enrich your supervision sessions. We instigated a year-long research study involving pairs of supervisors and executive coaches and found the benefits from using audio playback included re-evoking unacknowledged feelings, generating new insights, changing the dynamics between supervisor and coach and slowing the conversation down to notice unexpected habits and patterns. While we are not suggesting that the use of recordings could, or should, replace more traditional methods such as free recall, we would like to encourage more widespread experimentation with the use of audio to add variety to and re-invigorate the supervision of experienced coaches.

Why audio recordings in supervision?

'Supervision doesn't accept things at face value. It is looking with interest into all that is there and includes the discarded, the discounted and the disgraced,' writes Sheila Ryan.¹ So, in supervision the coach is invited to ask: 'What are you not seeing? What are you editing out in recounting your experience? What are you tuning into?' Supervision allows coaches to slow things down and to deepen inquiry into their own practice. However, what can help ensure supervision stays fresh and invigorating for coaches and supervisors?

Recordings of coaching sessions are rarely used in routine supervision to encourage the development and continued learning of qualified coaches. Indeed, a survey of coaches attending a workshop at the EMCC Annual European Conference, conducted by two of the authors in 2011, found that by far the most common method of supervision was free recall: the coach sharing what they remembered of a coaching session. A more recent survey of supervisors through the CSA also found that audio playback is rarely used in coaching supervision (see Table 1 for all these survey results). However, as one respondent said, 'I used [audio playback] in my psychotherapy training and it was extremely useful but I haven't used it in coaching [supervision], strangely enough... not at all sure why not.'

We do not need psychologists or lawyers to tell us that our ability to recall an event fully is often flawed. However, cognitive theory has shown that what we choose to pay attention to determines which aspects of an experience we notice and remember.² Emotions experienced at the time, or subsequently, may shape both what we recall of an event and how we interpret it.³ This dynamic is at play in supervision. When trying to recollect an event, human cognitive processes generate a memory reconstruction that is highly edited and subject to the emotions and relational dynamics in the moment.⁴ Memories are therefore distorted by the current situation as well. So, in a supervision session, if the coach presents a case from memory - ie through 'free recall' - this will inevitably create an account of what happened that reflects their own biases and needs. The way the client's story

is presented is in itself of interest to the supervisor and can be a rich source of data. This parallels the way that a coaching client, in choosing to present their story to their coach, prompts questions and emerging hypotheses in the mind of the coach.

In our research study, we wondered what additional insights were generated from more literally 'reliving the moment' with the client, using audio recordings of coaching sessions. We hypothesised that this might create different and interesting insights. It did.

