

| Fear within the Supervisory Space

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“Darkness is the absence of light, where light shines, there is no darkness, and awareness is that light.” (Rutledge 2002:20)

Introduction

Fear is a necessary lived feeling, emotion and experience, which can save us from danger and even save our lives. “The oldest and strongest human emotion is fear and the oldest and strongest form of fear is the fear of the unknown” (Svendsen 2007:32). Fear can be a hindrance or a motivating factor in our lives. “Fear can have both a destructive and a constructive aspect; it can break you down or open a new, better relationship with the world” (Svendsen 2007:91).

It is important to acknowledge fear within the supervisor, fear in the supervisee, the people we work with and the organisations we work within and therefore it is reasonable to question how potentially supervision can handle fear? In this article, I will examine how fear impacts on all parties involved in supervision and on how fear can be brought into the supervisory space.

Fear is defined as: “An unpleasant emotion caused by the threat of danger, pain or harm” (Oxford English Dictionary 2012). Fear can also

be a block in our relationships, enjoyment and careers, even to extremes of phobias e.g. agoraphobia, glossophobia. It can carry a stigma, be a source of shame and be difficult to express. “Fear immobilizes and fear motivates” (Sullender 2014: 124). Absorbing fear and anxiety on a daily basis can be contributing factors to frustration, stress, anxiety and eventually burnout. “All these fears surround and permeate the supervisory hour” (Sullender: 2014:123). My experience is that there is a dearth of exploration of fear in supervision, while many theorists devote a lot of attention to anxiety. “Fear and anxiety are closely related states. The question is what is behind the anxiety, what is the core fear? “It is our relationship to the fear that determines the choices we make” (Rutledge 2002:93).

Supervisor’s Fear of Power

While I work in a collaborative manner with my supervisees, I also have to acknowledge the power imbalance in the relationship. Owning my own power to have a positive impact on my supervisee and on their profession takes courage. “Power differentials are inherent in supervisory relationships, therefore a common source of fear” (Sullender2014:125). Our core belief about power will influence how we use power in supervision. “The idea of the one down position triggers the inner child response”

(Breene 2011:170). Therefore, the question that could be asked, is power a source of fear for some supervisors? Can our assumptions around power be negative? Is power a means to hurt or is it viewed positively as motivator, to persuade and encourage? “Much of the conflict around the role of the supervisor emerges from the difficulty that many supervisors have in finding an appropriate way of taking authority and handling power inherent in their role” (Hawkins & Shohet 2012:55).

Critical reflection on our assumptions around power, and how gender, culture and society influence these assumptions, can impact on our ability to manage power in the supervisory relationship. If the idea of power frightens us, how can we hold our own power? If we work out of fear, it may cause us to resist using our power, or we may use power games. Hawthorn cited in Hawkins & Shohet (2012) talks about abdicating power or manipulating power. In bringing awareness to our fear around the use of power, we can change our thinking and transform power into a positive aspect of supervision. In doing this we can model a positive use of power for our supervisees.

Ethical Issues

Ethical issues can create anxiety and fear for the supervisor, “What is the right thing?” “Do I need to report this?” or “Will this damage our relationship?”. Vicarious liability is acknowledged in the literature (Bernard & Goodyear 1992:132) (Bond 2000:121). The supervisor has a responsibility not only to the supervisee but also to the client. “Ethics, ethical decision making

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and ethical dilemmas are all areas of great uncertainty” (Carroll & Gilbert 2011:13). Uncertainty can cause fear, the not knowing, and the fear of getting it wrong. “Fear is closely associated with uncertainty” (Svendsen 2008:41). In the not knowing, we revert to our past experiences, whether positive or negative. If we are able to recognise our fears in these situations, we will be able to respond to them in an informed way rather than unconsciously working out of these fears. “Healthy fear offers us guidance; neurotic fear tries to control us” (Rutledge 2002:162). If the supervisee is aware that they are bringing an ethical dilemma, when they come to you, they could be facing their own fears. In addressing these fears, space will be created to explore a possible course of action. “Our reactivity, anxiety and general problematic feelings can be usefully held within the space so that they can be understood in all their complexity before any course of action is decided upon”. (Hawkins & Shohet 2012:141). Bringing awareness to our fear offers us choices in how we deal with the fear. “Face the fear, explore it, accept it and respond to it” (Rutledge 2002:151).

Evaluation

Bernard & Goodyear (1995) and Carroll (1996) highlight the gatekeeper role of the supervisor, the occasions which requires us to use our power. “There will also be

evaluation and gatekeeping and an awareness of the power dynamics between us” (Creaner: 2011:153). In evaluation, while collaboration is essential, the supervisor has an ethical responsibility to be honest with him or herself. Evaluation can impact on our core assumptions and learning from our past education and work experience. If these experiences are negative, we may try to compensate by being too complimentary therefore not identifying beneficial areas for growth.

