

Co-Work in SF Consultancy

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Abstract

This paper explores the use, effects and methodological possibilities of co-work between two similar accomplished consultants/supervisors working together in teams of organisations. It tries to show how co-work can be a very useful function for both consultants and clients. Due to the fact that there is not much literature about this topic (at least in German literature), the paper concentrates on the benefits described by authors of different approaches in therapy and consulting (see below). Finally, the paper emphasises the special possibilities that come with an SF approach in coaching and supervising in co-work.

Background

During my studies of systemic supervision, I had the chance to work together with a colleague in two team-supervisions. We enjoyed the processes of cooperation immensely. We therefore started looking for literature to find out about conditions concerning cooperation, possibilities such as methodological basics, or tools for co-work in counselling. Surprised that we didn't find any papers in German literature, we decided to write our master theses about the topic in order to build a theoretical foundation for co-work in supervision and consultancy. The following article refers to books and articles I found in systemic therapy (Andersen, 1990, Binter, 1998, Kaiser, 2008, von Schlippe & Schweitzer, 2009, Mücke, 1998) and analytical therapy (Giesers & von der Stein, 2002, Böttger, 1994, Roller & Nelson, 1991), adult education (Weule, 2009, Langmaack & Braune-Krickau, 2000, Guhs, 1995, Wyrsh, 1989), systemic supervision (Binter, 1998, Andersen, 1990,

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Brandau & Schüers, 1995, Kersting, 1992) and systemic consulting of organisations (Kindl-Beilfuß, 2012, von Schlippe & Schweitzer, 2009, Exner, 2004).

Defining 'co-work'

Combining co-work-definitions of different approaches and authors (Binter, 1998, Huber, 2000, Langmaack & Braune-Krickau, 2000, Mücke, 1998), I developed the following definition for 'co-work' in consulting and supervision:

Two similarly accomplished consultants with matching theoretical consulting-approaches or alignments work together in a process supporting a group/team at the same time and place for a certain period of time. The consultants facilitate the sessions together and reflect on it afterwards either by a conversation between the two counsellors or in group supervision.

The co-work partners accept responsibility for the whole process regardless of the method they chose for their cooperation.

Helpful requirements for a successful cooperation between consultants as stated by the current literature (see below)

In our collaboration as consultants and through my overview of the existing literature from various approaches, I was able to identify the following prerequisites that make the joy and benefit of cooperation between consultants more likely.

Consultants working together as co-workers should like and trust each other, work well together and have confidence in each other. It is helpful when they already know each other's way of working, and each other's methods and approach (Exner, 2004, Giesers & von der Stein, 2002, Roller & Nelson, 1991).

Mutual appreciation and taking pleasure in working together are as essential for effective co-work as is the free decision to work together with each other. Appreciating the

partner's professionalism, theoretical approaches, concepts and ideas is also needed. Co-workers have to communicate preconditions, assumptions and expectations before they start working together. Both should have the ability to develop common ideas and goals instead of competing with each other.

The process and the sessions must be prepared and reflected on together, which takes more time than in supervision or consulting-processes without a partner. Therefore co-workers must consider whether they have the disposition, time and other resources needed for additional conversation and coordination. In addition, a similar level of competence, as well as similar and matching theoretical alignments and values, facilitates the process of co-working (Böttger, 1994, Langmaack & Braune-Krickau, 2000, Kersting, 1992, Roller & Nelson, 1991).

Co-workers need the ability and willingness to make the co-work partners approach and procedure transparent for the group and justify it. They should both be able to constitute different perceptions, perspectives and alignments and be able to accept and appreciate these. Co-workers should have the willingness and ability to reflect their relationship with each other and make it the focus of reflection whenever it is helpful. They need a high level of self-reflection and a high degree of ability to deal with conflicts and willingness to cooperate. They need the ability to give and receive appreciative and constructive feedback. Lastly, they require co-equal ability and willingness to communicate in an open and reflective way, even if they do not completely agree with the partner's ideas or approach (Binter, 1998, Exner, 2004, Giesers & von der Stein, 2002, Langmaack & Braune-Krickau, 2000).