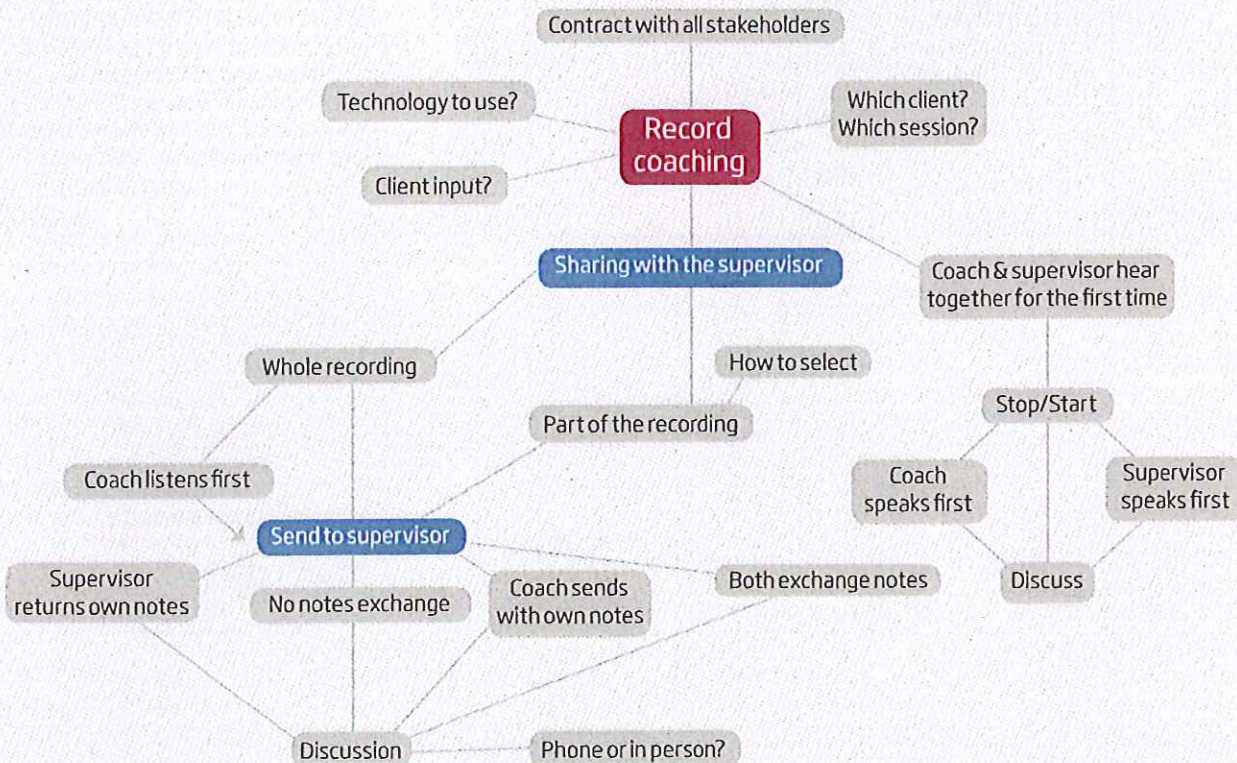
Our method

To explore the potential role of audio playback, two pairs of supervisors and executive coaches were formed. We used a phenomenological method where we carefully studied supervision, with and without audio playback, using review forms completed independently straight after the supervision session. In the first cycle, each supervisor-coach dyad experimented with using audio playback in their supervision, in addition to free recall. Two different questionnaires ensured that we captured perceptions of the methods both prior to and after using them. The second questionnaire was used immediately after three supervision sessions. The pairs then met to review their experiences and began a second phase of inquiry in which the use of audio in the supervision session during supervision was observed by the fifth member of the team, who offered additional insights and challenged the emerging findings. The same questionnaire was now used twice, and completed by all five members of the team for a total of 11 contracted supervision sessions.

Table 1 Survey results

Organisation	Numbers polled	Number of responses	Number who have used audio playback
EMCC conference session	40	32	2
3rd International Supervision Conference attendees	100	18	10
Association of Coaching Supervisors	120	4	3
Coaching Supervision Academy	200	20	1

Figure 1 Sharing recorded coaching in coach supervision



Our findings

Here we review our findings, covering our experience of the benefits and limitations of using audio fragments in supervision. Practical and ethical considerations are explored later.

Different ways of using audio playback in supervision

When we came together, one of our first insights was the considerable range of different possibilities that exist under the catch-all term 'audio playback'. Choices include:

1 using the whole audio recording or only fragments

2 sending the recording (whole or part) to the supervisor in advance of the supervision or listening together during the supervision session itself

3 having the supervisee choose the beginning and end of a fragment, or the supervisor, or both together.

Figure 1 illustrates the different options. This suggests that, rather than audio playback being a single discrete addition to supervision, there is a far greater range of possibilities than we originally envisaged.

We did not explore all these different permutations although we tried quite a few in the 11 supervision conversations that were part of our empirical research.

Strengths deriving from the use of audio playback

Re-evoking unacknowledged feelings

In *À la Recherche du Temps Perdu*,⁵ Proust describes feelings re-evoked by biting into a madeleine cake. The taste brought back deeply buried memories. For one coach in the research, listening with her supervisor to the voice of her client enabled her to acknowledge her true feelings towards her client: 'I believe so strongly in the Rogerian requirement for positive regard, I hadn't acknowledged to myself how boring I find my client. Hearing her voice, I felt the creeping lethargy I hadn't been consciously aware of before. My supervisor was able to share her sense of the client too. It opened up an important line of inquiry which I don't think we would have otherwise explored.'



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Changing the supervisor-coach dynamic

An unexpected finding was that bringing the audio playback into the session created a different dynamic between supervisor and coach. Instead of the more traditional supervision process of two people in the room, one sharing (coach) and one (supervisor) listening, reflecting, asking questions and summarising, something shifted when both were listening to a recording together. The recording became a third object to which both supervisor and coach turned their attention. Their physical posture relative to one another shifted from being opposite each other to bending over and in towards the technology in the act of listening and making sense together. It felt a more collaborative, shared endeavour where supervisor and coach were engaged literally as co-explorers.

