WHITEPAPER

COACH SUPERVISION IN SOUTH AFRICA:

COACH SUPERVISION IN SOUTH AFRICA – EXPLORING CURRENT PRACTICE AND PERCEIVED VALUE

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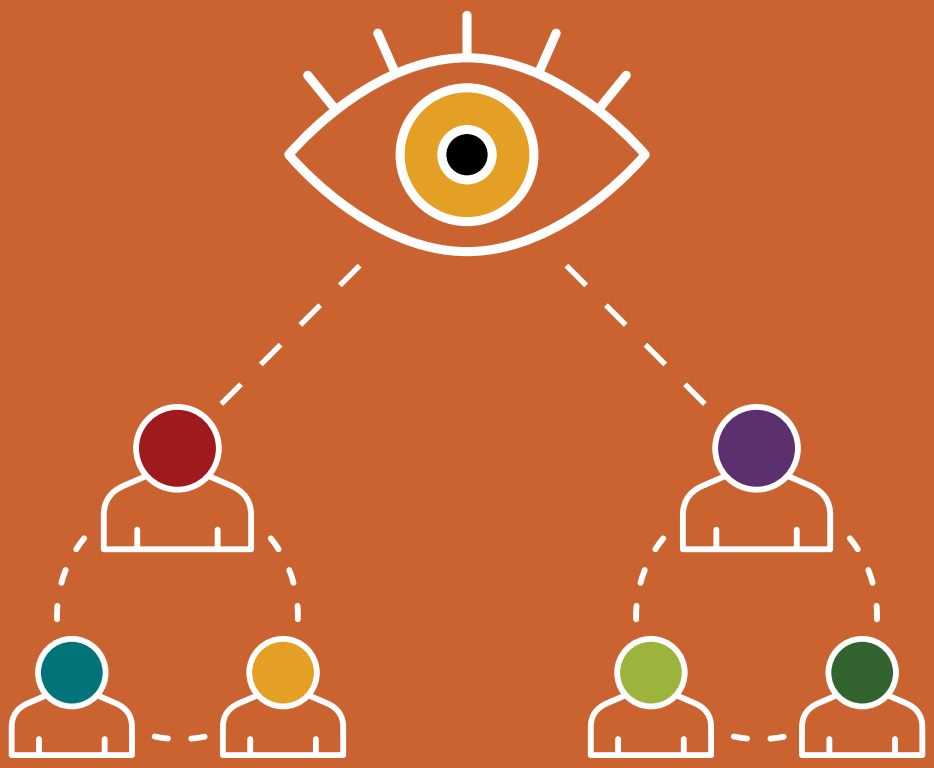

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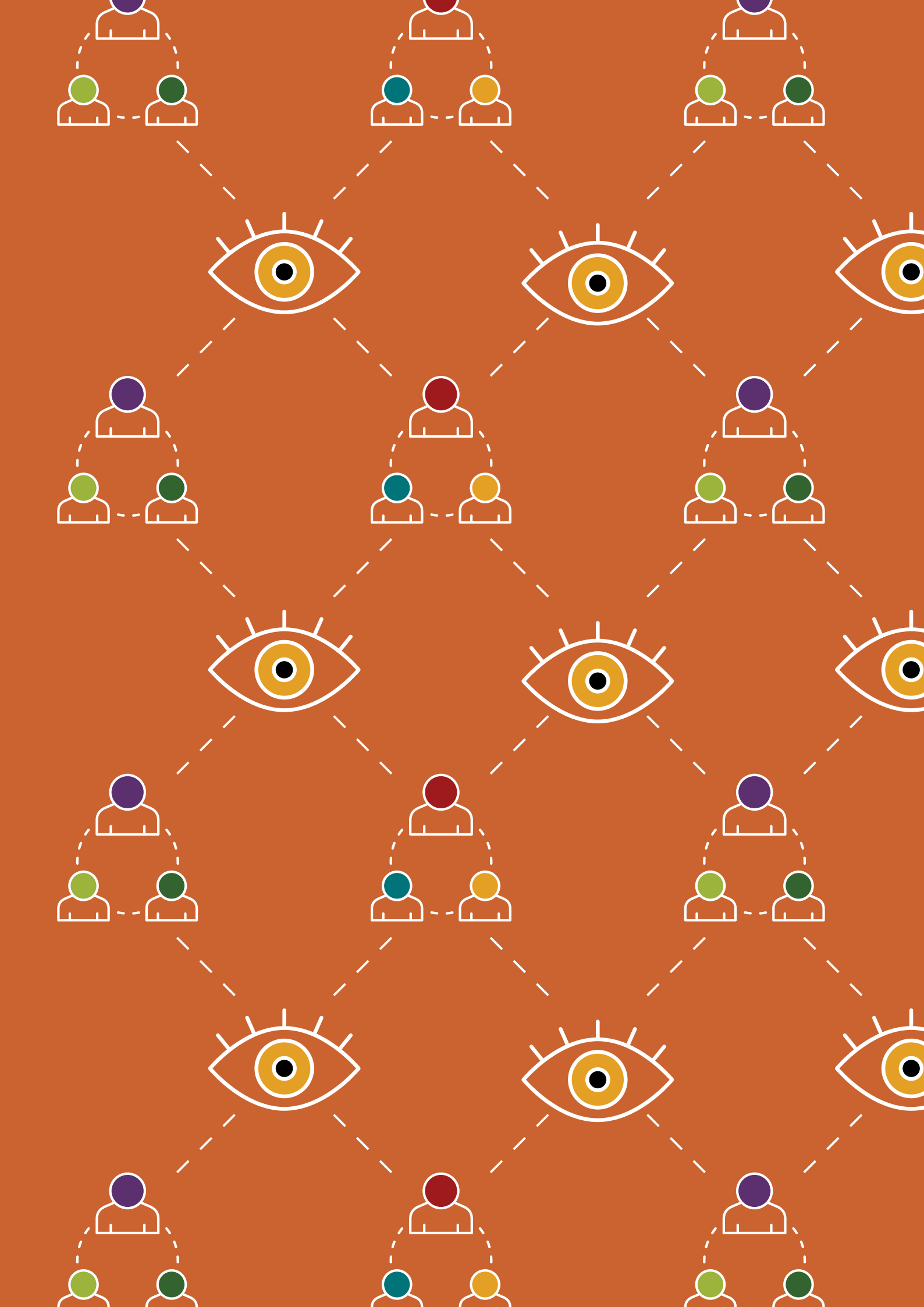

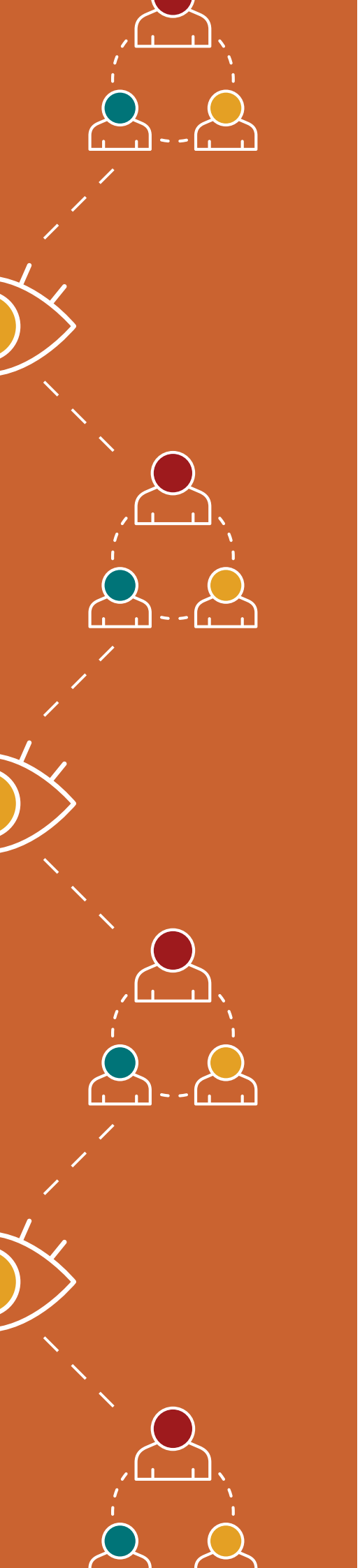

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At the Gordon Institute of Business Science (GIBS), we take a personal, holistic and integrative approach to learning. The Personal and Applied Learning department is an area established within the business school to be the custodian of expertise, best practice, and thought leadership in the domains of personal change, transformation, and applied leadership practice. This department guides teams throughout the school on designing and delivering applied learning and leadership development in their programmes. The unit also delivers programmes on facilitation and coaching direct to market.

