



Position of the DGSv Board

What is and can supervisory consulting do?

The DGSV defines supervision as a professional, work-related counseling format. It helps individuals, groups, or teams reflect on their professional roles, tasks, and relationships. It is primarily used by people working with other people to navigate complex situations, maintain quality, and prevent burnout.

Key Aspects of DGSv Supervision:

- **Focus:** It addresses the intersection of person, role, task, and organization.
- **Target Group:** Professionals, managers, and teams, particularly in social services, healthcare, and education.
- **Methodology:** It facilitates reflection, creativity, and development of action strategies in a triangular relationship between supervisor, supervisees and organization.
- **Standards:** DGSv members must adhere to strict ethical guidelines and professional standards¹, including quality-assured training and continuous professional development.
- **Distinction:** Unlike psychotherapy, it focuses on professional work-related issues, although it covers emotional aspects of the work.

The DGSv (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Supervision und Coaching) acts as the leading association in Germany for establishing supervisory quality standards.

The bigger picture: the world of work

Things are getting uncomfortable: crises, megatrends, and ambivalences. Do you also feel the great uncertainty?

We live in a time of profound upheaval, shaped by experiences of crisis (financial crises, the COVID-19 pandemic, the rise of authoritarianism) and megatrends such as AI, digitalization, demographic changes, climate change, global migration and other urgent geopolitical developments. Uncertainty is spreading in working environments of our modern industrial and service societies. Paradoxes and ambivalences characterize daily work experience

¹ See the DGSv Code of Ethics and the ANSE Code of Ethics. Downloadable from their respective websites

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For example: On the one hand, many work processes today are science-based. They presuppose rational processes of knowledge-creation and evidence based decision-making. On the other hand, or rather simultaneously, we are observing a growing hostility towards science, the denial of scientific findings, and the deliberate dissemination of fake news, conspiracy theories, and falsehoods

And another thing: On the one hand, knowledge of the socio-ecological dimension of economic activity is becoming increasingly widespread. On the other hand, or rather simultaneously, this knowledge apparently plays no role in many organizational decisions

The world of work is thus becoming increasingly complex, opaque, and paradoxical. Some therefore call it VUCA (volatile, uncertain, complex, ambiguous), others BANI (brittle, anxious, non-linear, incomprehensible). For the people in these work environments, one feeling is growing stronger and stronger: insecurity.

Organizations in the World of Work **Never has it been more necessary: the ability to reflect**

What can organizations and their employees do to counter uncertainty and a feeling of loss of control? How can they deal effectively, intelligently, and healthily with the major and minor paradoxes and ambivalences of the working world?

There is no panacea. But there is one skill without which nothing is possible in these VUCA or BANI times: the ability to reflect.

Organizations have recognized this. They are already organizing themselves in such a way that continuous reflection on their own actions becomes an integral part of strategy, organizational, personnel, and structural development, as well as quality assurance. This is where supervisory consulting comes into play.

It can elevate individuals, teams and the organization as a whole to a new level of reflection. It can help deepen and refine the reflective capacity of individuals and units. Because supervisory consultants assume that the pursuit of complete control over processes is (and always has been) an illusion; and that instead, it's about constant readjustment, adaptation and fine-tuning.

Consulting for the World of Work **This is the task: to do justice to the complexity of the working world**

Let's have a brief look at the future of our trade and let's take supervision as our common point of departure. Which developments do we see?

Supervisory consultation is rooted in supervision and supervision historically originated in social work, centered around mental and social problems, around the associated basic experiences and needs of human existence; and thus, around the conflicts and problems that arise when social and psychological needs are not adequately met.

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Supervision today is steeped in a profound understanding of the fundamental needs and conflicts of human existence. Supervisory consultants are familiar with belonging, closeness, distance, security, attachment, recognition, anxiety, integrity, development and much more. They draw upon knowledge from various disciplines and schools of thought: psychology, sociology, psychoanalysis, group dynamics, systems theory, and others.

