7. ENSURING THAT SUPERVISEES COME OUT OF ROLE

Several of the methods and techniques described in this book involve role-play, or accessing the unconscious. In these circumstances, it is advisable to give the supervisee the space and time to come out of role and come back to the present. Of course, this will vary according to which technique you are using and how sensitive your supervisee is.

In some methods and techniques this is more necessary than in others. For example, meditation and visualization allows supervisees to access the unconscious or dreamlike state. They need to be told clearly, ‘Allow yourself to gently come back to the present’, or similar words. Frequently, they will be unable to continue with any discussion or critical thinking without de-roling first.

If they have been involved in role-play, often a change of chairs is enough to help them come out of role. Otherwise a clear statement of who they are in real life – for example, ‘I am Tim!’ – is a great way of coming back to the present. Another stronger statement would be ‘I am not George, I am Tim!’ Standing up for a moment also works. Another way is to do a quick brush down with the hands of the entire body, starting with the head and working down to the feet.

If the role-play has been through the use of toys or objects, ask the supervisee to break up the constellation. Remember the emotional investment that goes into these creations, and respect them. If you need to break up a constellation for someone else, then we suggest you ask permission first.

Using these seven stages of supervision creates a carefully boundaried and safe space in which the other person can work. These stages do not always need to be done in the same order. If you are working with a student or supervisee who is familiar with the process, some of the steps can be very brief.

Creativity engages you in exploration. As a child you will have explored both through play and in learning. Perhaps you can recall your spontaneous and curious experimentation, some of which may have led to success while others may have ended disastrously. Were you a child who piled up inappropriately balanced books or bricks to stand on in order to reach a coveted treasure that was out of bounds? Perhaps you succeeded without anyone knowing. You may have been exploring how to make shapes in the sandpit or on the beach. Perhaps finding a milk bottle, you may have mixed sand with water and shaken the bottle hard until it broke and you were covered by the glass; receiving a reprimand. You might have been drawing a picture and wanted to share your excitement with a grown-up, but the person could not see, as you did, that this was an elephant. The inability of the grown-up to share your pleasure deflated your artistic enthusiasm.

Receiving negative responses to early creative exploration can leave its mark years after the event. Sadly, this experience can be commonplace, stemming in the main from authority figures like parents or teachers.

These early experiences may make both the supervisor and supervisee feel reluctant to try creative methods of supervision. Engaging once again with the creative process may trigger childhood memories of struggling to be creative and being upset and/or embarrassed by negative feedback received for their efforts. When we
Parallel process
We begin the chapter by demonstrating the importance of parallel process in our work. By parallel process we mean the mirroring process that happens when the dynamics, attitudes and characteristics of one interview become re-enacted in another where the same material is being discussed. This mirroring can be usefully harnessed in supervision. If the supervisors perceive anything unusual in their interaction with a supervisee, they can use this to explore and cast light on the relationship that the supervisee previously had with the client. The supervisee unwittingly reproduces something of the original session. This can be portrayed by a gesture, an attitude or a feeling from the initial session that infiltrates the dynamic with the supervisor. Observing this phenomenon can deepen the understanding of the issue being brought by the supervisee.

Parallel process can also work in the other direction. The supervisor can model certain attitudes during supervision, which then become unconsciously repeated by the supervisees, when they meet again with their clients.

Hawkins and Shohet (1989), referring to parallel process, comment that:

This function, which is rarely done consciously, serves two purposes for the supervisee. One is that it is a form of discharge – I will do to you what has been done to me and see how you like it; and the second that it is an attempt to solve the problem through re-enacting it within the here and now relationship. The job of the supervisor is to name the process and thereby making it available to conscious exploration and learning, rather than to be submerged in the enactment of the process. (p.69)

CASE STUDY
Jane worked in an adult education institute for 18 years. When she began, she was the only person teaching her subject, and she could plan and write her own curriculum. Her teaching was observed once a year and, as long as the student feedback forms were satisfactory, she was more or less left to herself. Most of her students were interested in learning, and took part in the classes with enthusiasm. But once in a while there would be a student who was attention seeking, resistant or argumentative.