Abstract

Workplace coaching has attracted significant attention over the past three decades as a key personalised learning and development strategy. Research confirms its effectiveness across various work contexts, with coach competence identified as the primary driver of coaching outcomes. This has led to efforts to professionalise coaching, including the establishment of accreditation bodies in South Africa, such as the ICF and COMENSA, whose role is to regulate credentialing and coaching standards. As a result, coach supervision has emerged as an area of study and practice that strives to enhance coaching quality and practitioner development.

This white paper explores the state of coach supervision in South Africa through a literature review and qualitative (interview-based) research involving key stakeholders – namely, coaches, coach supervisors, learning and development practitioners, and representatives from COMENSA and the ICF-SA Chapter. The study used thematic analysis to interpret the data collected.

The findings from the study indicate that coach supervision fosters a reflective and collaborative learning environment. However, its theoretical and practical models remain underdeveloped, and a key barrier to its adoption is a lack of understanding of its value. To address this, professional bodies must align coach supervision standards with the three core areas in which it delivers value – restorative, formative, and normative. Additionally, training providers should design programmes that support these value components to drive the formalisation and adoption of coach supervision. Lastly, a significant amount of work is required from a scholarly perspective to develop appropriate theoretical anchors that will drive effective coach supervision practice.

Keywords:

Coach supervision

Coach supervisor competencies

Coach supervision models/ frameworks

Ethics of coaching supervision

2. Introduction

Workplace coaching (or business coaching) is a growing practice internationally. According to the International Coaching Federation (ICF), revenue earned by coaching practitioners globally rose by 60% between 2019 and 2022, amounting to US$4.564 billion (ICF, 2023). While coaching has come to be regarded as a standard business practice aimed at enhancing workplace behaviour, relationships, or general performance (Knowles, 2022), the practice of coach *supervision* is a relatively new dimension of the profession (Bachkirova et al., 2021).

Research on workplace coaching has increased significantly over the past three decades, with the practice of coaching identified as a key strategy for personalised learning and development (De Haan & Nilsson, 2023). Workplace coaching is a one-on-one, tailored learning and development intervention involving the forging of a collaborative, reflective, and goal-focused relationship between an employee and an internal or external coach practitioner, with no formal authority influencing the latter (Bozer & Jones, 2018).

The extant literature provides evidence of workplace coaching effectiveness in different work contexts, with extensive research having been conducted on what makes coaching effective (Bozer & Jones, 2018; De Haan, 2019; De Haan & Nilsson, 2023). Contributing factors include coachee readiness, the coach–coachee relationship, the process of coaching, and the context in which coaching takes place.

However, the key driver of coaching effectiveness has been identified as coach competencies (Blackman et al., 2016; Bozer and Jones, 2018; Graßmann et al., 2019). This means that the coach is seen as the main "instrument" of coaching effectiveness and that coach competencies drive most of the outcomes of coaching (Bozer & Jones, 2018; Jackson & Bachkirova, 2018, Mbokota & Myers, 2024). The focus on the coach as the primary enabler of coaching outcomes has led to the emergence of coach supervision as an area of practice (Bachkirova et al., 2020; Jackson & Bachkirova, 2016).

Coach competencies can be described as the coach's knowledge, skills, abilities, and other characteristics (KSAO) (Blackman et al., 2016; De Haan, 2019; Pandolfi, 2020). These competencies can be the result of the coach's qualifications, experience, and knowledge of the business environment – all of which shape a coach's behaviour (De Haan & Nilsson, 2023).

Alongside these studies, the professionalisation of coaching is an area that has received some attention, evidenced by the establishment of professional bodies, such as the ICF, that set standards for and regulate coaching behaviour and credentialing practices.

The purpose of this white paper is to explore the nature and status of coach supervision in South Africa. The primary research question driving our study was:

What is the nature and perceived value of coach supervision in South Africa?

The specific research questions that we addressed were:

How do scholars and professional coaching bodies perceive the nature and value of coach supervision?

What are the key competencies required for effective coach supervision?

What frameworks and models are used in the coach supervision process?

What are the potential barriers to coaches undergoing supervision?

To answer these research questions, we first reviewed the literature on coach supervision to acquire broad perspectives on what is known and not known about the discipline globally. We then conducted an empirical qualitative (interview-based) study among key coach supervision stakeholders.

These comprised coaches, coach supervisors, learning and development practitioners who purchase coaching services, and representatives of the two main coach accreditation bodies in South Africa: COMENSA and ICF–SA Chapter.

2. Coach supervision – what the literature says

In our review of the literature, we focused on definitions of coach supervision, its perceived value, the necessary competencies for effective coach supervision, and the theoretical frameworks and models used and the processes followed by those engaged in coach supervision.

2.1 Defining coach supervision

We found various definitions of coach supervision. This was not unexpected as any new research construct goes through a period in which scholars view it from different angles and arrive at their own interpretations and descriptions. Four definitions were particularly noteworthy:

> "A formal process of professional support which ensures continuing development of the coach and effectiveness of his/her coaching practice through interactive reflection, interpretative evaluation and the sharing of expertise" (Bachkirova, 2008, pp. 16-17).

> "A formal and protected time for facilitating in-depth reflection for coaches to discuss their work with someone who is experienced as a coach" (Association of Coaching, 2019, p.3).

> "The process by which a coach/mentor/consultant, with the help of the supervisor, who is not working directly with the client, can attend to understanding both the client system and themselves as part of the client–coach/mentor system, and transform their work" (Hawkins & Smith, 2006, p. 147).

> "A forum where supervisees review and reflect on their work to do it better" (Carroll, 2007, p. 433).

At the core of these definitions is the fact that coach supervision aims to support the coach in their practice, assist in the development of coach competencies, and provide the assurance that the coaching profession's rules and ethical standards will be upheld (Bachkirova et al., 2020).

However, this field of endeavour is still in its infancy. Recent research has mainly focused on clarifying the concept of coach supervision, whose origins can be traced to therapeutic supervision (Moyes, 2009) but whose nature sets it apart from therapy (Bachkirova et al., 2020; Bachkirova et al., 2021; Ebewo et al., 2023; Lewis, 2023; Tennyson, 2021; Zimmerman, 2023). These are pioneering studies that point to the need for a more in-depth understanding of the nature and practice of coach supervision, including its theoretical underpinnings.

Professional bodies also have their own interpretations of coach supervision – whether it is, for example, 'time' (Association for Coaching) or a 'space' (EMCC Global) (Lewis, 2023). The ICF refers to coach supervision as "a dynamic and reflective process of collaboration, guidance, and support through which coaches develop their personal, professional, and ethical capacity and maturity" (ICF, 2024, p. 3).

The concept of coach supervision is complicated by the fact that the word "supervisor" has different meanings, depending on the field. In management, a supervisor is typically "in charge

of a group of people or an area of work and who makes sure that the work is done correctly and according to the rules" (Cambridge Dictionary, 2024). In medicine, a clinical supervisor is "responsible for overseeing a specified trainee's clinical work for a placement in a clinical environment" (NHS, 2024, p. 2), which points to the trainee's ability (or otherwise) to function at the expected level of competence.

However, in workplace coaching, a supervisor has a different connotation. While there can be many reasons for introducing coach supervision, the "three-legged" perspective is the most frequently recognised rationale: coach supervision plays a *formative, restorative,* and *normative* role (Proctor, 1988). Formative refers to educational aspects associated with coaching, including the development of skills, knowledge, attributes, and abilities. Restorative refers to the coach's awareness of and capacity for self-care, self-management, and contextual adaptation, which aid learning and development. Lastly, normative refers to ethical practice and quality assurance (Corrie & Birch, 2014).

Scholars and professional bodies, though, all agree that supervision involves reflective dialogue; that is, it creates a space to reflect on the coach's work, professional development, and client interactions. The evolution in the various definitions of coach supervision has led to a simple but comprehensive definition by Lewis (2023), which is: "a reflective dialogue between two (or more) professionals for the benefit of both the coach and their clients based on a partnership of trust and respect" (p. 269).

