

Interview with Robin Shohet

Robin Shohet has been teaching supervision through the Centre for Supervision and Team Development for 30 years. He lives with his family at the Findhorn Foundation, a spiritual community in the North East of Scotland. He is the author of a number of JKP books, including the new *Supervision as Transformation: A Passion for Learning*.

Here, Robin shares some thoughts on the profound ways in which supervision can facilitate change that enriches individuals and organisations.

You are well known for your work on supervision - what attracted you to this area of work as a specialism? Who supervises you now, and how do you continue to grow through these experiences?

I mentioned in one of my previous books - *Passionate Supervision* - that my first experience of supervision was so good and helped me to keep growing that I wanted to pass it on. I am sure I would have burnt out without it, and I see people now very stressed and I would love them all to have good supervision. It was in a therapeutic community for people who had come out of psychiatric hospital and supervision was one of the cornerstones of our work. It was the mid 70's and the emphasis on supervision was quite unusual at the time and we developed a reputation in residential social work. When three of the core staff, myself, Peter Hawkins and Joan Wilmot left to go freelance we just continued with the work we had already been doing and developed it over the years.

I love doing the work. Someone once said: If it moves, Robin will supervise it. It suits my personality - slightly detached and yet as you have noticed also passionate about it - passionate about wanting to see people flourish at work and supervision can play a huge part in that.

As for the now, I am in a new peer group; the last one lasted seventeen years. I really like the idea of being accountable to peers and this formed the basis of my helping to set up something called the Independent Practitioners Network which is a form of peer group accreditation. I also get excellent supervision on the hoof from my partner - perhaps the most challenging supervision as she knows me so well - and I regularly do at least one CPD event a year. As I write this, I am also doing a mythodrama workshop with one of the contributors, Richard Olivier which is really stretching. I will put in a plug for him here. He takes you on a journey using Shakespeare as a starting point.

Can you talk a little bit about your development as an author, and how this new book sits in relation to your others?

In terms of my work, my big breakthrough came when I was asked to co-write a book on supervision by the late Brian Wade of Changes Bookshop. He dropped out and so I asked Peter [Hawkins] to do it with me. We had no idea the book would do so well. We just wrote up what we had been doing and we were very lucky with the timing because it was one of the first books of its kind.

How I came to do my latest book, Supervision as Transformation is an interesting story. It started with a group of homeopathic doctors/veterinarians I was supervising. Their training, which at the time was pioneering, was losing out to competition and I suddenly blurted out: You need to write a book about what you do! The result was a book called Passionate Medicine, which I edited. The format gave me the idea for my next book, Passionate Supervision, and that was such a delight to do that I wanted to do another. Hence Supervision as Transformation: A Passion for Learning - I wanted to keep the word 'passion' in.

In the new book, I have tried to broaden the scope of the contributors to include more of an organisational aspect - how supervision has been introduced into the organisations that the contributors are part of. I think the first book had a more individual flavour.

Can you talk about the wonderful contributors to your book - how did you come to choose them for this project?

They were all people I knew personally whose work I respected. I could have had enough material for a third book, but the ones I chose were from a variety of professions. Michael Carroll (author of "Chapter 1: Supervision - A Journey of Life-Long Learning") is well known in the supervision and coaching field - we started about the same time and he writes well so I was delighted to have him. The second chapter ("It's at the Heart of our Practice at the Family Nurse Partnership.") is by Ann Rowe who was a pioneer in something called the Family Nurse Partnership, which supports pregnant teenage mothers during their pregnancies and the first two years of the baby's life. Brilliant work and they put supervision at the heart of their work. And I could go on and describe each chapter. I loved getting all the authors together and their reading each others' work which I think adds some cohesion to the book.

In his chapter, Michael Carroll lists 11 insights about the learning journey in supervision, one of which is the importance of flexibility to learning styles on the part of the supervisor. Can you talk about this from your own experience?

I liked what Michael wrote very much - it spoke to me as I have enormous problems learning. My learning style is having to trust and feel in relationship with the person teaching me - it is as if I am absorbing their energy. I remember having to change skiing classes because I could not learn from the head coach. He was considered to be a better teacher, but I went with someone else because I could feel a relationship. My stepson on the other hand does not care about the relationship, but wants someone who knows their stuff and puts it across clearly. So flexibility is key. Michael explains the whole question of learning very succinctly and it is central to the book.

What do supervisors struggle with the most in facilitating change for themselves or their supervisees, and how can this latest book help them?

There is a whole chapter in Supervision as Transformation on resistance ("Chapter 9: Resistance is a Natural Path - An Alternative Perspective on Transformation"), written by Christina Breene. I know we have all experienced obstacles in ourselves when we want to change and this chapter takes a very compassionate view on understanding these obstacles. I believe that something can only be changed when it has been fully embraced first and then it seems to drop away. Trying to change by will does not work and is a kind of violence because it is imposed, even if it is ourselves that is imposing it. So in order to facilitate change, we need to listen and accept first.

In the final chapter of the book, you reflect that the process has enabled you to 'hear yourself think'. Do you think that the process of 'putting into words' is essential to growth as a human being?

Now that is a huge question. I do think having the space to think clearly is very important, and supervision can play a vital role in that. But I am not sure what is essential to growth as a human being. Good early attachment perhaps, and a deep sense of spirituality, which I touch on in the book.

You are part of the Findhorn community. What originally took you there? What affect has the spiritual community had on your work in supervision, or vice versa?

Another huge question. It seemed like a complete accident. I wanted to do a writing week there but I had to do this thing called an Experience Week first. I did it with very bad grace, hated virtually every moment of it, thought the leaders were second rate and half an hour before leaving out of the blue I had a 'road to Damascus' experience of unconditional love. It has never happened since by the way. When I suggested moving, the family were quite shocked ('After all you have been saying!', they said) but were also receptive and so we gradually moved up and are all very glad.

Through Findhorn I have met some wonderful teachers and speakers who have had a big impact on much of my life, but not specifically supervision. Joan Wilmot and I were very instrumental in introducing supervision to Findhorn which makes it unusual in spiritual communities, so perhaps we have influenced the supervision the community does rather than vice versa.

Finally, 'passion' is a word that recurs frequently in your work, and 'creativity' is another. Would you like to say something about why these words mean so much to you?

Well. as I mentioned above I so want to see people flourish at work in the same way as I did through supervision, that is why I still love giving it, receiving it, teaching it, lecturing on it. For the same reason I like going into staff teams and working with their conflicts and helping to resolve them. I trace this to so wanting my parents to get on and needing to create happy families - a creative use of a not so functional family of origin.