After about 12 years, her head of department recommended that all teachers should take part in the City and Guilds Teacher Training, which would be funded. Senior staff were to be the trainers. Jane joined the teacher training as a student, and was fascinated to observe that over the weeks discipline in the classroom disintegrated. All the students were mature students and experienced teachers, and should have known about good classroom behaviour. Maybe they had entered teacher training little resentfully because of having to learn what they already knew, but in the first few lessons they were well behaved and respectful. After about three or four lessons, however, they started becoming cheeky, resistant or argumentative.

The teachers’ in-training behaviour was paralleling that of their own students. It was their opportunity to act out some of the behaviour they had witnessed over many years, and find out how the senior staff would deal with it. It was as if they were aware that they did not need teacher training on the level of resources and techniques. But what they did need, and expressed unconsciously, was training in classroom management.

Parallel process reveals itself through behaviour, attitudes, body language, and the use of words and phraseology. In most supervision training, supervisors are encouraged to observe the supervisee their own internal process, or the dynamic in the room, in order to check for parallel process.
In our experience, using the creative techniques to re-enact the client consultation is another form of parallel process. The advantage of using another medium is that supervisees can step back and become observers of their own creation. Using creative media allows them the opportunity to be external to it. For example, you might encourage supervisees to re-create a scenario from the consulting room or classroom using toys. The supervisees become engrossed in choosing toys that represent the characteristics of their clients or students. The choice of toys and placement of them reveals the dynamic of the relationship, and the atmosphere that was felt at the initial consultation.

When the supervisees go into the discussion stage of the process, they can begin to decide how they would like to change that relationship.

If you are planning to include some creative supervision techniques, you should read through our recommended seven-stage process (see Chapter 1). If you feel confident and familiar with your own creativity, you can start right away. But if you feel some hesitation or reluctance to begin, we recommend that you explore your own creativity at home before you start. This will free you to act spontaneously in the moment, and help you to expand your abilities as a facilitator.

When you, the supervisor, go to your own supervisor, the parallel process will be re-created once again. It would be interesting to add to this experience by using the same creative techniques that you used with your supervisees (if your supervisor were interested in working in this way). We discuss these various techniques in later chapters.

**Observe your own creativity**

If you take time to observe yourself in your everyday activities, you may well find that you already have several activities or hobbies that include spontaneity or playfulness. Sometimes with these activities you can go into a calm, thoughtless space, where you just know what to do. Examples of these could be walking your dog, digging the garden, playing with your children or grandchildren, cooking or experimenting with new recipes and ingredients, home decorating,

- sewing, knitting, DIY tasks, collecting sea shells, building sandcastles, skimming stones, flying a kite or editing your digital photos.

None of these activities in themselves is necessarily creative. It is the way that you engage with them that makes them so. For example, working in the garden can be done with care and consideration for the wildlife or for visual appeal. It can be a way of watching the seasons or preparing food for the table. Even though gardening tasks may be physically demanding, the gardener may feel stimulated by the work. The polar opposite would be the person who sees gardening as a series of chores to be done, such as cutting the lawn in the least possible time.

The person who just gets on with cutting the grass is task orientated and efficient. The one who puts their attention and affection into the garden becomes creative in their own right. We could say that the creative gardener is being expansive, in terms of body language and attitude. On the other side of the fence, the lawn cutter is being contractive, but may well express creativity elsewhere.

We suggest that you take some time to make a list of your everyday creative activities. You can write them into your notebook or reflective journal (see Chapter 9). Ask yourself the following questions:

- What do I enjoy doing that is intuitive, creative, spontaneous, stimulating or imaginative?
- What mood am I in while doing these things?
- How do I feel afterwards?
- How would I feel if there was no time for these activities?

Taking this one step further, we recommend that you do some experiential work with creative tasks to discover what you can learn from them.

The aim of these exercises is to reconnect you to the playfulness and spontaneity that you had as a child, and to show you how an act of creativity can lead to self-reflection. Experiencing this, rather than just reading about it, will increase your empathy and understanding as a supervisor. You will integrate both the intellectual and intuitive understanding of the process, and feel more confident as a facilitator of creative work.
EXPLORING YOUR OWN CREATIVITY

Choose any of the following exercises that appeal to you, and feel free to change them and develop them as you go along. There are no right or wrong ways of doing them. Just observe what happens to you and how you feel while you do them.