Coach supervision lends itself to different types. The most cited ones in extant literature are individual and group supervision, sometimes conducted by peer coaches or within a group supervision context (Hawkins & Smith, 2013; Lewis, 2023). As coach supervision is still a nascent field of study, scholars are endeavouring to understand the different forms that it takes, the utility in supporting and developing coaches, and how coach supervision contributes to the upholding of professional standards and ethics (Bachkirova et al., 2020).

2.2

The value of coach supervision

As coach supervision has emerged only recently as a field of study, there is limited literature on its perceived value among different stakeholders. The few studies that have been conducted argue that coach supervision benefits coaches because it makes them feel supported in their efforts to develop their expertise and professional standing (Bachkirova et al., 2020; Passmore, 2011; Tkach & DiGirolamo, 2020). For example, they might receive specialised support aimed at enhancing their learning and development (Bluckert, 2005) and guidance in tackling ethical challenges (Ratlaba & Terblanche, 2022).

Coaches can feel isolated at times, and the process of supervision dialogue can give them an "enabled sense of clarity about what was happening with and between themselves and their clients. This dialogue often proved more powerful than other forms of reflection such as journaling ... as it enabled them to gain understanding, self-awareness and identify new ways to proceed with a client" (Hodge, 2016, pp. 95-96).

2.3

Competencies required for effective coach supervision

As recognition of the importance and relevance of supervision within a coaching context grows, so too is more attention being paid to the capabilities and competencies needed by a coach supervisor. Competency can be defined as different (but related) sets of knowledge, skills, and attributes (KSA) that give rise to specific types of behaviour which, in turn, drive superior performance (Boyatzis, 2007; Chouhan & Srivastava, 2014). Competencies therefore include the KSA required to perform specific functions (Chouhan & Srivastava, 2014).

2.3.1 Scholarly views

The extant literature on coach supervision assumes that a coach supervisor has been a practising coach for several years and that coaching represents a complex adaptive system (Bachkirova & Smith, 2015). The literature also identifies five categories of supervisor competencies: being self-aware, facilitating reflection, working with plurality, working with complexity, and upholding ethical practice.

Being self-aware

Self-awareness is a concept and practice that is well known to any certified coach. It is especially important for a coach supervisor to have self-awareness because it helps to reveal their supervision philosophy, the theory behind their supervision approach, and how they conduct supervision in practice. According to Congram (2011), three different interconnecting elements often influence the coach supervision experience: the coach supervisor, the coach, and the client system (Congram, 2011). How the coach supervisor reacts to the information shared by the coach may impact the coach's interpretation of such information during the supervision process. Therefore, the coach supervisor must be aware of how they respond to the coach's issues and what the client system dictates.

Facilitating reflection

To facilitate reflection, the supervisor should first aim to create a safe space to enable the coach to reflect on their responses, practice, and feelings. The intention here is to create awareness and improve the coach's coaching practice. Central to this approach is the concept of reflexivity which is: "the ability to notice, understand and use constructively one's own processes of thinking and feeling as well as the psychological, social and system issues that condition them" (Jackson, 2021, p. 28).

In creating a safe reflection space, the coach supervisor needs to consider ethical issues as well, such as what should and should not be shared with others. Equally important is that there is an atmosphere of trust and safety as this will "enable coaches to share their practice and disclose their fears and vulnerability ... It is vital that coaches do not feel judged by the supervisor, but are supported to engage, explore, contribute, and thus are able to learn and grow" (Hodge, 2016, p. 101).

Working with plurality

The term plurality refers to the ability of the coach supervisor to recognise the different and changing aspects of human nature in a complex world (Bachkirova, 2022). Not only should the supervisor be aware of their own natural lens and perspectives, but they should also engage with the coach's diversity (such as beliefs, learning styles, thinking strategies, motivation, and stage of professional development). This will enable them to support the coach in ways that are appropriate to them.

By being aware of the different attributes of the coach, the coach supervisor is able to provide better assistance with respect to the normative function of supervision – that is, helping the coach to make ethical decisions and deliver a high-quality service (Bachkirova, 2022). In addition, by being aware of the theoretical stance of the coach, the supervisor is able to extend the coach's knowledge by encouraging them to explore their practice from different angles or perspectives, thus also contributing to the developmental function of supervision – that is, helping with the professional and personal development of the coach.

Working with complexity

The capabilities of a coach supervisor should be multi-faceted and grounded in experience and training. Such capabilities include the ability to work with complexity and to think about and address systemic issues in coaching, especially in an organisational context. While different theories are associated with how to coach systemically, Lawrence (2021) developed a model showing the different dimensions of complex or meta-systemic supervision.

Lawrence's (2021) model shows how coach supervision can be informed by the following approaches: first-order systems thinking, second-order systems thinking, complexity theory, and meta-systemic thinking.

First-order systems thinking:

This approach views organisations as real systems that function logically and can be mathematically modelled. It assumes that an external observer can objectively diagnose the system's functioning. This approach could be used in coach supervision to analyse the structures and processes involved in coaching. For example, supervisors could look at the mechanics of the coaching relationship and the respective roles and responsibilities of the coach and their client, and could assess whether there are any structural inefficiencies in how coaching sessions are conducted. This approach focuses on straightforward, observable elements within the coaching system.

Second-order systems thinking:

Building on first-order thinking, this approach acknowledges that relationships within organisations are complex and not always linear. It emphasises the importance of understanding multiple perspectives and the dynamics of these relationships. This approach aligns well with coach supervision, highlighting the importance of relationships and feedback loops. For example, supervisors using second-order systems thinking to encourage reflective conversations with the coach about their emotional and relational responses to clients. Second-order systems thinking could also be used to explore the coach's perspectives on their client's challenges, how their personal beliefs or biases might impact the coaching process, and how they can develop greater awareness of the dynamics in their coaching relationships.

Complexity theory:

This theory regards organisations as complex, adaptive systems composed of agents whose interactions lead to emergent behaviours. It recognises that outcomes are unpredictable and that the system's behaviour cannot be fully understood by analysing its parts in isolation. Complexity theory, when applied to coach supervision, sees the coach–client relationship as a dynamic and evolving system, where small changes can have large ripple effects. Supervision should focus on the unpredictability of human interactions and the emergent nature of coaching outcomes. Coaches, in turn, should be encouraged to explore how their own actions, even subtle ones, can create a chain of responses in their client, and how they can navigate and adapt to the complexity of coaching in diverse contexts.

Meta-systemic thinking:

This approach critiques the notion of organisations being strictly viewed as systems. In coach supervision, meta-systemic thinking invites reflection on the limitations of traditional systems thinking. It asks coaches to critically examine their approaches and assumptions about coaching, recognising that systems models cannot capture all the complexities of human behaviour and interactions. For example, supervisors may encourage coaches to consider the broader social, cultural, and emotional factors affecting their coaching relationships with clients. Meta-systemic thinking challenges coaches to see beyond rigid frameworks and to incorporate diverse perspectives, thereby promoting a better understanding of human nuances and systemic influences.

In summary, Lawrence's (2021) model can help supervisors guide coaches in their reflective processes, enabling them to:

- Identify systemic issues within their coaching relationships;
- Understand how different coaching approaches (and the coach's own mindset) impact the dynamics of the coach–client relationship;
- Adjust their methods to better address the complexity of human interactions; and
- Continuously develop self-awareness and critically evaluate their practices.

By engaging in these activities, coaches receiving supervision can gain deeper insights into their own behaviours and processes, improve their effectiveness, and navigate the inherent complexities in coaching relationships.

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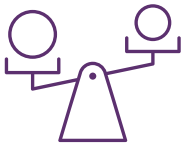


Upholding ethical practice

Upholding ethical practice is a core feature of coach supervision. The practice of ethical reflection (relating to issues such as contracting, ethical boundaries, sharing of information, and duty of care) is a key element in coaching and forms part of the contract that the coach supervisor enters into with the coach at the start of their supervision relationship. Corrie and Lane (2015) refer to three ethical approaches that a coach supervisor should consider when supervising a coach: external, internal, and relational (see Table 1).