Generating new insights

The use of audio playback can also allow coach and supervisor to identify patterns and review incidents that have been lost in the editing and censorship of our memory processes. For example, one coach was able to notice that he had hurried a client to closure in a coaching session; the client had even attempted to re-open the conversation. This had not been recollected at all by the coach. It is unlikely such details would ever have surfaced in a free recall session. Yet, in this instance the audio presented clear evidence that the closure of the session was not handled well, opening a fruitful learning conversation.

Aspects of coaching such as energy, tone, pace and word patterns are likely to occur at the subliminal level and therefore are mostly beyond reach of the free recall method. An audio playback can present granular data about areas that are not well served by our memories, and present us with important, albeit sometimes uncomfortable, truths.

Slowing the conversation down

For experienced coaches, it may have been years since anyone other than their coachees witnessed what goes on in their coaching. Over time, we build up habits and patterns of which we are generally unaware. Yet even small gestures can be significant in influencing the direction and meaning of a conversation.⁶ The gift of listening to yourself on an audiotape, and listening with your supervisor, is that small patterns and habits can become visible. It brings your current practice into focus, a bit like having a coaching MOT. And, rather than leaping to conclusions, there is the possibility of re-exploring what happened, slowing it down, taking it apart as if it were discourse analysis. Rather than exploring the normal topics in supervision, the authors found that introducing audio brings a rawness and authenticity that can be refreshing and energising.

Limitations of using audio

While we experienced real benefits from using audio in supervision, there are some limitations. Its very strength, literally bringing the client into the room, is arguably also its main weakness. Bringing a chosen but unedited experience into supervision potentially privileges the 'as was' over the 'is now'. Coach and supervisor return to what happened, potentially losing the richness that comes from the way a client's story is presented, with all its free associations, sense-making up to now and emotional experience of reliving the case.

Indeed, very often in coaching supervision the 'bare facts' can be less important than how these bare facts are reported. Moreover, changes due to memory and defences can themselves be interesting and illuminating. Working with free recall, the supervisor accepts that the material offered is not the 'truth' about something, but rather an account about something that has a core of truth in terms of a) what was on the coach's mind during the client work; b) how the coach has processed the material afterwards, and c) what is on the mind of the coach now.

Technical and ethical considerations

The technical requirements of audio recording are now simpler than ever. The coach no longer needs to remember to take a dictaphone or to check the batteries. Most smartphones and tablets have built-in recording functions. The relative familiarity of a phone lying on the desk also makes the recording process less obtrusive.

However, ethical considerations remain important. Assurances of confidentiality are an essential element of the coaching contract that must not be breached through recording. The ubiquity of recording devices means coaches have to be vigilant about file storage, transfer, download and destruction. Devices and files need to be password-protected and shared with extreme care. Using audio therefore implies that coaches develop a proficiency in the use of digital technologies.

Dos and don'ts

We conclude by sharing our encouragements and cautions about the use of audio playback in supervision.

Dos and don'ts for coaches

Do	Don't
Experiment with different ways of using audio playback	Make it a big deal for clients. If they don't want to be recorded don't be upset
Practice with your recording equipment before trying it with a client	Become overly analytical about your recordings. See them as an additional and helpful tool
Use with clients where you are genuinely open to learning something new	
Contract with clients around purpose and confidentiality	
Consider making recording a part of your routine practice	

Dos and don'ts for supervisors

Do	Don't
Encourage coaches to experiment with different ways of using audio playback	Allow coaches to become solipsistic and over-analytical about their recordings
Use to identify strengths of existing practice as well as exploring problem areas	Forget about the here and now relationship with your supervisee in the room and your use of parallel process
Use if you and your supervisees have become a bit stuck and are repeating old themes of conversation	

Conclusions

This research demonstrates for us that the use of audio playback within supervision can offer rich and deep insights for coach and supervisor. Audio playback and the more generally used method of free recall are complementary in our view. A recorded audio fragment reveals little in terms of what is on the mind of the supervisee right now. In contrast, free recall reveals little about what was going on during the session and is all about what is on the mind of the supervisee right now. Our encouragement is to use both to ensure that supervision provides coaches with continuing fresh insights into their practice.

References

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