- **Make a doodle.** Get a large plain piece of paper (at least A4 or larger) and, using a soft pencil, scribble with large arm movements across the page.

  Sit back for a moment and then returning to the page see what images arise for you out of the doodles. Using felt-tipped pens or coloured pencils develop the picture. When you have come to a natural conclusion, review what you have drawn and see what it says about you.

- **Bubbles.** Collect up a large mixing bowl or washing-up bowl, some washing-up liquid, a straw, some watercolour paint or food colouring and several sheets of plain paper.

  Fill the bowl with water, and add the washing-up liquid and colouring. Blow through the straw to froth it up and create lots of bubbles. Place a sheet of paper on top of the bubbles and see what patterns it makes. Afterwards, reflect upon what it felt like to play with water and bubbles.

- **Pictures in the clouds.** Go for a walk and see what pictures you can see in the clouds or the trees. Let your imagination run free.

  On returning home, reflect on your moods and feelings at the time, and how you feel now.

- **Make a collage.** Collect up old newspapers, a blank sheet of A4 paper, scissors, pencils and glue. Cut out any pictures and headlines that appeal to you and put them together on the sheet of paper in any way that you wish. Glue them on.

  You will have made up a story board or vision board. What are you attracted to? What are you telling yourself?

- **Making faces.** Take several balloons and some felt-tipped pens. Experiment drawing a face on a fully blown-up balloon and one that has not been blown up; then blow it up. Enjoy the variety of faces that you create.

  Notice the expressions that you gave the faces. What were your feelings while you worked? Consider what this means for you.

- **Shells and objects trouvés.** Use household objects.

  Collect a dozen or so small household objects – for example, bottle tops, corks, seashells, erasers, elastic bands, pen tops, dried beans, buttons or clothes pegs (see Figure 2.1).

  Now think of an incident that happened either last Christmas or on your summer holiday and represent it using your objects trouvés. Show the dynamic and interaction of what happened. Leave it for 30 minutes or more, and on returning to it observe it with fresh eyes. What can you learn from it?

- **A model house.** Go round your home collecting up materials that could be used for constructing a model house – for example, straws, paper, cardboard, boxes, matchboxes, toothpicks, glue, felt-tipped pens, scissors, paperclips, stapler.

  See what arises in you as you build your house.
USING YOUR REFLECTIVE JOURNAL

Notice your responses to doing these exercises. Afterwards it is worth spending a little time writing in your reflective journal about any thoughts or emotions that came up while you were doing them. Writing after playing helps you deepen your understanding of both the process and the results. What did you feel while you were in the process of creating? Did you feel relaxed or tense, excited or calm, energized or peaceful? Were you pleased with the result? Did it trigger any further thoughts, emotions or experiences? Sometimes these exercises can put you in touch with earlier childhood feelings.

Having tried out these exercises yourself, you can use them with your supervisees or students. They would be useful as an introduction to creative supervision or as warm-up exercises at a workshop.

It is our experience that when you engage with playfulness, experimentation, spontaneity and creativity, it opens up your own ability to work in more ways with your supervisees. It helps you to reconnect with the right side of the brain, and it is an interesting and dynamic way of self-reflecting.

Chapter 3

Opening up Unconscious Communication

Have you ever sat in a train looking around you? As you cast your eyes about, perhaps you feel a different sensation as you glance at one person in particular. It is a fleeting sensation, which is hard to verbalize, but a sense that this person resonates with you in a way that is different from the other people. If you were to analyze this further you might find that there is something particular to this person; it could be body build, a gesture, clothes or tone of voice that reminds you of someone you know. This will happen to all of us at some point even if we don't analyze what is happening. It is an unconscious process that occurs at different times in our lives. It is replicated in supervision and is what we explore in this chapter by looking at different sorts of unconscious interpersonal communication.

