

AN INTERVIEW WITH GAIE HOUSTON – ON SUPERVISION

Gaie Houston has worked for over 20 years with small groups in industry, education and the Health Service and in very many small groups of unlabelled human beings. As well as writing drama for radio and the theatre, she has presented three television series on human behaviour and written books including: *The Red Book of Gestalt*, *The Red Book of Groups*, and, *The Red Book of Counselling and Supervision*. All the books are available from Gaie Houston, 8 Rochester Terrace, London NW1 9JN, UK or via her website at www.gaiehouston.co.uk

'The Red Book of Groups' is a reflective piece designed to help people notice how they can change their present style if it doesn't suit them or them and the group. One of the hallmarks of Gaie's style is informality and humour. Here is a quote:

"The wonder-child leadership style. If you have reasonable goodwill, want to be liked, and have had no training in working with groups, you have possibly tried out this style, without quite meaning to. One sign of having done so is to find after the end of a session that you have a splitting headache and a tendency to kick doors and scream".

Gaie also does a nice line in pin-figures, e.g. "The Idle Jack leadership style"



(see also the cartoon at the end of the article).

Gaie's work is of supreme relevance to language teacher trainers who often find themselves running small groups of different kinds, whether in-service training meetings, sessions on teacher training courses, feedback groups or local workshops in other people's towns. I highly recommend *The Red Book of Groups* to anyone wanting to consider their leadership style and to notice more about the groups they are in.

When we met, Gaie and I spoke mostly about the issue of supervision.

TW The use of the words 'supervisor' or 'supervision' in teacher training tends to conjure up images of teacher trainers, tutors or inspectors observing teachers at work and then talking to them about it afterwards. There is an almost inevitable touch of hierarchy and authority to the words. 'Supervision' is used in very different senses however in other fields. Can you tell me what the word means to you?

GH Well, I asked someone once what supervision meant to them. They said, "It means having really super vision, a really clear vision of what I'm doing". That immediately broke the hierarchical overtone that there is to that word. To me, supervision means having a time and a place to simply talk over and through some of what you're doing at work, in

confidentiality with someone who is well-informed. The whole point of supervision is to enhance how you do your work and how you enjoy your work.

TW What is the role of the supervisor?

GH The supervisor provides one form of help simply by being there and by bothering to listen. As a supervisee, if I see that you are listening to me, the chances are much greater that I will listen to myself and will give value to what I seem to be saying.

TW Can a peer be a supervisor?

GH Oh yes, it may well be a peer. As long as there is confidentiality.

TW What are the benefits of supervision do you think?

GH It's cathartic, in that you can gripe a bit about what is really irritating you – it might be about colleagues, or about the organisation or about people you have been working with. It is really a way of giving perspective. You disentangle you from the other person. You reflect. At best you learn to do your best, and you become wiser.

TW Do you see supervisors as rather special beings?

GH No. Supervision is a very accessible way of operating. The skills of confidentiality, good listening, providing space and eliciting are there in good teachers anyway.

TW What sort of language can be used for eliciting?

GH Well, there are some questions that are better than others. You could say, "What would you do differently next time?" or "Let's invent a different response to what you just described". With language like this, you're giving the person being supervised an extension of what she does already.

TW What sort of language would you consider un-useful in a supervisor?

GH Responses such as "Well, I wouldn't allow that in my class", or "Have you tried.....?" set up a kind of hierarchy in the supervision. The sub-text is that the supervisor thinks she is better or knows more than the supervisee. Responses like "Oh you always get one or two like that", are unhelpful generalizations. They don't help people to play with possibilities. They rate around zilch for usefulness. Responses such as "Why don't you.....?" are advice-giving when advice has not necessarily been asked for.

TW Is giving advice wrong?

GH The analogies with teaching here are very strong. So often what you elicit from the other has far more relevance and force for the supervisee than does the instant packaged meal that you could dish out to them. As I said before, the assumption is that, having heard herself speaking, the supervisee will begin to make her own solutions or at least to see clearly where there are gaps. It would be nutty to say never give advice. There are times when the supervisor has had an experience and can say what she did and what happened next. This is sharing information and resources. But the primary function is to mobilize what Patrick Casement calls the "internal supervisor" (see ref). This is the ability we all have to observe and critique ourselves. In reality most people are partly in the moment and partly standing back to see if what they are doing works. This flicking back and forth needs to be a little more formalized in supervision.

TW That's very interesting.

GH Getting more ability to move into this descriptive mode, having a look at what's happening, can be a way of moving past performance-related fears (How am I doing? What should I do

next?) and on to thinking more about the group as a system. (How can we account for this? What choices do I have here?)

TW We seem to have reached another main function of supervision, to move trainers off themselves.

GH Yes and to help them to have a larger repertoire of responses and to allow themselves to try them out.

TW How can people set up a supervisory relationship?

GH There are a stack of ways. If you don't have a group or can't get to an outside "Olympus", then probably meeting in geographical pairs once or twice a month is easiest. Then, say, once a month also meet in a whole group of about 5 pairs. When the whole group meets, it is to work out the next pairings, to experiment with new techniques such as role play for supervision and also too, very importantly, to enjoy the peer group. Working in isolation is a kind of spiritual starvation.

TW Is there anything the pairs should negotiate when they start meeting each other for supervision?

GH Yes, they can negotiate division of time, place, useful language, how truthful and direct they want to be and so on. The idea from Masters and Johnson of "Assert and Protect" is a useful one too!

TW How does that work?

GH Well, basically the speaker or supervisee does what she wants to and the listener or supervisor can object if she wants to. The objection will be taken note of. It won't be flouted. So, if I as a supervisor decide to talk for ages about how I had trouble getting a bus to Harrods and if you think it's really boring for you, then you object. You have to protect yourself from boredom or whatever. Supervision is not a dutiful horror. At best it is a clearing and life-enhancing meeting.

TW Can supervision be rather deep and perhaps burdensome? Is it like therapy or counseling sometimes?

GH Well, in counseling and therapy the self, the I, is clearly in the centre. In supervision the talk is about work. Now of course the self enters but it is more a question of 'How am I making out in the group system?' There is a clear distinction between supervision and therapy. If, however, as a result of supervision, I discover that I'm always in tears after half an hour and that maybe it isn't due to a series of peculiar people I've been working with.....Maybe then I need to do some counseling so that I can get into a more comfortable relationship with myself. But, it's not appropriate to do a lot of counseling in the middle of a supervision. Two tasks, two roles, at best two different people.

TW Gaie, thank you very much indeed.

Reference

Casement, P. (1989) On learning from the patient. Routledge

