HOW TO OBSERVE AS A SUPERVISOR, AND TO ENGAGE IN DIALOGUE AT THE SAME TIME

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The article presents reflexion of supervisor’s perception and observation in situation of dialog with client. Supervision is unthinkable without our ‘sensitised perception’. As supervisors we can be partners in dialogue, as long as we are sensitive. That is to say: as long as we use our senses attentively and observe our clients as well as ourselves.

INTRODUCTION

As supervisors we offer communicative attention, support, critical feedback and reflective analysis to our clients. Our work takes on the form of a dialogue or – in the case of team supervision – a multilogue. In order to serve our clients we have to establish contact with them. We not only listen carefully to their narratives, we also watch their bodily movements, the way they carry themselves, their manner of speech. In short: we perceive our clients with all our senses. And our clients perceive us in turn.
In order to help clients reflect on – and learn from – their professional experiences (supervision), to solve professional problems, to develop adequate role skills or to enhance their field competencies (coaching), we need to make sense of their stories. Therefore, we have to be sensitive; that is: we have to purposely use our senses. Supervision or coaching is unthinkable without our ‘sensitised perception’. In the end, all our interventions are based on our perception of the client, the specific supervisory situation we meet him/her in and the co-creative process we shape together. And, not to forget, our perception of what goes on in our own hearts and minds.

But how do we do this? Which skills do we mobilise, and which methods do we apply? And – more importantly – if we observe our clients, are we not then acting as an outsider, an expert not interested in contact and interaction.

The question, therefore, is: how could we avoid becoming outsiders to our clients? In other words: how do we observe our clients, while at the same time engaging in dialogue with them? In this article I will try to clarify this issue. First, I will attend to perception and observation. Then, I will focus on ‘participative observation’ and on common mistakes. In conclusion, I will argue that observation in supervision should be made functional to the supervisory dialogue.

PERCEPTION AND OBSERVATION

The famous psychologist Watzlawick once coined the phrase: ‘we cannot not communicate’. Even if we would refuse to talk to the smelly passenger next to us in a crowded train, we involuntarily signal our refusal by turning our back to him.

The same goes for perception: we cannot not perceive. We perceive as long as we live. It is impossible to shut off our senses; even in sleep. Luckily, most of what we perceive does not enter our consciousness. We ‘automatically’ select what is important to us in order – for instance – to survive in dense traffic, or to just in time notice the smell of a leaky gas pipe.
From the thousands of stimuli that trigger our senses daily, we routinely select those that help us through our working day. We are vaguely aware of our surroundings. We hear our clients talking and we see their movements. But to perform professionally, just hearing and seeing our clients is not enough. We need to do much more than that. We intentionally listen to what they have to say, and consciously watch them move about. And if we decide in advance what we want to find out, we engage ourselves in observation.

Therefore: (most) perception is unintentional and ‘automatic’, while observation is always intentional, purposeful and deliberate.

PARTICIPATIVE OBSERVATION

The term ‘observation’ is often linked to the mental position of the outsider. The observer positions himself outside the arena and watches other people play their game. Either one observes, or one acts. To do both at the same time seems impossible.

Or is it? I think this connotation is entirely wrong. Let us, for example, consider the famous goalkeeper Gianluigi Buffon. In order to prevent his opponents from scoring, he needs to give close and deliberate attention to the ball, the development of the game in front of him, the movements of his teammates and his adversaries, the variables of the playing ground, and the effects of his own actions (the process). Buffon feels ‘at home’ on the pitch. He is familiar with his position, freely commands all his athletic powers (his ‘skills’), and knows how to adapt to the fast changing events around him (his ‘method’ of goalkeeping). To him, observation is part of the game. Indeed, it is his game. Without deliberate and sensitive observation he would not be able to keep goal for the Azzuri or Juventus at all. He would just be one of the spectators in the Stadium, watching the game and getting fat on Hot Dogs and Hamburgers.

Participative observation is possible. Without observation, real and effective participation – let alone supervisory dialogue – is unthinkable. To us as coaches and supervisors, observation is a
necessary precondition to be of service to our clients. In order to closely ‘follow’ our clients we act and observe at the same time. Action and observation are linked together as pearls on a necklace.

**FREQUENT MISTAKES**

Participative observation in itself is no guarantee for success. Let us observe Gianluigi Buffon again. Utterly concentrated, he observes how the opposing centre forward puts the ball on the penalty spot and hits it. There the ball flies, and there we see our goalkeeper spectacularly diving to the right side of his goal. Alas, the ball goes to his left. 1-0 for AC Milan. What a pity (or what joy; whatever your point of view may be).