Unconscious communication takes place through body language, eye contact, facial expression, movements of the head, repeated gestures, tones of voice and autonomic responses. Mostly these are not consciously noticed by the other person but unconsciously they contribute to the type of relationship that is formed. In this chapter, we look at how you can become more observant of non-verbal communication, and harness its use in supervision. We look briefly at the unconscious processes including transference, counter-transference and the drama triangle. Finally, we look at some cases in which supervisors make only minimal interventions through responding to their own inner thoughts and feelings.
**Listening on different levels**

When teaching listening skills to novice practitioners, Jane asks them to consider non-verbal communication. They are encouraged to become aware of body language, eye contact, nods of the head, bodily noises, repeated gestures and the little ‘hm-hm’ noises that we make to express understanding without interrupting the other person’s flow. Beyond this, Jane asks students to think about what else they do while listening. Most of us multi-task while listening, and maybe it is not humanly possible to listen while in a completely empty and receptive state.

Here are some examples of the other things that go on at the same time as listening:

- Making a clinical or intellectual assessment.
- Assessing according to previous ideas or prejudice.
- Making notes.
- Getting emotionally involved through pity or sympathy.
- Remembering a personal situation that parallels that of the speaker.
- Planning a response.
- Appearing to listen but too tired to concentrate.
- Appearing to listen, but focusing on going home, or the next meal.

If the aim of listening is to understand the other person better, then some of these other activities are going to be detrimental to that process. We can imagine a sort of sliding scale, with careful listening and focus on the speaker at one end of the scale while at the other end there is little or no focus on the speaker and the listener’s thoughts are involved elsewhere.

However, we can take it a step further. The human brain is capable of complex tasks, and multi-tasking. If supervisors can be neutral observers of their own thought processes, if they can witness what is happening within their own brain and body, and notice at what level they are listening, then they have gained another supervision tool.

Hawkins and Shohet (1989) offer a process model of supervision. They identify six ways of analyzing what occurs in a psychotherapeutic supervision setting. These are: reflecting on the content of the therapy session; exploring the therapist’s strategies and interventions; exploring the therapy process and relationship; focusing on the therapist’s counter-transference; looking at the here and now process as a mirror of the there and then and, lastly, focusing on the supervisor’s own counter transference. Here in the last of these Hawkins and Shohet suggest:

The supervisor primarily pays attention to their own here-and-now experience in the supervision; what feelings, thoughts, and images the shared therapy materials stirs up in them. The supervisor uses these responses to provide reflective illumination for the therapist. The unconscious material of the therapy session which has been unheard at the conscious level by the therapist may emerge in thoughts, feelings, and images of the supervisor. (p.58)

The therapist or practitioner receives both conscious and unconscious information from the client. Conscious information can be verified with a voice recorder or typed notes. But unconscious knowledge – the things that they don’t know that they know – can only be discovered through careful self-reflection or through the process of supervision.

When supervisors rather than supervisees observe their own inner processes during a session, this is a different way of unearthing the unconscious information. This is accepting that material can leapfrog from client to supervisor, while the supervisee is the unconscious carrier of this material. If you as supervisor can be a witness to your own inner processes, you can notice when you have responses that are unusual. If you find yourself with a thought, feeling or attitude that is stronger than normal, out of context, or unusual in any other way, it has probably arisen out of the supervisory material. This can be tentatively shared with the supervisee as a potentially useful piece of information.
PHYSICAL REACTIONS

Sometimes the story brought by a client, patient or supervisee creates a small but noticeable physical reaction in the therapist, practitioner or supervisor. For example, some of us might have experienced a slight prickling of the hairs on the back of the neck in response to hearing someone else’s good news or success. Other responses might be a slight breathlessness or tightness in the chest, chilliness, restless feet or parallel pains to the client during the consultation. All these can happen face-to-face with a patient. They can equally happen at one remove, while the supervisee is talking about a patient or client.

These spontaneous physical reactions can be used as an effective supervision tool, if you notice them and feed them back to the supervisee. However, they need to be used quite tentatively. They are only useful if they resonate with the supervisee, enabling them to understand themselves or their client more completely. Sensitive and low-key offerings of the self are recommended – for example, ‘I suddenly felt cold when you said that, and I wonder if that’s relevant to the case’ or ‘Would it be useful to you to hear how I am feeling after hearing your story?’

EMOTIONAL REACTIONS

At other times, the reaction to the supervision material is emotional, and you need to do a quick reality check to decide whether it is one of your perennial buttons that has been pushed, creating a normal reaction for you; or whether this has come from the supervision material.