Supervisory consulting, however, is much more than that. It integrates insights from ergonomics, organizational theory, and management and leadership theories, often supplemented by specific knowledge of the particular work contexts they directly or indirectly deal with. Supervisory consulting is also familiar with fundamental conflicts in the workplace, for example when it comes to issues regarding the legitimacy of power, or tensions around resources, formal structures, conflicting interests between shareholders and other stakeholders, belief systems, corporate culture, diversity and inclusion issues, competence dilemmas, practical constraints or team dynamics.

A fundamental human experience and a central idea of supervisory consulting is „*the addition of a third party*”² An example from developmental psychology is the parent-child relationship. It involves maintaining and shaping multiple social relationships simultaneously. This significantly increases complexity and inevitably raises the question of who acts in what role and with what responsibility, when, and to whom. Supervisory consultants are able to always consider the „third,” „fourth,” „fifth,” etc. dimension in workplace relationships: for example, clients, colleagues, or customers.

At the same time, supervisory consulting takes into account fundamental questions of the working world: regarding goals and tasks, structures and processes, roles and functions. This not only means increased complexity, it also creates an important and appropriate space for reflection and a change of perspective. Only in this way can one do justice to the complexity of the working world today and tomorrow.

The Application **The Three Forms of Supervisory Consulting**

Profound knowledge of basic human needs and the ability to understand and shape complex social relationships – this is what distinguishes supervisory consulting from other consulting formats. It is in demand in a wide variety of fields and by diverse occasions. It has established itself as a reflection format for specialists, professionals and managers, for groups and teams in social, medical and educational organizations, in commercial business, politics, science, and public administration.

²A telling example of a ‘third party’ (also called ‘third term’) is the conductor of a symphony orchestra. He enables a group of very diverse instrumentalists to unite and synchronize in such a way, that they together honor and enhance the intentions of the composer – the fourth party – by individually growing in playing their part, as they have mastered it at their various academies of music; the fifth party, and so on. This approach shows the interconnectedness of human existence: problems or failures are never only individual, and neither are talents or the successes that spring forth from those.

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It takes three forms:

1. Supervision: Shaping Complex Working Relationships

Supervision is consultation for individuals and organizations whose primary task is working with and for people, and who therefore must continually redefine their professional position within the tension between closeness and distance to their clients. This is highly demanding relationship work, for which supervision is essential. Supervision enables continuous reflection on professional roles. It is aimed at individuals, groups, or teams. It is integrated into the organizational structure and contributes to organizational development.

2. Supervisory Coaching: Mastering Professional Challenges

Supervisory coaching is aimed at individuals, often managers, within organizations whose goal is to expand their repertoire of actions. It is usually event-driven, solution-oriented, and time-limited, focusing on a specific professional question or challenge. Supervisory coaching supports self-reflection and the testing of new behavior. It is aimed at individuals or teams. It differs markedly, for example, from life coaching, which tends to ignore the work-related context. Or from profit oriented business coaching, which primarily focuses on performance and its potential for improvement. And certainly from any other coaching approach bases on unrealistic pretenses and promises.

3. Supervisory Organizational Consulting: Guiding Major Changes

Supervisory organizational consulting considers the organization as a whole. Its primary goal is to maintain or enhance an organization's functionality and performance. Supervisory organizational consulting serves the organization's purpose, its customers, clients, employees, and owners. It is the professional guidance and support of change processes. It utilizes a variety of formats to exert an impact within the organization. Supervisory organizational consulting tends to differ from other organizational consulting approaches that focus more on cost effectiveness and process efficiency, generally starting from optimal, idealized organizational models, such as those associated with concepts like Scrum and Agility, New Work, Lean Management, Six Sigma and whatever other trends and fashions may from time to time pop up and disappear again.

The Common Ground

Whether we talk about supervision, coaching or organizational consulting: our focus is always on supporting self-reflection, opening up new possibilities, accompanied by an ethical and values-oriented approach.