Buffon went the wrong way, but we can make mistakes just as well. Let me list some frequent mistakes in observation:

- Foreclosure: you have found what you were looking for. You cease to observe further. You decide on the interpretation you have already arrived at, and you pay attention only to information that confirms your view.

- Over determination: observing is interpreting, but it can be overdone. You may attach such high value to certain, very obvious phenomena that you don’t notice certain other, less obvious behaviour. In short: you ‘overvalue’ the spectacular, and in so doing you distort your judgment.

- Monocausality: you link behaviour to but one ‘cause’, which tends to make you blind for other possible causes. It may even make you impervious to the multicausal – or even ‘chaotic’ – quality of human behaviour. In other words: you quit observing. But be careful: by monocausal reasoning you mechanismically reduce your clients to programmed robots.

- Decontextualisation: you eliminate influences of the context around the supervisory situation. You only observe what’s happening ‘here and now’, and forget about the ‘unseen’ influences from ‘there and then’, which both your client and
you are bringing in to the situation. You are also blind to ‘framing effects’, such as your own presuppositions and those of your client, the influence of the physical environment, or the way you and your client perceive their respective positions within the organisation.

- Monologueing: very soon you ‘see’ what is wrong with your client. So you keep telling him (or her) how he (or she) ticks. Some clients may be happy with your professional verdict; it saves them thinking for themselves. But others may think you are an arrogant know-all.

Be this as it may, are you still interested in what your client might think and feel him/her? How is he/she going to learn on his/her own power if you take your monological interpretations for the one and only truth about your client?

Mistakes may be inevitable, but we as professionals should nevertheless try to avoid them. One way to keep straight is to take your time. Another way is to give him or her your full and ‘non-judgmental’ attention. And a third way is to not only observe your client(s), but to also observe your own thoughts, feelings and actions. If we help our clients to explore their deep convictions, values and beliefs in relation to their professional labour, we should not shirk away from analysing our own. Do we realise how our convictions and beliefs may influence – or even shape – our perceptions? Remember: how we look determines what we see, and what we see models our interventions.

**Observation in function of dialogue**

We therefore should be aware of our emotional patterns, our ‘inner scenario’s’ and our interpretations. They may tell more about our frame of reference than about the client. Let us always ‘distrust’ our interpretative powers. To put it differently: as supervisors, we acknowledge and study our own perceptions just as much as those of our clients. We correct fixed interpretations, and reflect on our own ‘quick and dirty’ emotional reactions. As we may learn from Damasio
(2003), “quick and dirty emotions” are primary emotions, localised in the limbic system and originating from the amygdala. When they are activated, we have chaotic feelings for which we have no words, and which we can’t trace back to earlier stored patterns of emotional response.

Next to these ‘quick and dirty’ emotions we harbour ‘secondary emotions’, which are cultural and personal, derive from learning effects, and thus connected with our language and our personal biography.

Looking at ourselves as supervisors means to clear away redundancy, like the effects of foreclosure or monocausal reasoning. Thus, we create space for the client to manifest himself freely, even if we observe his (or her) behaviour just as we observe our own. We share our views with our client(s) and we encourage him or her to do the same. Along these lines both – supervisor and client – engage in dialogue. Thus, observation is an integral part of the supervisory dialogue.
TO CONCLUDE

We are not in the business of analysing or categorising our clients. On the contrary: we offer meaningful support to (beginning) professionals who seek to master the art of ‘good living’ in the course of their daily work. Who could say this more poignantly than Bob Dylan?

All I really want to do
(Fragments)

I ain’t looking to compete with you,
beat or cheat or mistreat you,
simplify you, classify you,
deny, defy or crucify you.
All I really want to do
is, baby, be friends with you.

I ain’t looking to block you up,
shock or knock or lock you up,
analyze you, categorize you,
finalize you or advertise you.
All I really want to do
is, baby, be friends with you.

I don’t want to straight-face you,
race or chase you, track or trace you
or disgrace you or displace you
or define you or confine you.
All I really want to do
is, baby, be friends with you.

I don’t want to fake you out,
take or shake or forsake you out.
I ain’t looking for you to feel like me,
see like me or be like me.
All I really want to do
is, baby, be friends with you.

As supervisors, we can be partners in dialogue, as long as we are sensitive. That is to say, as long as we use our senses attentively and observe our clients as well as ourselves.
LITERATURE