CASE STUDY

Jane was trying out a new supervisor, and negotiated to visit her once a month for three months. She brought a case of a man who had spoken freely and honestly in the consultation. He described himself as never relaxed, always having tunnel vision, wanting to work every hour, always on the phone growing his business. He said:

I can’t let them screw me. I have to be the one who comes out on top. I negotiated to buy a shop from a foreigner, and he was messing me about, so I went to the shop and locked the door in and gave him a good hiding.

The case continued with graphic details of bullying and abuse.

The reason why Jane wanted to take this to supervision was that the man’s delivery had been light-hearted, inviting collusion. Jane felt completely safe with him, and was unaware that she was possibly vulnerable to bullying from him herself. She enjoyed his story, as if it were a comedy thriller on TV, and encouraged him to talk. Afterwards she felt very disturbed, and wanted to examine her feelings in supervision.

The supervisor listened to the story and announced forcefully, ‘I’m feeling really angry.’ The indignation came out quite strongly, and she erroneously observed that this must be a parallel process to what Jane was feeling. She went on to make some prescriptive suggestions about how to terminate the working relationship with this man.

Reflecting on this later, Jane realized that her supervisor had provided the strong emotions that were lacking in the consulting room. It would have been more useful, however, if the supervisor could have recognized that the anger she felt was most likely coming from the man himself, at one remove. Despite his deceptively cheerful delivery, everything he described revealed a lot of anger. If the supervisor could have labelled this dissonance and offered it as a cool observation, rather than a heated and emotive reaction, it would have been useful for both of them to work through the complexity of the case, and decide on an action plan.

Wosket (1999), in her book *The Therapeutic Use of Self: Counselling Practice, Research and Supervision*, makes an interesting distinction between sympathy, empathy and compassion in relation to the use of self. She sees sympathy as a purely emotional reaction that is disempowering to the therapist or practitioner because it robs the person of the ability to think and act clearly. Empathy allows a bit more objectivity, so that the therapist can give helpful feedback in terms of providing a symbol or an ‘as if’ metaphor. This reflecting back in a slightly different form can help the client understand the issue. However, it can be a little bit cool, controlling and limited to the therapist’s own experience.
Compassion on the other hand takes the therapist even further, having 'a quality of engagement and investment in the relationship' (Wosket 1999, p.213):

In compassion the experiencing of emotion proceeds, but does not preclude, the ability to think and act as sympathy often does. When I experience compassion I am hit first by my feelings as a response to whatever is going on to the client, and may need to allow those to form more fully before I can make sense of them sufficiently to make a verbal response. I may experience a shudder, a lump in my throat, a lurch in my stomach, the sense of tears welling up, the sensation of coldness or hotness, the feeling of heaviness or of lightness, a sense of nausea or panic. Frequently there will be a feeling of being struck dumb in that instance as if the strength and impact of the feeling have momentarily robbed me of my ability to say anything meaningful. After that the thinking comes and may produce words that are clumsy and tentative as I struggle to give form to my feeling and offer it to my client. (p.213)

**Increasing your awareness of non-verbal communication**

Here are three exercises that will help you increase your awareness of non-verbal communication.

- **Soap opera:** You can watch a soap opera with the sound turned off. Just watch the body language, gestures, facial expression and eye contact. It is easier to do this with a soap opera rather than a film, because the acting is exaggerated. See how much you can learn about the conversation or the plot before turning the sound back on.

- **Listening in:** If you are in a position to sit at the edge of a conversation, overhearing it but not expected to join in, you can practise observing on what level you are listening. For example, listening to children playing might be a useful exercise. Notice if you are totally focused or if your mind is drifting. Are you making an assessment or planning to answer back? Do you have an emotional or a physical reaction?

- **Observe a partner:** Sit or stand opposite someone who is prepared to work with you. Without talking, mirror or mimic each other for five minutes. You will need to observe each other carefully, and move when the other person does. You will notice that the longer this exercise goes on, the more you will become attuned to the minutest changes in your partner's breathing, movements and gestures. Your eye contact will be very steady, and you will also become acutely aware of each other's bodily noises.