Some authors describe similar strong personalities of the co-working consultants as useful for co-working, similar to the co-equal ability to communicate and act transparently. Before co-working, each consultant should reflect whether he or she is really able to lead a group as a team of two. Questions such as "Am I really able to step back, and let my partner lead? Can I deviate from my own way ideas and conviction and respect the way my partner chose?" (Ehinger, 1986 in Huber, 2000, Mücke, 1998, Roller & Nelson, 1991).

Last but not least: Co-workers must agree on payment arrangements before they start working together, as coaching and supervision are not usually conducted in a team. It needs good arguments and persuasiveness to get an appropriate fee for two co-workers (Binter, 1998, Langmaack & Braune-Krickau, 2000, Wyrsh, 1989).

Co-work is not easy but can be learned. If co-workers conceive their work as a process of formation and learning, they have a good chance of achieving a successful process with all the benefits that come with it.

Not all of these prerequisites were mentioned in the literature by all representatives of the differing approaches (for example, the extent to which the relationship between consultant needs to be reflected in front of the team varies between systemic and analytic consulting approaches). In any case, the above summary is quite common-sensical and offers helpful hints to consider when entering into co-work.

Methodological possibilities in co-work

Co-working consultants have the great advantage of having someone else to prepare and reflect on the individual sessions and the whole process. They have the opportunity to learn by watching a colleague at work and can revert to a second perception, opinion and professional view of someone who is involved in the process.

Co-work involves the following methodological possibilities:

- **Leading sessions together**
Co-workers can interchange their techniques, take turns leading the sessions and complement each other in the conversation.
One partner can care for the structural elements (time-keeping, conversation-rules, organisation of the session with a good start and a good ending, etc.). The other one could focus on the content of the process (Böttger, 1994, Huber, 2000, Kaiser, 2008, Kersting, 1992, Wyrsh, 1989).

- Variations of ‘reflecting team’
Co-work partners can split their work. One partner works by interviewing with the team, while the other one observes the session, gets observing-instructions from the group and focuses e.g. on all the resources and solution-ideas which the team provides. At the end of or even during the session, co-workers can reflect the process in front of the group and make their perceptions transparent (Andersen, 1990, Brandau & Schüers, 1995, Kaiser, 2008).
- Reflecting positions/‘splitting’
Whenever a conflict or diverse points of view, perceptions, etc. hinder a helpful process for the group, co-workers can choose to represent the diverse positions and in that way emphasise the different points of view. In this manner, they may support and help the different ‘parties’ to talk, discuss and negotiate the diverse positions, in order to find a solution that enables constructive work again (von Schlippe & Schweitzer, 2009, Kindl-Beilfuß, 2012).
- Profit from multi-perspectives and diversity of two consultants
Two people working together differ in perceptions, points of view and ideas. Different styles of working, theoretical approaches, and backgrounds (different sexes, ages, field competences, cultures, etc.) can be very helpful in finding more ideas for solutions about an aspect (Binter, 1998, Kaiser, 2008, Kindl-Beilfuß, 2012, von Schlippe & Schweitzer, 2003 & 2009).
- Implementing short breaks in the sessions, to reflect current perceptions, hypotheses or goals of one or both of the co-workers are essential (Andersen, 1990, Mücke, 1998). After such a break, they can offer a talk about resources (you may know it as resource-gossip) to the group.
- Working in accompanied subgroups
Whenever it is beneficial to work in smaller groups, co-workers can split the group and accompany at least two

groups with their work. After that co-workers can reunite the whole group and help the subgroup-members to present their results (Guhs, 1995, Weule, 2009).

Possible effects of co-work ...

... for consultants

Consultants, those working together as co-workers, benefit from the possibility of actively working together in a process of having a second perception of a professional that is directly involved in the process. Thereby, they have the possibility of prompt timely feedback by the partner. By observing a colleague, one's own competence can extend. This way the partners can develop their profession and professional identity. Additionally the consultants extend their own professional options, perspectives and courses of action (Andersen, 1990, Binter, 1998, Brandau & Schüers, 1995, Langmaack & Braune-Krickau, 2000).