Area	Descriptor
External	Ethical decisions that emanate from a "universal set of principles that are externally mandated".
Internal	Ethical decisions that reflect a coach's internal ethical maturity and morality, including "sensitivity to ethical dilemmas and a willingness to engage with them"
Relational	Ethical dilemmas in relationships with others which require negotiations about what is/is not moral and the best course of action to take.

Table 1: Ethical approaches to coach supervision
Source: Adapted from Corrie and Lane (2015)

Regardless of the ethical approach chosen, coach supervisors can also apply the Universal Declaration of Ethical Principles for Psychologists (International Union of Psychological Science, 2008). These principles, which can be adopted regardless of whether the ethical approach is external, internal, or relational, include: respect for the dignity of persons and peoples; competent caring for the well-being of persons and peoples; integrity; and professional and scientific responsibilities to society (Lane & Cavanagh, 2021).

2.3.2 Professional bodies' views

With the literature on coach supervision gradually expanding, more attention is being paid to what constitutes the professional practice of a coaching supervisor. For example, in September 2024, the ICF published what they believe to be the required competencies of a coach supervisor, which is useful when assessing potential candidates for such a role.

Competency	Descriptor
Provides ethical guidance	Models ethical standards and encourages the coach to do the same.
Engages in ongoing reflection and self-care	Engages in ongoing learning, development, and self-care, including ongoing reflective practice to enhance the quality of their supervision.
Establishes and updates contracts	Partners with the coach to enter into contracts and revises these as necessary to support the coach supervision process.
Manages the supervision process	Manages the supervision process and makes adjustments to meet stakeholder needs and increase effectiveness.
Creates a supportive environment	Creates an environment that supports the coach personally and professionally.
Facilitates client reflection	Guides the coach in the process of reflecting on self, work, systems, and contexts to develop personal and professional awareness and insights.
Guides client development	Supports the coach and supervises the personal and professional development of the coach's client.
Manages group supervision	Effectively manages the group supervision process (relevant only to group supervision activities).

Table 2: ICF coach supervisor competencies
Source: Adapted from ICF (2024)

Other governing bodies have different competency frameworks. For example, the Association for Coaching subscribes to the following core principles:

- ensuring the quality of coaching practice and the development of the coach's competence;
- keeping the development of capacity for reflective and reflexive coaching practice at the core of the supervisory process; and
- ensuring that the coach, the coach's client and (where relevant) the sponsoring organisation receive the best possible service at all times. This principle reinforces the importance of demonstrating the credibility of the coach and coach supervisor and enabling value creation for the coach's client and their stakeholders.

The fragmentation of the literature on coach supervision highlights the need for more empirical studies to be conducted aimed at verifying and/or improving the perceived core competencies of a coach supervisor.

2.4 Coach supervision frameworks and models

Given the relative immaturity of coach supervision as a field of study and practice, relevant theoretical frameworks and models still need to be more thoroughly analysed and/or developed (Bachkirova et al., 2020; Bachkirova, 2022). Not surprisingly, the range of applicable supervision frameworks and/or models at this stage is limited.

Some coach supervisors are more explicit than others regarding their underlying philosophical approach to supervision and the models they use. One of the most well-known models is the 'Seven-Eyed' Model of Coach Supervision, first developed by Hawkins in 1985 as a therapeutic supervision model and further developed by his colleagues at the Centre for Supervision and Team Development (Hawkins & Shohet, 2012).

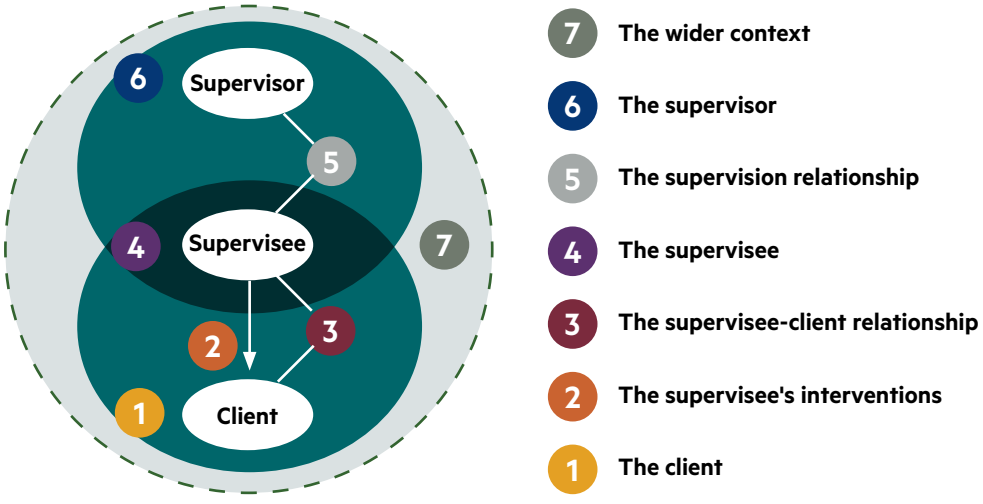


Figure 1: Seven-Eyed Model of Coach Supervision

Source: Hawkins and McMahon (2020), building on the 1985 work of Hawkins

Designed to support critical reflection, the Seven-Eyed Model uses seven different lenses to evaluate the coach's work. The coach reports back, during the supervision session, on what is going on with their clients – their concerns, issues, or change outcomes (Hodge, 2016). The coach also reflects on what is happening internally (that is, within themselves), including their coaching interventions and related skills (current or future needs).

Other models, such as the Three Worlds Four Territories (3W4T) Model of Supervision (Munro Turner, 2011) (see Figure 2), are variations of the original Seven-Eyed Model. The 3W4T model helps to guide the supervisor's discussion with the coach on what is happening in the system – both internally and externally.

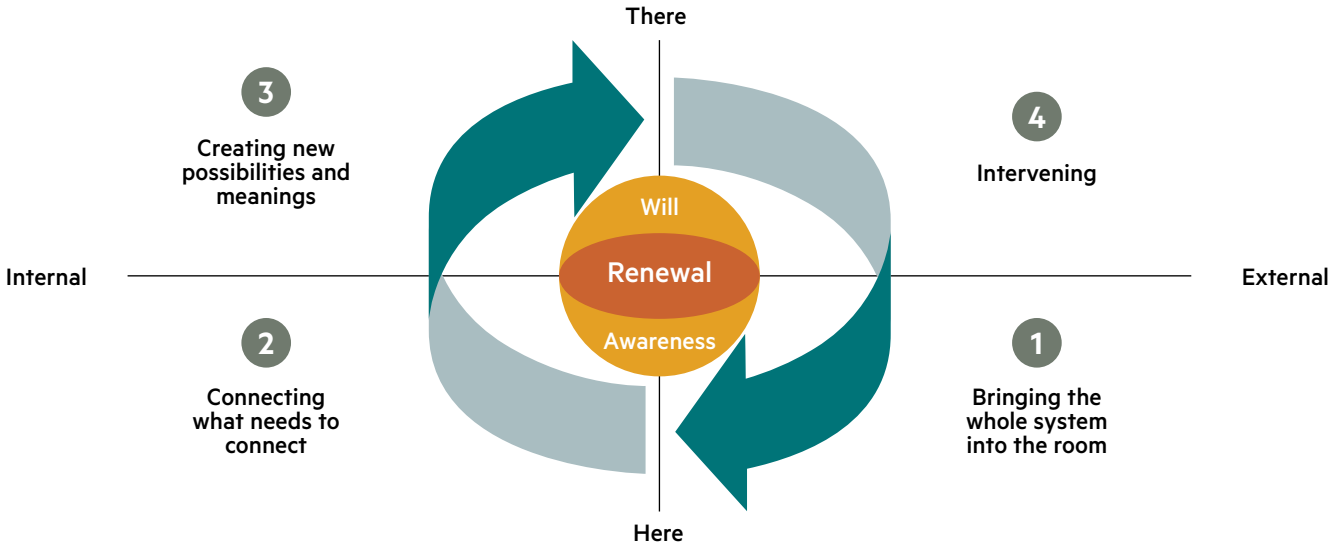


Figure 2: Three Worlds Four Territories (3W4T) Model of Supervision
Source: Munro Turner (2011)

Both the Seven-Eyed Model and 3W4T model propose that all primary participants in the process – that is, the coach, the organisation, and the supervisor – bring their own histories and related complexities to the supervision session, which may need to be navigated (Hodge, 2016).