**Unconscious processes**

An awareness of unconscious processes can enrich your understanding of case dynamics. Transference and counter-transference are unconscious processes that can occur in any therapeutic encounter. Transference happens when something in the current relationship unconsciously triggers a resonance for the supervisee or client with a past relationship. They then respond to the present situation in the way that they would have responded to the past one. This past relationship can be with anyone at all and need not have any connection to any therapeutic encounter. Often it is in relation to a perceived authority figure. Sometimes the transference can express itself as an over-warm and loving response to the supervisor or therapist, and at other times it may be expressed as feelings of anger, hostility or resentment.

Counter-transference is the name given to unconscious feelings felt by the therapist or practitioner towards the client or patient. If the practitioner starts to behave in a way that is different with this client, compared to the others, it might be as a result of counter-transference. Any strong feeling that seems out of keeping with the situation might be triggered by counter-transference and would benefit from being examined in supervision.

**Case study**

Caroline had a patient who repeatedly turned up late for her appointments. She would come in and say, 'I'm sorry I am late. You aren't angry with me, are you?' Caroline always replied, 'No, it's fine. I understand that it is hard for you to get here on time.' After a time, Caroline decided to examine this more deeply in
order to understand what might be going on between her and the patient in this situation. The patient had a history in which she had found authority figures frightening. Caroline wondered whether unconsciously the patient was associating her with other frightening authority figures from the past who had told her off. Had the relationship been a therapeutic one rather than a homeopathic one, the therapist would have worked with the transference, helping the client understand the nature of it. In this example, Caroline chose to respond in an unchallenging way, remaining unattached and neutral. She was aware of how important it was for the client that her response should not mimic that of the authority figures in the past because this would be detrimental to her relationship with the client.

Here is another example of how the unconscious process of transference can influence the practitioner-patient relationship.

**CASE STUDY**
A practitioner contracted to come to Jane for regular supervision. One session he brought a case that he wanted to discuss. The patient had a deep pathology and wasn't getting better as fast as either of them would have liked. The practitioner was thinking of asking the patient to stay on for another few months to see if a better prescription could be found. He wanted advice about how to support the patient, if she chose to stay.

Jane asked more about the case, and discovered that the patient was negative and complaining, with a strong sense of the unfairness of life. Her friends and the people at her work didn't treat her as well as she thought they should. In some respects, she was demanding and egotistical. Jane asked more about the relationship between the practitioner and the patient, and the practitioner said, 'I feel helpless. She says that the symptoms are so bad and she is so unlucky that she doesn't expect results.' They began to see that the patient had low expectations of the practitioner, transferring her attitudes and experiences from all previous therapeutic relationships onto this present relationship.

Identifying the unconscious processes made it easier for the practitioner to decide upon an action plan. It would not be appropriate to discuss the transference itself with the client, because this was not a psychotherapeutic relationship. But having insight into the dynamic enabled the supervisee to feel more empowered and less helpless. Together with Jane, he formulated an action plan in the event of the patient's returning.

**The drama triangle**

Another dynamic that is played out in supervision is that of the drama triangle. This configuration was first discussed by Karpman (1968) in his ground-breaking article ‘Fairy tales and script drama analysis’ (pp.39–43).

The three roles suggested by Karpman are victim, persecutor and rescuer. In brief, victims act out a role of helplessness, complaining and dependency. Their theme tune is ‘it's not fair’, but they are not good at taking advice, and might, in transactional analysis terms, play out the ‘yes but’ game. Persecutors are people who are angry and aggressive and enjoy conflict. They have fixed ideas about right and wrong, and are quite selfish. Rescuers are patient, understanding, responsible, placating and avoid conflict. They put others first, sometimes feeling taken for granted or guilty because of their unrealistic expectations. These are all polarized positions. In any interaction people will move between positions although most people have a preferential position (see Figure 3.1).
We frequently see the drama triangle being played out in supervision groups. For example, a supervisee complains about a client, who appears to be pushing boundaries. The client does not come to appointments, or forgets to pay, or is unnecessarily aggressive, for example. In this scenario, the client is seen as a persecutor and the supervisee as the helpless victim. Then another group member steps in as rescuer, with a manner that is sympathetic and reassuring, completing the drama triangle. The rescuing intervention in a supervision group like this prevents the victim from learning from their experience. As facilitator, you have to be careful not to get drawn into a further re-enactment of the triangle. The supervisee might want to see you as another persecutor, or might try on the role of persecutor themselves to see what it feels like. It is useful to remain in the role of leveller.

