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Citation:

Manley, AJ (2010) The Supervision Process through the Eyes of the Supervisor. *Sport and Exercise Psychology Review*, 6 (2). 43 - 46. ISSN 1745-4980

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The supervision process through the eyes of the supervisor

Carla Meijen and Andrew Manley

This study builds on a previous article (Manley & Meijen, 2009) in which advice for in-training practitioners was provided through the shared reflections of experienced and accredited professionals. One of the tips was to choose a supervisor well. This is especially relevant given that the British Psychological Society (BPS) offer some Society-defined roles and expectations of in-training practitioners as part of the candidate handbook for the qualification in sport and exercise psychology. The British Association for Sport and Exercise Sciences (BASES) offers similar guidance for supervisors and supervisees affiliated to their own process of accreditation through supervised experience (SE). In addition, higher education institutions will often provide PhD supervisors with some guiding principles and expectations with regard to the work they conduct with research students. However, useful as these suggested roles and guidelines are, it could be argued that they are less transparent to students and aspiring practitioners who may want to understand more clearly what it is that potential supervisors expect from their supervisees.

Thus, the aim of the current article is to provide students with an overview of some of the common expectations supervisors have of their supervisees and to offer some practical advice to students on how to get the most out of their relationship with their supervisor. To do this, we contacted five supervisors in the field of sport and exercise psychology asking them to respond to a number of open-ended questions (available on request from the authors) in relation to their expectations of the supervisee. The questions were related to issues such as previous qualifications, attitude, preparation before meetings, perceptions of their relationship with supervisees, and how to encourage critical thinking and professional development. The respondents are currently supervising PhD students and/or in-training practitioners (i.e., BPS

Stage 2 leading to chartered status or BASES SE). The data were analysed by the authors using thematic analysis in order to identify common threads articulated within the obtained responses. The main themes emerging from the questions will be summarised, followed by practical advice for supervisees.

Themes

Previous qualifications

All respondents agreed that a solid undergraduate degree (consensus on this seems to be 2:1 or above) is essential for both a PhD position and for in-training practitioners. Previous qualifications are often used by potential supervisors as a first point of call to narrow down selection for positions, and one respondent mentioned that *“if the student hasn’t got a 2:1 or a first then a Masters is needed to demonstrate an ability to think critically and at an advanced level”* (Respondent #4). One respondent emphasised that a good relationship is, however, just as important as previous qualifications: *“I am aware that a good relationship between the supervisor and supervisee is essential for a successful PhD completion”* (Respondent #1).

Attitude

Commitment emerged as a theme related to the supervisee’s attitude. When considering a PhD, it is important for applicants to consider motives for pursuing a PhD. As respondent #2 mentioned, *“rather than just wanting to be called a Dr, what do they [supervisees] want to investigate and why?”* In line with the theme of having an appropriate attitude, there was consensus from the respondents that the ambition a supervisee has needs to be guided by practical strategies (e.g., goal setting) to achieve specific targets/aims. Striving for excellence is reflected by a supervisee’s willingness to go that extra mile, such as

hunting down key literature regarding treatment of a client or when writing up a research study. Striving for excellence is closely linked to commitment, which is reflected by putting in the necessary hours to achieve success and willing to make sacrifices to achieve their goal. The respondents were also in agreement that supervisees should be encouraged to adopt a sense of responsibility for their own efforts if they are to be successful in their endeavours: *“The student has to be prepared to work hard, ... be determined to stick through to the end...Otherwise they just go through the motions”* (Respondent #4).

Specifically for PhD students, it was highlighted that passion and enthusiasm for the area of interest would be something that supervisors would look for in potential candidates. It was advised that students should consider what it is that they want to examine as part of a research degree, and perhaps more importantly, why that topic is of interest to them: *“The only student I had ... who didn’t have this passion and interest and just fell into the PhD, dropped out.”* (Respondent #4).

Use of appropriate communication skills emerged as another theme that could be linked to attitude. One of the respondents pointed out that *“a student that’s willing to listen first, then argue later when s/he has developed a sound case, imbues me with confidence that this student will succeed in any endeavour”* (respondent #1). In addition to such willingness to welcome advice from their supervisor, the supervisees should be able to disseminate their work; this can be reflected by the ability to present work at conferences or communicate clearly with clients when working as an in-training practitioner. This is further addressed by respondent #5, who stressed the importance of the supervisee demonstrating *“an ability to communicate important information to their target audience and get on with the key individuals that will facilitate their path to their end goal”*. Also, the supervisee should not be afraid to ask questions, with Respondent #2 actually stating that they should be expected

to do so; *“I expect them to push me as a supervisor, to ask questions, to challenge my views, to not just ‘accept’ what I say or do”*.

A supervisee’s attitude can make or break their success and, as outlined above, is reflected in their willingness to work, listen and take advice, their ability to be flexible, and their determination and passion to pursue their goal(s).

Preparations before meetings

All supervisors expect their supervisees to be prepared for meetings. This includes being familiar with or developing agenda items for each meeting and being conscientious with timekeeping. This will allow both supervisor and supervisee to reflect on the achievement of goals set at the start of the PhD or in-training process. In addition, a lack of preparation could be a warning sign to the supervisor. A clear focus for the meetings with a supervisor are also essential as *“the supervisor is not living with the student’s project on a daily basis as the student is and is often juggling a number of things both in terms of doing tasks and intellectually”* (Respondent #4).

Perceptions of role as supervisors

The supervisors within this sample perceived their role to consist of being a facilitator, motivator, advisor, and also a role model for their supervisee. According to one respondent, the supervisor’s role as motivator is mostly reflected at times when the supervisee appears unsure about their commitment to their work, when they may *“feel bogged down, lost and lose motivation”* and only *“very rarely has to give the student a kick to get them out of an unproductive approach or lack of commitment and work rate”* (Respondent #4).