The benefit of having a model to work with is that it can guide coach supervisors in selecting the areas that they should focus on when providing support to the coach. However, no model or framework is perfect. In the two models mentioned above, there are three components that a coach supervisor needs to consider.

1

The first component is the context within which the coach's client operates. Context (or the "system") plays a crucial role in the success or failure of a coaching engagement (Bozer & Delegach, 2019; Fatien Diochon & Nizet, 2019). It includes internal factors, such as a supportive organisational environment, whether coaching is integrated into an organisation's leadership development programmes, and the organisational culture (Fatien Diochon & Nizet, 2019). It also includes interpersonal relationship factors, such as power dynamics, organisational structure, and social dynamics in the organisation (Fatien Diochon & Nizet, 2019).

How these factors impact the relationship between the client and their line manager or team can determine the coaching outcomes. Context also includes external environmental factors that impact the organisation and, invariably, the client. These factors may also create intrapersonal conflict and ethical dilemmas for the coach which must be addressed during supervision.

2

The second component is the client's well-being, given the context in which they operate. It is estimated that up to 40% of the success of any coaching engagement is attributed to client readiness (McKenna & Davis, 2009). The extent to which the client is a willing participant in the coaching relationship is partially determined by the context and partially determined by the client's personal characteristics (Blackman et al., 2016; Bozer & Jones, 2018) and the timing of the coaching interventions. This implies that the coach supervisor must have a line of sight of all these dynamics.

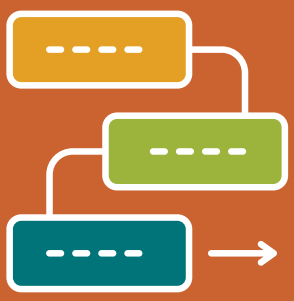
3

The third component is the coach's well-being. The literature tells us that the benefit of supervision is that is enables the coach to enhance their professional standards and ensure that their well-being is not compromised in the process (Passmore, 2011; Tkach & DiGirolamo, 2020) in addition to helping to address ethical challenges that they may face (Ratlaba & Terblanche, 2022). This component includes the competencies that make the coach supervisor effective.

Based on our review of the literature, we concluded that we should focus in our empirical study on understanding:

- How scholars and professional coaching bodies perceive the nature and value of coach supervision.
- The key competencies required for effective coach supervision.
- The frameworks and models used for coach supervision.
- The barriers preventing coaches from undergoing supervision.

These four focus areas were intended to inform the expansion and professionalisation of coach supervision practice in South Africa and formed the basis of the study's research questions.



3. Empirical study – methodology

To gain rich, practical insights into the coach supervision process, including its perceived impact and value, we conducted an empirical study among a group of stakeholders. At the outset, ethics approval for the study was granted by GIBS' Ethics Committee.

3.1 Selection of respondents

We used various criteria to select respondents. For example:

- Coaches had to have worked as professional coaches for more than three years and been members of a professional coaching accreditation body.
- Coach supervisors had to have worked as professional supervisors for not less than three years (in an individual or group supervision capacity), worked as coaches for not less than 10 years, and have an association with a professional coaching accreditation body.
- Learning and development practitioners' organisations had to be offering their own coaching services and/or sourcing coaching services externally.

3.2 Profile of the respondents

Our study methodology involved conducting one-on-one interviews with a total of 17 stakeholders/respondents, drawn from the following stakeholder categories:

1. Coach supervisors
2. Coaches
3. Representatives of accreditation bodies (ICF-SA and COMENSA)
4. Learning and development practitioners/buyers of coaching services

Table 3 provides a profile of the respondents (with some individuals straddling two of the above categories). The table shows that the coach supervisors had extensive coaching experience, ranging from 16 to 29 years. They would have worked with accreditation bodies at different points, which means they were actively involved in coaching practice and possibly coach supervision and other industry-related activities. Some had held different portfolios in COMENSA and ICF–SA, giving them a good grasp of what was happening in the industry.

While most respondents had extensive experience in coaching (with the average being 15 years of experience), coach supervision has only emerged as a practice in the last 10 years, which attests to the nascency of the field. This was confirmed by the representatives of the accreditation bodies and evidenced by the fact that the ICF only developed coach supervision guidelines in 2024 and recently made coach supervision a requirement for the reaccreditation of its affiliates. All the coach supervisors indicated that they provided group supervision, while two provided individual supervision as well. ICF affiliation appeared to be the most popular type of affiliation, with about two-thirds of the 18 respondents indicating that they were affiliated to the ICF. This has been driven by learning and development practitioners who have made it a requirement for their clients to be accredited by or affiliated to a specific coaching body. The learning and development practitioners who were interviewed confirmed their preference for the ICF because of its global character and reach.

A total of seven coaches were participating in coach supervision sessions. In line with the coach supervisors' group supervision approach, most coaches who were undergoing supervision preferred group supervision; only one coach was undergoing individual supervision. Three coaches indicated that they did not participate in formal supervision, while one reported that they regularly engaged with a peer (peer supervision).

#	Respondent type	Participant ID	Years of coach supervision experience	Years of coaching experience	Affiliation				Individual supervision	Group supervision	Not in supervision
					ICF	COMENSA	EMCC	AOC**			
1	Supervisor	SUP1	25	25	X				X	X	
2	Supervisor & Accreditation	SUP2	12	19		X				X	
3	Supervisor & Accreditation	SUP3	19	23	X			X		X	
4	Supervisor	SUP4	12	29		X				X	
5	Supervisor & Accreditation	ACB/SUP5	10	16		X			X	X	
6	Accreditation & L&D	ACB1	N/A	8	X				X		
7	Coach	CP1	N/A	12		X					X
8	Coach	CP2	N/A	20	X					X	
9	Coach	CP3	N/A	16	X				X	X	
10	Coach	CP4	N/A	8	X				X		
11	Coach	CP5	N/A	15		X	X			X	
12	Coach	CP6	N/A	11	X						X
13	Coach	CP7	N/A	12	X						X
14	Coach	CP8	N/A	19	X					X	
15	Coach	CP9	N/A	23	X	X		X	X	X	
16	Coach	CP10	N/A	17		X			X	X	
17	Learning & Dev practitioner	LND1	N/A	N/A	X						

Table 3: Profile of respondents

3.3 Analysis of the interview data

Once the interviews had been completed, transcripts were produced. The data was then analysed using a thematic approach.

4. Empirical study – findings

4.1 Defining coach supervision

Regarding the definition of coach supervision, respondents were aware of and accepted the ICF and COMENSA definitions and used them to determine whether they were supervising or under supervision. The definitions are:

COMENSA defines coach supervision as:

> "A formal engagement between a qualified supervisor and a coach, aimed at providing professional support to ensure the coach's ongoing development and to maintain high standards in their coaching practice. This process offers a collaborative space for reflective practice, enabling coaches to manage complex situations, uphold ethical standards, and foster continuous professional growth."

The ICF (2024) defines coach supervision as:

> "A collaborative learning practice to continually build a coach's capacity through reflective dialogue, benefiting both coaches and their clients. This process provides a safe environment for coaches to share their experiences, successes, and challenges, fostering ongoing development and mastery in their coaching practice."

There are several similarities in these two definitions. These are:

1. Supervision is conducted by a qualified and experienced coach with training and supervision skills. However, those who participate in supervision are also on a learning path, as they share their insights and wisdom.
2. Supervision is described as coaching and as a facilitated conversation that utilises coaching skills.
3. The supervisor creates and maintains a safe space for vulnerability, safety, reflection, learning, growth, development, and mutual support.
4. Supervision includes giving and receiving feedback for developmental purposes.
5. Coach supervision enables coaches to better serve the clients and organisations that they are working with.

Occasionally, in the interviews, there was a blurring between mentoring and coaching in the coach supervision practice. For example, one respondent said:

> "I help coaches-in-training to become competent in all of the coach core competencies, but I also support their ongoing development, according to a prescribed curriculum." (SUP 4)

This raises some questions. Is coach supervision about mentoring coaches in practice, or is it about coaching the coach, or both? If it is both, when does each occur, and how?

4.2 Identifying themes

The findings from the empirical study were organised into four themes that emerged from the analysis:

1. Coach supervision creates a reflective and collaborative learning environment.
2. Coach supervisor competencies go beyond coaching skills.
3. Coach supervision mode, models, and process are still at a nascent stage, both in theory and in practice.
4. The main barrier to undergoing coach supervision is not understanding its value.