In a nutshell:

Consulting for the working worlds of today and tomorrow

- Supervisory consulting is familiar with the fundamental needs and conflicts of human existence and likewise those of the workplace
- It remains stable, even in turbulent times. It supports useful, productive, and functional reflection processes for individuals and organizations

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- It is characterized by careful clarification of the mandate, diagnostics and process design with regard to the dimensions of person, role, organization, and stakeholders. Therefore, it has a particularly profound impact. No other consulting approach can do this

In concrete terms

If you engage in supervisory consulting, this is what you may expect from supervisory consultants:

- They take a close look at your specific situation and that of your organization. They identify role ambiguities, conflicts, and organizational issues and ensure the quality of work and working conditions. You receive tailor-made consulting precisely adapted to your situation
- They support your (self-)reflection, always with the goal of increasing your ability to act and with an open eye at the options available to you. They don't offer ready-made solutions or 'products'. They are cautious with recommendations or advice.
- They see to it that you as professional develop your own ideas and solutions to problems you wouldn't have come up with without the structured process and creative support of supervision
- They deliberately slow down the consulting processes to allow for thorough reflection outside of day-to-day business. They don't make unrealistic promises, nor do they immediately jump to whichever obvious (superficial) explanation for problems. You can rely on the fact that the problems will be investigated thoroughly. Solutions found in supervision therefore have a high probability of success
- They can explain their approach at any time. They create transparency regarding procedures, positions, costs and roles. They refrain from creating dependencies, neither through inappropriate contract design nor through manipulative shaping of the working relationship. They maintain control over the assignment and can address and resolve any disagreements at any time
- Supervisors respect the way your organization has developed. They accept that recognizing problems or even negative trends can lead to disappointment and sometimes even feelings of shame. Supervisors create a safe space to address these issues. They do not dismiss the unpleasant aspects of change or toxic characteristics of the organization. They do not pretend that leaving one's comfort zone is commonplace. In a protected, communicative space, they support you to venture into unfamiliar territory and to experiment with new perspectives and ideas

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- To shed more light on neglected aspects, supervisors keep their eyes and ears open for the blind spots that arise when dealing with the typical tensions of the working world. Such tensions include, among others, those between closeness/distance, top-down/bottom-up or stability/flexibility. If, for example, stability threatens to drift into complete stagnation, supervisors, if necessary, seek ways to regain flexibility – and vice versa. They don't take sides. In this way, they support you to examine whether the balance you've found between these typical tensions fits the circumstances appropriately
- They call things by their name, create a trusting working relationship, and tailor their approach to you, your team, and your organization. They don't avoid the term 'problem' just to appear more compliant. No sugarcoating. You can trust that they will work on constructive solutions
- They take responsibility for the consulting process. They know their own limitations and bring in experts when needed. Supervisors do not take away your work, the implementation of solutions or your responsibility for decisions. You remain responsible for yourself, your contribution to your team and your organization. Roles remain clearly defined
- They pursue ongoing professional development and maintain an open mind to societal developments and changes in the workplace. They don't follow every trend. You receive well-considered and reflective consulting inventions that may not appear particularly fashionable or up-to-date at first glance, but are of high quality
- Supervisors continually examine themselves, their role, their responsibilities, their consulting projects, and the effectiveness of their interventions; for instance in meta-supervision sessions or intervision. They don't pretend to have a monopoly on wisdom. You gain sparring partners who are willing and accustomed to expose themselves, both personally and professionally, to challenging and uncomfortable situations
- Supervisors design processes with an open mind and accept the risk of failure. They trust in the process and in the competencies and potential of their clients. They are not naive; rather they understand the importance of professionally managing consulting and communication processes. You receive honest and realistic advice
- They don't shy away from difficult situations. Nor do they provoke unnecessary conflicts or escalate situations. You have a partner with whom you can navigate even the toughest times

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DGSv Board

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The content of this text is translated, edited and slightly adapted by Sijtze de Roos, who remains responsible for possible mistakes.