Even when our experience is positive, we can find evaluation difficult. “Evaluation is difficult, even for those who love the challenge of supervision”, (Bernard & Goodyear 1995:109). When we value the supervisory relationship, we can be afraid to damage it by challenging our supervisee, finding it easier to stay in the “cosy relationship” and thus avoiding challenge. “People whose primary degree has been as therapists may therefore find switching to the role of evaluator particularly difficult” (Scaife 2001:215). The word ‘challenge’ can create fear, images of confrontation, winner or loser, or provocation, as opposed to encouragement, motivation and transformation. It is important to critically reflect as a supervisor what challenge means for me and to acknowledge how this will impact on my supervisee. If I am afraid of challenge I may avoid it in the supervisory relationship.

“Supervisors cannot take someone to a place they themselves have not been” (Powell 2011:175). Acknowledging my own assumptions, core beliefs, understanding my fears and vulnerabilities and critically reflecting on them in my own supervision, will continue to increase my own awareness and my ability as supervisor. “Attending to my own anxieties, fears, frustration, mistakes, feeling of inadequacy, overwhelming responsibility, and lack of sufficient self-awareness is all part of the process” (Rowe 2011: 43).

Supervisee’s Fear

The supervisee will come with different levels of fear, doubts and vulnerabilities. The trainee will have fears of failing evaluation, fears about taking risks with their new knowledge and fears of supervision itself. “Given all the misconceptions that surround “supervision”, it is probably no surprise that our fantasies give rise to fears – which will also have their roots in past experience and past relationships” (Breene 2011:170). This is also true for more experienced supervisees. The fear of inadequacy or “not being good enough” is a common theme in the workplace with higher demands placed on workers, with value for money, standards, accountability, all regular issues raised by managers with their employees. Doubt in one’s ability may also be caused by interaction with those we work with. “We have often seen very competent workers reduced to severe doubts about themselves and their abilities to function in the work through absorbing distress, dis-ease, and

disturbance from clients” (Hawkins & Shohet 2012: 4). The concept of “not good enough” is also exacerbated by the supervisee comparing themselves to others, their colleagues and even the supervisor. “One common threat is fear of inadequacy; although supervisees want to succeed, there is a prevalent concern of not “measuring up” to the supervisor’s

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standards” (Bradley & Gould 2002: 2). Comparing oneself to others usually results in a negative response to oneself it can make us feel inadequate, and it can also remove our own responsibility for our decisions. “To look out is to blame; to look in is to own” (Holton: 2014).

Fear of taking responsibility for our own actions e.g. “manager said to do it”, “it’s the policy in the organisation” all leads to a lack of accountability. It is only when we examine the fear that prevents us from making a decision, that we can we make the necessary judgement on how to proceed. In my experience we can have a tendency to focus on the negatives rather than the positives of ourselves. In supervision can we acknowledge our strengths, knowledge and experience or do we fear appearing conceited and arrogant?

Manifestations of Fear

Fear can take many forms. It can be an intense feeling, it can be familiar, or strange and it can

often be experienced in ways that we don’t even acknowledge as fears. “The feeling of fear is not always the same, it varies not only in intensity but also in quality” (Svenson 2008: 46). If one is unaware of one’s own fear it can be expressed in various forms. “Fear can take many forms; dread, worry, panic, anxiety, self-consciousness, superstition and negativity” (Rutledge,2002:88).

Shohet talks of “aggression as a form of fear” (2008:191) he also identifies other expressions of fear; withdrawal, blame, intellectualizing and resistance. Therefore, to help the supervisee transform these behaviours; the underlying fear needs to be addressed. When we help the supervisee acknowledge their fears, it can be the disorienting dilemma, which can bring about transformational learning. Fear usually permeates into relationships and can present as a parallel process therefore addressing the fear can have wide ranging benefits.

If the supervisor is unable to help the supervisee bring their fears into the supervisory relationship, the effectiveness of the supervision can be severely impacted. Non-disclosure is one outcome of a supervisee’s inability to be open and honest with their supervisor. “Within a single supervision session, 85% of trainees withheld information from their supervisors” (Mehr et al 2010:107). They go on to explain their finding, “the results supported the hypothesis that the greater the anxiety experienced by

the trainee, the greater amount of non-disclosure and a lower overall willingness to disclose in the supervision session" (Mehr et al 2010: 111).

the power that would be removed from that fear. "The goal is not to banish our fears but to tame them, to identify the truth to focus their energy, to welcome them home"

2000:21). There can be many fears in the aftermath of an assault or other physical injuries in the line of work, "Am I seen as weak?" "Did I provoke it?" "What did I do to deserve it?" "Did I follow the policy?" "Will it happen again?" are all questions people might ask themselves in this situation.