4.2.1 Theme 1 Coach supervision provides a reflective and collaborative learning environment

Our findings showed that most coaches who underwent supervision predominantly attended group supervision sessions. In some cases, coaches moved from a group session to an individual session if they felt they required a more in-depth, one-on-one intervention to deal with more personal issues. The coaches invariably reported that coach supervision provided a number of benefits.

Rich learning opportunities.

Some respondents reported that they learned just as much from hearing about other people's challenges and opportunities as they did from sharing their own experiences. This learning led to their *"sharpening coach skills, building confidence"* (CP1), enabling them to develop *"awareness on own biases"* and to develop and grow from this awareness as a coach (CP9). Respondents also believed that group supervision offered a safe space where they could *"share their fears, concerns*, and *their vulnerabilities"* (CP6).

Group supervision benefits.

While individual supervision was seen as valuable, most respondents maintained that group supervision provided a better opportunity to access the collective wisdom of a diverse group of coaches. One respondent said, *"The beauty of group supervision is that one learns often from conversation topics raised by colleagues. There, you can learn much under the guidance of a group supervisor"* (CP3). Another respondent said, *"I think supervision helps you not to be complacent and to recognise blind spots because you are so used to your way, structure of interpretation, approach, and methodology. Supervision expands your repertoire, scope, or access to other resources"* (CP4).

Critical reflection.

Coach supervision allowed respondents to critically reflect on their coaching practice and the type of support they gave to their clients.

Candid sharing of challenges and constructive feedback.

Coach supervision provided a space in which respondents could reveal the challenges that they faced with clients or themselves or with their current approach to coaching and receive valuable feedback on how to address these challenges. Some respondents, for example, faced "deep personal issues" (CP9) that had caused emotional and mental strain. Coach supervision allowed respondents to "cleanse or sanitise themselves after each session, to regroup, rebalance, and prepare for the next session" (ACB1).

Supervision also helped respondents to reflect on their practice in general, address lingering questions, and ensure that they remained "present" in every session. Without this support, respondents were at risk of becoming emotionally drained or disconnected from their clients, which could negatively affect the latter's coaching experience. Most importantly, coach supervision contributed to respondents' well-being (ACB1).

Ethical standards and professionalism.

Coach supervision provided an opportunity for respondents to reflect on what might be ethical and unethical in their clients' environments, and to explore different ethical dilemmas and the importance of adhering to professional standards. Respondents were unanimous in the view that supervision is critical for the ongoing development of the coaching industry and ensuring quality performance among coaches. Coach supervision helped respondents to maintain coaching standards and ethics, to *"maintain the integrity of the coaching profession"* and *"develop the industry, the community"* (ACB2).

Respondents added that supervision is a quality assurance measure that makes both the coach and the industry more credible. Additionally, supervision benefits coaches, their clients, and the latter's organisations. Beyond their interactions with professional stakeholders, respondents indicated that supervision enabled them to *"show up"* in ways that were helpful for those who were close to them.

Representatives of the two professional coaching bodies (ICF-SA and COMENSA) expressed their support for coach supervision as a vehicle through which to uphold ethical standards and enhance the professionalism of the industry. Even though it is not mandatory for coaches to undergo supervision, both professional body representatives expressed their intention to soon make it mandatory as part of their reaccreditation process.

Coaching models, theories, and approaches.

Coach supervision provided an opportunity for respondents to delve into coaching models, theories, and approaches and to share their coaching methodologies. This expanded both their knowledge and skills, which was evident in the application of their methodologies and ensured that they were engaged in evidence-based coaching. Supervision also challenged respondents to explore alternative ways of supporting their clients, which contributes to the ongoing development of coaching practice.

Coaching community of practice.

Many of the respondents worked as sole proprietors in coaching businesses and were bound by confidentiality. This could lead to a sense of isolation and loneliness. Group supervision provided them with support, often in the form of *"nurturing"*, and the feeling of *"being part of a community of practice"* (CP5) where they were exposed to diverse issues and approaches. Here, they could interact with peers, learn about their coaching approaches and experiences, and resolve issues that they faced in their practices without the risk of judgement.

A unique perspective was that group supervision provided an opportunity for respondents to benchmark themselves against other coaches, especially with respect to acquired knowledge.

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4.2.2 Theme 2 Coach supervisor competencies go beyond coaching skills

Our findings showed that while coaching skills are required as the basis for coach–coach supervisor interactions, coach supervisors need additional competencies. The following three enablers of coach supervision were identified:

1. Coach supervisor competence and credibility.
2. The ability to create a psychologically safe climate for supervision.
3. The ability to assemble an optimal group for supervision.

Coach supervisor competence and credibility.

The respondents reported that the quality of supervision was contingent on what they called *"credibility"*, which was reflected in qualifications from reputable training institutions as well as formal supervision accreditations and designations. The extent of a coach supervisor's training in and knowledge of coaching theory, methodologies, practice, and supervision goes to the heart of their credibility.

The respondents reported that it was particularly valuable for coach supervisors to have gained their coaching and supervision experience in a similar context to that in which the coaches under their supervision were working. This added to the suitability and credibility of a supervisor since it was assumed that they were familiar with the issues relating to that specific context – to the coaches' benefit.

Furthermore, it was important for supervisors to demonstrate mastery of coaching and supervision competencies. Several skills were mentioned, with coaching skills – such as questioning and active listening – being a typical response. In addition, supervisors had to act consistently, in both private and public settings, and display personal and professional integrity, which would help to elevate the status of the profession and to protect clients. Moreover, supervisors had to demonstrate advanced listening skills, maintain authority in managing complex group dynamics, and skilfully facilitate group learning and dialogue processes. Finally, supervisors had to be astute in assessing when to coach, teach, challenge, advise and support.

To do all these things successfully, supervisors had to possess attributes such as open-mindedness, curiosity, and flexibility. Such attributes enabled them to work with diverse personalities, perspectives, and topics.

The ability to create a psychologically safe climate for supervision.

Given the intimate nature of coaching and supervision, respondents emphasised that a supervisor's ability to create and maintain an environment of psychological safety helped to clear the way for effective supervision, with coaches also contributing to this process. One respondent said, *"I think the courage to be vulnerable enables supervision, and conversely, the fear that you may be judged can disable supervision"* (CP5). Creating psychological safety begins with *a "safe container"* in which all those undergoing supervision commit to the principle of confidentiality, including – by extension – client organisations, thus effectively providing a *"double layer"* of confidentiality.

Psychological safety is possible with supervision because coaches and coach supervisors develop a rapport with each other, which establishes a foundation for a healthy, collaborative, supportive partnership for learning and development. Such a partnership helps to build trust so that coaches undergoing supervision feel safe and sufficiently vulnerable to reveal difficulties, doubts, curiosities, triggers, discoveries, and opportunities in their coaching work. Witnessing such a climate of psychological safety, which promotes empathy and a lack of judgement, will encourage others to engage in the supervision experience, thus enhancing its value.

The ability to assemble an optimal group for supervision.

Another group supervision enabler, according to the respondents, was the composition of the group for supervision. Respondents preferred small groups of (three to eight) participants to allow for meaningful contributions while keeping the group manageable. It was also felt that diversity in all forms in a group stimulated thinking, learning, and growth. Three respondents mentioned that they preferred groups with maximum diversity, covering age, race, gender, ability, professional experience, methodological orientation, and perspectives. They found that this enriched group supervision in a way that individual supervision did not. How coaches showed up – preferably with wisdom, a lack of ego, altruism, and a need to listen rather than dominate – contributed markedly to the overall supervision environment.

4.2.3 Theme 3 Coach supervision mode, models, and process are still at a nascent stage, both in theory and in practice

Our findings showed that coach supervision is a very young discipline, both in a theoretical and practical sense, with its character, approach, and supporting models still flexible and evolving. The following issues emerged in relation to this theme:

1. Nature and types of coach supervision.
2. Preparation for coach supervision.
3. Coach supervision models.
4. The coach supervision process.

Nature and types of coach supervision.