Working in co-work can unburden co-workers, as both take responsibility for the whole process (Exner, 2004, Kersting, 1992). Co-workers can support each other through difficult phases of the process and can offer methodological possibilities (as described) that could not be provided to the clients in cases where only one consultant is working alone. It may be easier for co-workers to create a professional distance from the clients and the process, as there is a second person to care for what systemic consultants call neutrality or multipartiality (Andersen, 1990, von Schlippe & Schweitzer, 2003 & 2009). One possible disadvantage of co-work may be that initially it needs more time for preparation and reflection, for teambuilding between the co-workers and for coordination. Consultants lose their sole leadership and therefore need an even higher tolerance for ambiguity (Langmaack & Braune-Krickau, 2000). Co-workers may get a feeling of imbalance as one of them sometimes is more active in sessions than the other one (Binter, 1998, Giesers & von der Stein, 2002, Guhs, 1995).

... for clients

Clients have the chance to observe a model for a successful professional relationship, cooperation, respectful contact and dealing with diversity (sex, age, culture, points of view, profession, fields-competence, positions in the company, etc. (e.g. Böttger, 1994, Guhs, 1995, Kaiser, 2008, Langmaack & Braune-Krickau, 2000)). The use of feedback from the co-workers (about resources and observed exceptions) offers clients the possibility for self-exploration or gaining confidence (Böttger, 1994, Giesers & von der Stein, 2002, Exner, 2004). Having two consultants allows every client to choose with whom they want to build a relationship. This offers the clients the possibility of deciding between two counterparts in any situation and might make it easier to form a good relationship (Giesers & von der Stein, 2002).

Clients benefit from the synergistic effects of two perceptions, perspectives, points of view, ideas, etc. which extends the different options to act and offers more possible solutions for the issues of the group. Through co-work, clients can experience different field-competences and procedures of work (e.g. one of the co-partners might follow a systemic approach while the other one is solution focused) (Binter, 1998, Langmaack & Braune-Krickau, 2000, Mücke, 1998, Wyrsh, 1989). On the other hand, co-work carries the risk that clients may get confused by different perceptions and (solution)-ideas, which create a high level of complexity, instead of reducing complexity in the process. Another risk of co-work can be untransparent unsettled relationships and interactions between the co-workers that may confuse clients (Giesers & von der Stein, 2002, Kaiser, 2008).

Co-solutions: perspectives of SF in Co-work-consulting

As a systemic supervisory I am used to working with systemic structures or hypotheses. I'm aware that SF is not referring to these tools or using these. There are enormous opportunities to use the benefits of co-work in the SF context constructively and in order to find the right solution with the clients.

A resource orientation rather than a deficit orientation can stimulate the cooperation between the co-workers to work together. The respectful, cooperative and non-blaming stance of the SF attitude helps me to be able to open up and be authentic in the process. Working with two consultants in the manner of a 'reflecting team' opens the opportunity for the observing person to pay attention to exceptions and resources. Additionally it offers this perception to the interviewing partner in the open talk of the 'reflecting team'. Those two external perspectives with their frames of reference can offer a multi-perspective. The focus of working in SF is on the interaction between people. Co-workers offer more useful ideas for the consulting-work and can be a model of successful and appreciative interaction and communication between professionals. Sometimes, consultants realise very late that they are working on an issue that doesn't need to be fixed. A second person can remind the other one not to fix anything which is not broken. Practically, co-work includes the possibility of dividing and working with a group in two subgroups if reasonable and to bring the results together afterwards. That is a very effective and fast way to work. In case conflict management is needed, co-workers can use the method of 'splitting' and 'reflecting positions' in a respectful and appreciative way.

Further research

These conclusions are drawn from a small number of articles and papers about the subject and several individual cases and non-standardised interviews with co-work experienced consultants. It would be useful to interview clients to find out whether they recognise the benefits discussed here. A qualitative study that includes such interviews both with clients and consultants could be useful to assure that co-work can really be beneficial for both parties in the process of counselling. Also helpful could be training, where consultants/ supervisors are "taught" how to realise responsible co-work in consulting.

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