Virginia Satir (1988) was a family therapist who developed the position of the leveller. She wrote about different modes of behaviour that she termed placator, blamer, computer, distractor and leveller. Of the leveller, she says in her book *The New Peoplemaking*:

> People who are levelling show an integration, a flowing, an aliveness, an openness and what I call a juiciness. Levelling makes it possible to live in a vibrant way, rather than a dead way. You trust these people and you know where you stand with them and you feel good in their presence. Their position is one of wholeness and free movement. (p.94)

In the role of leveller, you can be centred, honest and authentic, without assumptions or projections. You can be quietly assertive, without being aggressive, and you can be flexible. This is perhaps easier to do if you are the facilitator of a group, observing three other people playing out the drama triangle. If you are caught up in the dynamics of the triangle, your inner witness needs to be present, to notice what is happening. Then you can move over to become the leveller.

Creating a sacred space

One advantage of understanding non-verbal communication is that it can be used deliberately to create a good working environment for a consultation, supervision session or tutorial. By working environment, we mean the dynamic of the relationship or interpersonal process, and we suggest that it extends beyond the relationship of the people working together, forming a protective bubble around them. This can be seen in a workshop environment where students are asked to work in small groups. Some groups are self-conscious, glancing around the room or giggling. Other groups create an internalized focus that enables them to do deep and effective work without noticing the hum of other people in the room. They manage to re-create the ‘sacred space’ of the consulting room, where the client can feel truly heard.

A good working environment is created in several different ways. We always recommend that you start with a clear contract and have appropriate boundaries. The room in which you meet should be comfortable and suitable for confidentiality. You should be mentally and emotionally open and present.

Body language can be studied and used as a tool to enhance the working relationship. Your conscious use of gentle, non-aggressive body language, with appropriate eye contact, will build up trust and confidence in your supervisee, student or client. Your ability to read their non-verbal signals will enable you to make decisions about how best to communicate with them.

You should aim for a state of balance between genuine interest in the person in front of you, and awareness of your own inner state. The other person should feel supported, appreciated, respected and listened to, which in turn enables them to open up.

The minimum intervention

We have suggested that you should aim to be totally present and alert, listening to and observing the other person, aware of non-verbal communication and your own inner processes. But you don’t always need to do much; and sometimes the minimum intervention is more potent than a long discussion. This is not the same as being passive, or absent minded. It is not an aggressive silence either, challenging the supervisee to speak. It is a state of calm and gentle regard with a clear awareness of boundaries.

Using minimal intervention can take courage, because for many supervisors the natural impulse may be to respond in an active way, for example, to be prescriptive or informative. Sometimes supervisors
have agendas of their own and will want to ‘solve’ the problem following their own hypothesis. This will be frustrating for the supervisee and will not lead them to find their own insights. To create the space for the supervisee or group to learn, without controlling them through words, means doing less and trusting in outcomes. Sometimes non-verbal supervision arises spontaneously, as in the following case example.

**CASE STUDY**

Jane was privileged to observe a neat piece of non-verbal supervision while studying in a supervision workshop. She was working in a triad, and she had the role of observer. The storyteller was becoming quite long-winded about her client. Jane felt restless and wished the storyteller would get to the point. She began to feel critical of the supervisor in the triad, who appeared to be not managing the session very well. She turned her attention to him and began to observe him more closely. He had begun the session with his head on his hand in a listening pose, three fingers curled on the cheek, with the index finger open. Gradually he began to use the whole hand to support his head, and his head began to droop. Then his arm suddenly fell off the armrest of the chair, and his head collapsed completely.

The storyteller had been unobservant of her supervisor, because she was involved in her story. But the abruptness of his arm falling off the armrest, mimicking someone falling asleep, brought her to a halt. ‘Oh,’ she said, ‘I’m going on too long aren’t I? That is exactly what my patient was doing. I felt exhausted when I was working with her.’

As the three of them debriefed on what had happened, the supervisor apologized for being rude, but said he felt he wanted to follow his own intuition and react physically rather than use verbal interventions.