As shown in Table 4, the coaches who were interviewed were participating in either individual or group supervision sessions, the frequency of which varied from monthly to bi-monthly or longer, such as quarterly. Sometimes, the frequency was influenced by coaches' coaching commitments, the coaching programme goals and milestones, supervisor availability, and budgetary considerations. On average, a group supervision session lasted two to three hours, while individual sessions lasted an hour to 90 minutes. The average group size was about seven or eight, with the smallest group comprising four members and the largest comprising 12 members.

Although monthly sessions seemed to be the preference, attendance varied due to various factors, such as coaches' availability and cost implications. There was also a combination of online and face-to-face sessions – with online sessions having become particularly popular in the wake of the COVID pandemic. This also helped to contain costs and achieve a broader geographical spread of participants. However, the potential downside of online sessions is that people may hold back a bit and not be as candid and forthcoming as they might be in an in-person session, where it is easier to build rapport and trust.

Preparation for coach supervision.

Respondents often mentioned the importance of coaches being properly prepared for supervision as a key factor in ensuring successful supervision. For example, one respondent said, *"I make notes on where I am struggling [with the client context], where I think I need supervision on because sometimes when I bring the case in, I discover other things I was unaware of as I tell the story"* (CP6).

Respondents shared that such preparation enriched the supervision experience and provided real-life, relatable, and practical cases that provided more opportunities for reflection and engagement. They could learn from the experiences of others while reflecting on their own actions and reactions.

It was important that both the supervisor and the coaches felt that they had derived value from the supervision exercise, which was often related to how easily they could connect with peers and how much they had learned as a result of the supervision process. Another identified enabler of effective supervision was when coaches had a good experience and felt that the supervision had contributed to their growth and development, including their ability to add value to their clients.

Coach supervision models.

Supervisors, it was found, used a variety of models, including the Gestalt Cycle of Experience Model (SUP1), the Supervision Triangle Model (SUP5), various adult maturity models (SUP2) and Hawkins' Seven-Eyed Model. All supervisors indicated that it was largely their coach training experience that guided their approach to supervision; they were not specifically "led" by one or other model. Most coaches were not necessarily aware of the models that their supervisors used, although they did say that the coaching methodology informed the supervision approach. Given that all the coach supervisors had extensive experience in the coaching industry, they were more likely to be eclectic in their approaches to supervision.

There were divergent views on whether coaches preferred supervision that focused on their coaching methodology or supervision informed by various methodologies. The answer to this question depended on a coach's personal preferences and learning goals. One respondent maintained that *"when in the supervision of coaches in the same modality, you are speaking from one hymn book, so you do not have to explain too much of your language, it is obvious, but at the same, you are not expanding, you are not opening up to other avenues like you are speaking to the converted"* (CP6). While this helps coach supervisors to hone their skills and deepen their competency within a particular modality, they are not broadening their competencies for multiple applications.

In contrast, working with coaches with different philosophical orientations gives coach supervisors valuable insights into different ways to improve their own coaching, although this can come with challenges. Yes, "this can be chaotic because you need to match yours with theirs, and it can be difficult to facilitate because you have to find a common ground constantly" (CP6).

Coach supervision process.

Since most coaches interviewed were under group supervision, the process followed by coach supervisors, with the support of the coach participants, involved the following steps:

1. **Contracting and setting terms:** This included reminding the coaches of confidentiality principles.
2. **Conducting the initial check-in:** This included clarifying the coaches' needs.
3. **Presenting the cases:** This involved exploring the dynamics at play between the coaches and their clients or the coaches presenting the cases they were concerned about and/or wanted to explore.

#	Respondent type	Participant ID	Individual supervision	Group supervision	Not in supervision	Frequency of supervision	Models used
1	Supervisor	SUP1	X	X		Varies	Seven-eyed and Gestalt
2	Supervisor & Accreditation	SUP2		X		Monthly	Seven-eyed and adult maturity model
3	Supervisor & Accreditation	SUP3		X		Monthly	Seven-eyed
4	Supervisor	SUP4		X		Monthly?	Seven-eyed
5	Supervisor & Accreditation	ACB2/SUP5	X	X		Monthly	Supervision Triangle and Seven-eyed
6	Accreditation & L&D	ACB1	X			As needed	
7	Coach	CP1			X		
8	Coach	CP2		X		Monthly	
9	Coach	CP3	X	X		Varies	
10	Coach	CP4	X			Monthly	
11	Coach	CP5		X		Monthly	
12	Coach	CP6			X		
13	Coach	CP7			X		
14	Coach	CP8		X		Varies	
15	Coach	CP9	X	X		Monthly	
16	Coach	CP10	X	X			
17	Learning & Dev practitioner	N/A			X		

Table 4: Coach supervision types, models and process

4 **Facilitating engagement among peers (fellow coaches). This involved:**

- Zooming in and out to gain broader insights, viewing the case from a "balcony perspective" and allowing peers to weigh in on the issues raised in the case from different perspectives;
- Examining the relational dynamics between the supervisor and coach, identifying common patterns, challenges, and support mechanisms;
- Identifying blind spots and raising awareness of elements that may have been overlooked; and
- The supervisor eliciting coaches' input and feedback.

5 **Closing the session:** This involved the supervisor asking the coaches to reflect on the insights gained and how the supervision may have prompted them to see their cases in a different light.

It was clear from the evidence outlined above that the coach supervision process was still evolving, and that the supervisors participating in the study were still relying on coaching models and therapy-based models, such as the Seven-Eyed model (as opposed to specific coach supervision models).

4.2.4 Theme 4 The main barrier to undergoing coach supervision is not understanding its value

Our findings showed that the barriers to coach supervision can be traced to the coach supervisor and/or to the coach. These barriers included: cost, lack of awareness of the value of coach supervision, fears about a non-conducive learning environment, and personal factors.

Cost.

Cost was the most cited factor (12 respondents) preventing coaches from undergoing supervision. Most coaches operated as small businesses or individual enterprises, and affordability was a real concern to them. There was a common perception that supervision was too costly, with some even viewing it as a "*money-making scam*" by supervisors and accreditation bodies.

Lack of awareness of the value of coach supervision.

Concerns about cost tie in with the fact that some coaches did not understand the value of supervision. This pointed to the need to create awareness and to educate people about the benefits of coach supervision. In addition, a few coaches indicated that they did not know how to find a potential coach supervisor.

Fears about a non-conducive learning environment.

An additional barrier, according to supervisors, was coaches' fear that they would be subjected to the harsh scrutiny and judgement of the supervisor and their peers and that their views would not be kept confidential – which would be deterrents to active participation and learning. A coach's status in the presence of peers and supervisors is important. Since participating in supervision sessions requires making themselves vulnerable in the midst of other competent and experienced people, it may feel risky. For example, some respondents feared raising an issue that might call into question their knowledge or skills, which could damage their professional reputation.

Personal factors.

A personal barrier is a coach's time constraints. For example, respondents spoke about the trade-off between spending time on their own development (for no remuneration) and charging for their time when working with clients, which could prompt them to drop the idea of supervision as it was "non-essential". Another impediment is that some coaches believe they do not need supervision because they already have qualifications, experience, and skills. However, some respondents saw this as *"arrogance"* and *"ego"* on the part of the coach.

4. Key takeaways from the study

The literature review and empirical study produced some key takeaways:

Against the backdrop of the rapid evolution of workplace coaching as a field of study and practice, increasing attention is being paid to coach supervision which is aimed at enhancing coaches' skills and the professionalism of the coaching industry. However, it is still at a nascent stage, both globally and in South Africa (Bachkirova et al., 2020; Lewis, 2023). This means that relatively few studies have explored the different dimensions of coach supervision, including its theoretical foundation, definitions, key drivers and characteristics, and common standards of practice – all of which would inform appropriate frameworks and models that could be used by interested scholars and practitioners.

Multiple definitions have been proposed for coach supervision, and a common definition remains elusive. Even professional coaching bodies are grappling with the concept. For example, coach supervision has been associated with teaching, mentoring, coaching, and evaluative practices (Lewis, 2023). However, there is general agreement that coach supervision provides a coach with the opportunity to critically reflect on their practice and expand their knowledge and self-awareness through interactive exchanges and feedback. It is also clear that the three key stakeholders in the process are the coach, the coach's client, and the coach supervisor. In addition, effective coach supervision requires a systemic approach, which recognises the impact of the organisational context on coaching quality and ethics.