Through dialogue with my colleagues fear of the unknown, fear of getting it wrong, and fear of criticism/challenge were acknowledged.

The non-disclosure or resistance to engage fully while a natural response is a major block in the supervisory relationship. "The key here is to accept our resistance and then finding a supervisor we can trust, despite our resistance, concerns and fears" (Breene 2011: 168) It is important as a supervisor to be aware of the resistance, acknowledge and work with it to understand the fear behind it. "Supervision-induced anxiety causes supervisees to respond in a variety of ways, with some of the responses being defensive. It is these defensive behaviours, which serve the purpose of reducing the anxiety that are referred to as resistance" (Bradley & Gould 2002:1). In a safe supportive supervisory relationship, the supervisee can be supported to work through their resistance, "Bring areas of darkness into light" (Conroy 1995: 14).

Through dialogue with my colleagues fear of the unknown, fear of getting it wrong, and fear of criticism/challenge were acknowledged. "Fear of the unknown is actually fear of my imagination" (Huber 1995:75). If it was possible to discuss in supervision, a worker's greatest fear, to explore ways they would deal with that situation, imagine

(Whitehead & whitehead 2010: 173) Hiding the fear creates the isolation and the panic. "When we hide our feelings about how the work is impacting us, we separate ourselves from others, disempowering all of us in the process" (Adamson 2011:88).

Physical Safety

I have discussed emotional responses to fear, but what about the fear of our own physical well-being and safety? I was physically assaulted and verbally abused when leaving work, by a client with whom I felt I had a good relationship. This was a frightening experience; I was concerned for my own safety and the safety of the client, who was intoxicated at the time. I was alone, scared, uncertain of what was going to happen. There were so many feelings afterwards, embarrassment, shame, questioning; how I could have handled the situation differently? What could have happened? "Very often what was imagined but did not happen was harder to deal with subsequently than the reality of what actually happened" (Smith 2000:20). It was difficult afterwards not to mistrust all my clients; I was also concerned about how my colleagues perceived me. "There is always that fear. How will it be perceived by others?" (Smith

If I had hidden all my concerns and fear, I believe they would have continued to cloud my judgement, negatively impacting on my relationship with clients and colleagues and I would be working out of fear. In revealing myself in supervision, I was able to learn from the experience. "They wanted to be allowed to re-discover their sense of self in the company of another" (Smith 2000: 24). It is vital that fear doesn't take over our lives or our professions. "Fear is contagious. If someone becomes afraid of something, this fear has a tendency to spread to others, who in turn spreads it further" (Svendson 2008:14)

Conclusion

Fear is a very real issue in all our lives, from our perceived threats, to real threats to our physical and mental health, our professional image, our financial rewards and our promotional opportunities. Fear is a factor for the supervisor, the supervisee and the organization. In establishing that fear is a factor for all and often difficult to admit, how can supervision help? Many theorists and researchers on supervision acknowledge a strong supervisory relationship as key to effective supervision. "A good supervisory relationship is the best way to ensure that we stay open to ourselves and our clients and continue to learn, develop

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and flourish in our work” (Hawkins & Shohet 2012: 255). This safe non-judgemental space is the ideal place to bring awareness to our fears. “The first part of looking at fear is just inviting it into our awareness without judgement” (Thich Nhat Hanh 2012: 4). However, if we are resistant to acknowledging our fear, unable to critically reflect on the root causes of our fear we may act unconsciously out of our fears. This can have a negative impact on our relationship and work in general and also our own wellbeing. “Fear is the biggest block to intimacy and communication” (Shohet 2008: 197). If one talks of being afraid, the impulse is to reassure the person, when often the fear is very real and reassurance won’t take it away. “The belief is that anxieties and fears need to be uncovered rather than driven underground by reassurances” (Smith 2000). Rutledge discusses four steps to transforming our relationship with fear “Face it, explore it, accept it and respond to it” (2002:15).

In a collaborative, safe, non-judgemental supervisory space these four steps can be worked through. In allowing the supervisee the opportunity to work through their own meaning and understanding of how fear is affecting them, there will be a greater opportunity for broad learning. “The essential thing is to allow the person to find their own meaning in their own way in their own time” (Smith 2000: 24). In the supervisory relationship

it is important to acknowledge recurring themes and see what lies beneath them, this is also true of fears. “Recurring fears are clues” (Rutledge: 2002:92). ☺

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