If you are running a group, your role as facilitator is to maintain boundaries of time, communication and relationship. If the group has been meeting regularly for some time, and everyone is familiar with the group contract and house rules, then you can be less active. Your interventions can become minimal, and even reduced to non-verbal signals to the group at times. Smiling, nodding and leaning forward can be enough to show the group that they are on track.

**CASE STUDY**

Caroline writes:

My group met in the beginning of January. They started with expressing their frustrations and anxieties around home life, work, and particularly the recent redundancies and redeployments in the department. Normally appreciations are shared. One group member shared his appreciation of the snow and the fact that the email had been down for a month. The group talked about the peace and quiet of the snow, and the family time over Christmas with food and cooking.

The group wanted to chat, and were not interested in the usual tasks of supervision. They wanted to digress and talk about gardens. From time to time I checked in to see if everyone was okay with this because one of the members of the group had said that she had an issue that she wanted to explore. But they all decided that they wanted to carry on. I let them.

I noticed how hard that was for me. I was torn between thinking this is not my task as facilitator, and being totally intrigued by what was emerging. Now they were talking about allotments and this led to dreams of what they could grow there. The talking was organic and the ideas evolved. Someone mentioned how during the snowy period she had shopped for her elderly neighbours. She was shocked that this had not happened for her own elderly parents who had been snowed in for days. There was talk of street parties and the idea of reconnecting with our environment. The theme of quality of life was emerging and the need for nourishment. The amalgamation of two departments and with a number of redundancies and redeployments had left most people feeling vulnerable and fragmented. Nourishment seemed to be a good place to start.

The idea was suddenly born of inviting everyone in the newly formed department to a pot luck lunch with home grown
or home-cooked produce. Someone volunteered to design the invitations. There was a sigh of relief as if tension had dropped away.

This session had a different feel to it from sessions where everyone was trying to solve the problems inherent in the amalgamation of two disparate departments. Here, through conversation, laughter and dreaming, the idea of community was emerging. Without any prompting, the group had gone from a complaint about the department to an organic brainstorming, through to an action plan. I hardly did any active supervision. I just joined in the talk about allotments.

In this case example, Caroline held the space for the group, checking in with them before allowing them to go off task; and she checked in with her own inner process as well. She created an atmosphere that enabled ‘conversation, laughter and dreaming’, and finally an action plan.

Increasing your awareness of non-verbal communication

Unconscious interpersonal communication takes place within many different sorts of relationships. It occurs through body language, eye contact, facial expression, nods or shakes of the head, repeated gestures, tone of voice and the choice of words used. If you can increase your awareness of these, you can start to use them within supervision, as well as in other relationships. We suggest that there will always be some part of non-verbal communication that remains unconscious. But you can train yourself to become alert to some of the messages that have been sent unconsciously to you, and choose whether and how you want to use them. Conversely, you can control some of the non-verbal messages that you are sending out to a client or supervisee, and consciously create the best possible environment for them.

Chapter Four

Using Toys and Bricks

We are surrounded in our everyday world with representational symbols. Take, for example, exclamation marks. As a road sign this signals danger to us, while in another context it would read as a part of speech. An apple might have the connotation of the computer company or the Big Apple of New York. Objects, icons and logos come to have multi-meanings that enrich our understanding of life around us. Some of the meanings are conscious and others unconscious. The advertising industry is masterly in the way in which it extends into the unconscious resonances when it chooses an image for its maximum impact. Just as symbolism is used in our environment, it can be used in supervision as a powerful tool to access unconscious meanings in our work.

In this chapter, we discuss the use of toy animals, figurines and bricks to help open up the unconscious understanding of supervisees and enable them to reflect further. It is a method of supervision that uses symbolic objects to represent people, their emotions and interactions. They are placed in a configuration, and re-assessed to find out what is being unconsciously expressed.

A more conventional mode of supervision might involve the verbal presentation of an issue followed by a discussion. Sometimes talking through the story with a supervisor is enough to find a deeper understanding. At other times, repeating the story can act as a smokescreen, preventing the supervisee from discovering anything further about the situation. It is in the nature of stories that they change with the retelling. Using symbolic personae to represent the protagonists in a story allows the supervisors to re-view the situation,