We conducted an empirical study in South Africa to help address the research gap relating to coach supervision, focusing on the nature and perceived value of the discipline, the key competencies required for effective coach supervision, the frameworks and models that coach supervisors are using, and potential barriers preventing coaches from participating in supervision programmes.

The perceived value of coach supervision, as identified by all the stakeholders participating in the study, falls into three categories: formative, restorative, and normative (Bachkirova et al., 2020; Proctor, 1986).

In terms of its *formative* value, coach supervision provides a learning platform for reflection, and the sharing of ideas and coaching methodologies. It also acts as a platform for peer learning, with coaches learning from the feedback they receive from their supervisor or their peers. This enables them to improve their coaching skills and better understanding their clients' context (Fatien Diochon et al., 2019).

In terms of its *restorative value,* coach supervision encourages self-care among coaches. In our study, respondents emphasised how coach supervision helps coaches deal with personal (including emotionally laden and distressing) issues that surfaced during the supervision, to *"cleanse and sanitise"* themselves, and to ensure their own well-being so that they can deliver a better service to their clients. Being part of a community of practice of people who support one another was considered to be of great benefit.

In terms of its *normative value*, coach supervision (besides improving coaching skills and standards) is a platform where ethical issues and dilemmas can be discussed and debated, which helps coaches to act in an ethical manner and encourage the same behaviour in their clients. This, in turn, helps to ensure that professional standards are maintained – for the benefit of clients and the industry in general (Passmore, 2011; Tkach & DiGirolamo, 2020).

The key competencies that a supervisor must display for effective coach supervision are: the ability to manage complexity, manage group dynamics, facilitate group processes (in the case of group supervision), and create an environment conducive to supervision through the creation and maintenance of psychological rapport and an ethical climate (especially in a group setting). These findings are in line with the literature which indicates that coach supervisors are required to facilitate reflective action (Jackson, 2021), work with complexity and plurality (Bachkirova, 2022), and uphold ethical standards (Passmore, 2011; Tkach & DiGirolamo, 2020).

As coach supervision is a relatively recent phenomenon, there is a lack of standardisation in supervision practice and processes (Bachkirova et al., 2020). Very few supervisors participating in the study mentioned that they were specifically guided by any formalised framework or model, although the Seven-Eyed Model (an adaptation of a therapy model) was a fairly frequent point of reference (Hawkins & Shohet, 2012). Supervisors reported relying much more on their coaching skills, individual approaches, and understanding of group processes to conduct coach supervision sessions.

A broad framework that appeared to emerge from the findings, however, appears in Figure 3. The sequence of steps was consistent among the coach supervisors and confirmed by both the coaches and supervisors participating in the study. They are:

1. Preparation for a coach supervision session,
2. Entering into a coach supervision agreement,
3. Presenting the coaches' cases,
4. Engaging with and discussing the cases from different angles, and
5. Concluding the coach supervision session.

The Group coach supervision process

Figure 3: The group coach supervision process

Source: Primary data from the empirical study

6. Conclusion

The field of coach supervision is gaining traction in South Africa and globally, with those who are providing and receiving supervision services finding it a valuable channel for individual learning and development (at the coach and client level) and professional enrichment (at the supervisor and institutional level). However, there is clearly a need for more extensive research to be conducted across a range of contexts to better understand the construct's nuances and applications.

A key conclusion emanating from our empirical study is that while excellent coaching skills form the foundation of effective coach supervision, group process skills are also necessary – similar to those employed in group or team coaching – especially as group coach supervision is often the preferred among coaches seeking supervision. Coach supervisors therefore need to be adept at navigating coach and client systems and working with complexity. As more data is captured and more experiences reported, coach supervision will make an increasingly important contribution in the areas of management development, personal growth and development, and business optimisation. The implications for professional coaching bodies such as the ICF and COMENSA are particularly exciting, given coach supervision's potential to deliver formative (reflection and learning), restorative (self-care and well-being) and normative (ethics and professionalism) value. Understanding the different types of value that coach supervision delivers will help to guide the development of professional standards and appropriate frameworks for this important field of endeavour, while also building greater awareness, and mitigating real or imagined barriers to entry.

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PAL was established to optimise individual learning and performance. PAL *"places human beings at the forefront of their learning and growth process and explores and influences human development and change that is relevant, meaningful, scalable"* (GIBS) with the intention of fostering responsible, inclusive leadership. Coaching is one of the personalised learning processes that PAL offers as it believes that coaching can help to mobilise unique human competencies – creativity, resilience, adaptability, interpersonal connection, and leadership capabilities. These are essential for optimising human performance, while also being critical skills of the future.

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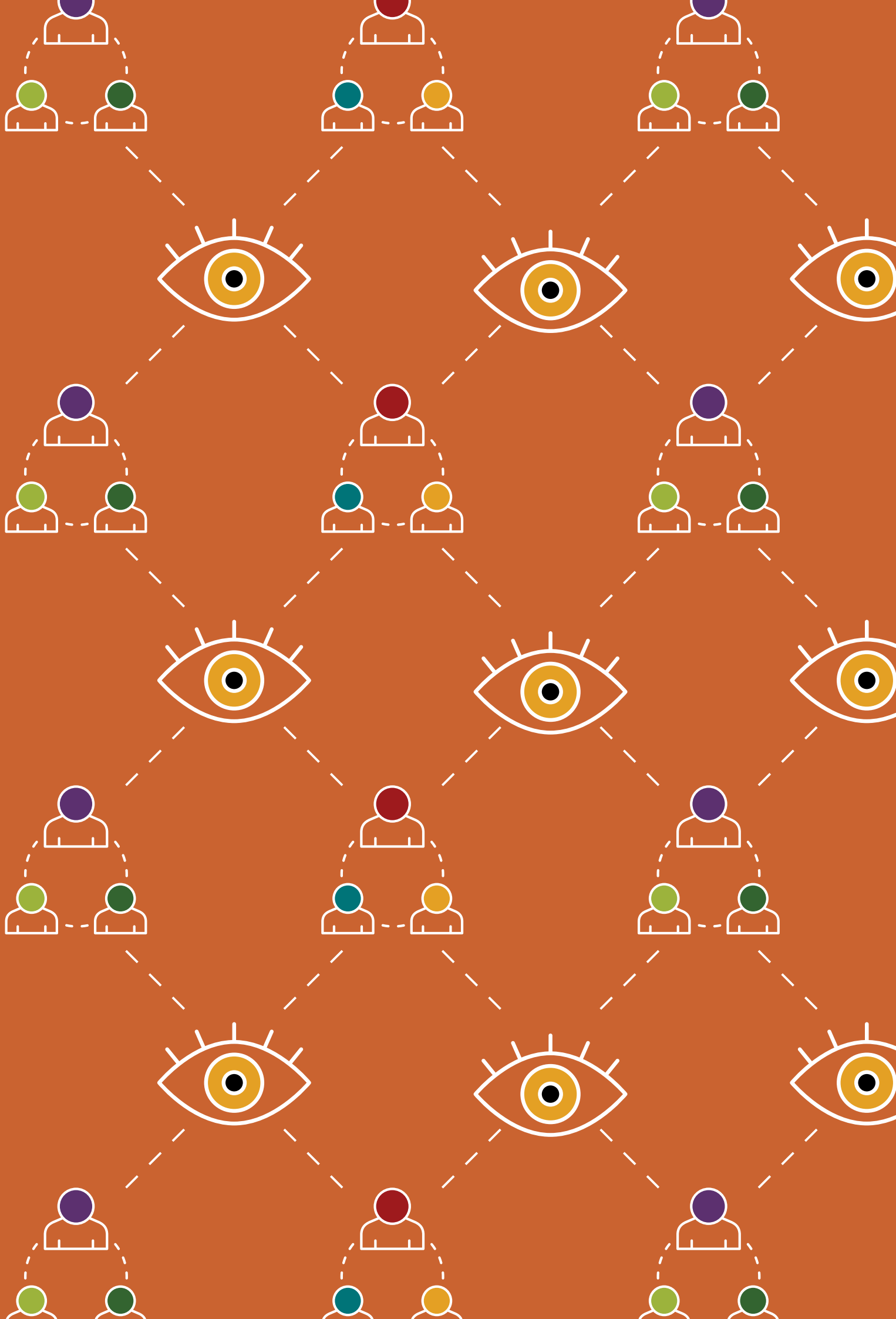

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