The role as facilitator is perceived to be one which usually evolves over the course of the supervisory relationship. Although a supervisor is mostly driving things in the early stages of the supervision process, after the first year (particularly in the PhD process) the student is the one who should be driving the process. The role of the supervisor at this stage is just to keep the supervisee on track and “*to help develop students into more independent researchers*” (Respondent #3). The role as facilitator can be reflected by challenging beliefs, provoking thoughts, and aiding the development of expertise in the topic area “*with the intended goal being for the supervisee to develop confidence in their ability to argue/defend their position*” (Respondent #2). This last point is linked closely to the role of advisor, in which the supervisor should be able to identify and direct the supervisee to relevant opportunities (e.g., requests for assistance in applied work, involvement in the organising of conferences/symposia, or calls for research papers from conferences/peer-reviewed journals).

The respondents believe that part of their role is to help the supervisee build key skills, thus providing opportunities for supervisees to achieve the goals they have identified, and also ensure the gradual development of an effective relationship between both parties. While the supervisor is usually more of an advisor and facilitator in the beginning stages, as the relationship develops, the supervisee should be able to work more independently and rely less on the supervisor.

What's in it for the supervisor?

The various benefits that may be obtained from engaging in a process of supervision are not exclusively reserved for the supervisee. Although some supervisors may not expect to benefit from their relationship with the supervisee, the respondents within our sample acknowledged that they can themselves learn much from the people they mentor: “*Such bi-directional transfer of knowledge and understanding breathes life into the supervisor-student*

relationship and the synergy that emerges develops an intrinsic desire to succeed in the field of sport and exercise psychology” (Respondent #1). In addition, the respondents mentioned that they enjoy witnessing the supervisee’s development over time, which also helps the supervisor to develop themselves, especially in terms of communication and relationships.

Critical thinking

All respondents reported that they value the approach of frequently questioning the supervisee and challenging their reasoning as a means to develop critical thinking skills. In addition, setting the supervisee tasks which require demonstration of independent thinking, creativity and leadership was deemed to be a useful strategy in assisting the supervisee’s development. For example, critical thinking can be *“encouraged by asking the right questions and trying not to direct the student too much –knowing when to direct and when to guide”* (Respondent #5). Furthermore, it was stated that the supervisee should be encouraged to *“read widely whilst questioning everything ... not to consume information with wondering whether a different question might yield a better answer”* (Respondent # 1). Critical thinking can also be aided by independent practice, for example by trying *“to develop types of experiences that they have throughout the SE period in terms of the level at which they work”* (Respondent #2), and to reflect on these experiences: *“inherent within this is the ability to be able to reflect effectively and learn from their experiences”* (Respondent #2).

Advice and some concluding comments

In addition to the themed examples above, the respondents provided some further advice to current and aspiring supervisees. As well as checking to ensure that potential supervisors have sufficient time available to fulfil their supervision duties to the appropriate standard, the respondents advised supervisees to, *“do your homework and make sure they*

[supervisors] are qualified to support you” (Respondent #3). In addition, it was suggested that the supervisee should familiarise themselves with the aims of the supervisor, whether these are explicitly stated or not: *“make sure your supervisor is supervising you for the right reasons and not merely for personal gain (e.g. finance, kudos etc.)”* (Respondent #5). There are various methods by which this may be achieved (e.g., consulting supervisors’ online profiles, by being upfront and asking them directly about their motives). Being comfortable with your supervisor is equally important. When seeking a supervisor, it was recommended to look for *“one in which the student feels comfortable and empowered to discuss any element of work with the assurance that the supervisor supports and encourages intellectual development”* (Respondent #1). Another respondent advised that supervisees should try to opt for someone *“who has a strong work ethic themselves as you need that so you know they’ll support you”* (Respondent #4). Although it must be conceded that, in some cases, the choice of supervisor is not under the control of the supervisee, it is worth supervisees at least being privy to the above advice. It is also important to acknowledge that the work conducted by the supervisee is not constantly on the supervisor’s mind for a variety of reasons. Therefore, providing supervisors with a brief summary of the work completed (e.g., readings consulted, outline of client work) could result in more productive meetings and could be useful as a means of getting the best out of the relationship between supervisor and supervisee.

On a more personal level, the respondents noted that to be successful in a PhD or the supervised experience route, you will need to be enthusiastic, passionate, and *“throw yourself into what you do”* (Respondent #5). At the same time, having a healthy balance between time devoted to work and time devoted to other life pursuits was encouraged, with the setting of realistic goals being suggested as a strategy that supervisor and supervisee might strive to develop cooperatively. In addition, with opportunities for training and available jobs being scarce for early career researchers/practitioners, a proactive approach should be adopted by

supervisees. As mentioned by Respondent #5: “*go and find opportunities rather than expect them to come to you!*”

The respondents have given us a valuable insight regarding their expectations of PhD students and/or in-training practitioners. They expect the supervisees to set clear goals, possess good communication skills, have an appropriate background, and engage in critical thinking. The supervisors feel they can aid critical thinking by asking the right questions, but they stress that it is also the responsibility of the supervisee to engage in reflective practice and, where possible, search out opportunities for themselves.

The authors would like to thank the five respondents who kindly gave up time from their very busy schedules to help us in the writing of this article.

Reference

Manley, A., & Meijen, C. (2009). Reflections on the accreditation process: Implications and advice for in-training practitioners. *Sport and Exercise Psychology Review*, 5, 44-47.