Helmut Willke

Supervision in the knowledge society

The role of Professional Associations for Supervision as actors in civil society
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Defining a new role for supervision

Supervision can be defined as an activity which enables actors to recognize blind spots, hidden meanings and latent options within a complex interactional setting by being exposed to additional perspectives and options. Mostly, supervision is related to professional activities such as education, teaching, therapy, social work, consulting or management, and it is of particular relevance to professionals as an opportunity to reflect on their communication and operational strategies. It is important to note that, in this sense, supervision is not just a reflexivity mechanism – i.e. teaching to teach or managing management or consulting consultants. Instead its goal is to add additional perspectives and dimensions to a given interactional setting by way of instigating reflection in order to expand its range of options and its range of observing (Willke 1997: ch. 1.2).

Traditionally, the focus of supervision is on individuals who seek support in improving their professional efficacy. However, the better we understand the formative role of systemic contexts for patterns and processes of interaction, the more supervision should count as an important approach (including concepts, methods and instruments) to scrutinizing and improving the functioning of entire systems, be it teams, groups, organizations or indeed societies.

The formative role of systemic contexts for shaping interaction is not an entirely new idea. Many disciplines have contributed to the understanding that collective superstructures, like culture, rituals, value systems, rules and patterns of communication, organizational structures etc., strongly influence actual behavior and interaction (Stacey 2000). Two disciplines, in particular, have paved the way for a more adequate understanding of the intricate interplay of local (individual) interaction and the emergence of systemic properties. On the one hand, this is systemic family therapy, which early on has constructed a view of the family as a system of its own and in its own right being superimposed on the actual communications/interactions of the members of a family (Haley 1988; Liddle, Breunlin and Schwartz 1988). On the other hand, organization development has become a discipline in its own right, in addition to human resource management (HRM), because it has become obvious that profound transformations of organizations and serious change management need both, the people side of change and the system side (collectivity) (Senge 1990; Willke 2005).

Supervision as a specialized discipline for support and development has yet to find and define its position in relation to complex systems going
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The German Professional Association for Supervision (DGSv) commissioned a study on work and life in contemporary organizations (Haubl and Voß 2011) in 2008, and the researchers have repeated this study in 2011. It is a move forward from the traditional concerns of the association to extending its activities to the sphere of pressing societal problem areas. Equally important, it is a move forward to involving the association itself as a "collective actor" in defining and extending the field of supervision. This implies firm determination to envision the association as an actor in civil society. Mostly, professional associations are simply regarded as aggregations of individuals given the task to further the goals and the standing of their members and the particular profession. This turns out to be a very limited view of the possibilities and capabilities of a collective actor.

An association as an organized social system can be understood as an entity of its own in a specific sense: it incorporates and documents in its history, culture, business processes and rule systems aspects of the collective experience and learning of its members. The organization as organization is in a position to accumulate and develop "organizational intelligence" (Nonaka and Takeuchi 1995; Quinn 1992), learning capabilities (Argyris and Schön 1978; Argyris and Schön 1996) and "systemic properties" (Senge 1990) which transcend the disaggregated expertise of its members.

Surprising as this argument may appear at first sight, it becomes less offending when we think of the effects of the "culture" of old, traditional organizations, i.e. churches, universities, school systems, political parties, corporations etc. Such organizations have accumulated experience across people, time and location and thus are able to generalize expertise and, in an evolutionary (historical) process, incorporate any relevant expertise in their structures, operational procedures and rule systems. Obviously, the degree of "institutionalization" varies depending on the types of organizations/associations, but as soon as there is a formal organization, the organization as such is beginning a life of its own. Interestingly, this becomes quite obvious regarding the negative aspects of organizational life as described in series of critiques of the power and obstinacy of organizations. The point here is that there also are important positive sides to organizational life – and these should be acknowledged and put to use.

Within an emergent knowledge society professional organizations have at their disposal a most precious resource – expertise. Apart from being a resource, such expertise also implies an obligation to contribute, within the organization's particular capacities, to the welfare of society. As actors within civil society, professional associations for supervision must take seriously their social responsibility as representatives of a kind of specialized expertise which may prove valuable for solving vexing societal confrontations or impasses. In this sense a plethora of foundations, NGOs, think tanks, research institutions, associations etc., contribute to collecting, organizing and putting to use their specialized expertise in a given societal context. To some degree they complement and counterbalance the influence of traditional lobbying, but, more importantly, they are beginning to establish a new regime of decentralized and distributed expertise, which is then available for coping with all kinds of societal problems and dangers to public goods. In this sense private organizations may become relevant actors in civil society.

Supervision is the activity of accommodating different views, of moderating, coordinating and integrating divergent perspectives and
opposing interests, and of reflecting professional practices. Over and above the individual experience and expertise of its members, the association itself cumulates the collective experiences and expertise of its varied members, thus forming and retaining a body of generalized and accepted principles of supervision. Supervision appears to offer something that is of increasing importance to complex and heterogeneous societies. Modern societies come in many flavors but they are all differentiated into highly specialized and complex components which follow different logic paths, different interests and different trajectories, thus creating serious incompatibilities, ruptures and discontinuities. Therefore, competencies in “translating” and moderating between divergent views and conflicting interests are in high demand. Certainly many disciplines – from coaching to consulting – may contribute to these efforts, but it should be equally unequivocal, then, that supervision offers adequate competence in this respect.

If professional associations for supervision as actors of civil society are to have an impact on relevant political issues, then three steps of analysis are in order. First, the most pertinent deficiencies in processes of political decision-making must be stated clearly in order to identify the need for additional resources caused by certain actors in civil society. Secondly, the specific expertise of a professional association for supervision as a collective actor needs to be formulated as an offer to contribute to societal problem-solving. Finally, a process of matching the competencies of professional associations for supervision as civil society actors with perceived needs of society should make these associations focus on a few selected areas of civil society activities which look promising in terms of “societal supervision”.

Building a resilient society
In view of the volatilities and complexities of modern societies the most important overall quality of a society is probably its capacity to cope with ubiquitous conflicts and crises. We will call this capacity its “resilience”. The global financial and economic crisis, the crisis of the health system, the energy, environmental and many other crises have sufficiently demonstrated that the capacities of the political system to deal with these challenges are limited indeed. Therefore, all efforts to improve the resilience of modern societies should be welcome, which is why we want to show that professional associations for supervision are in a position to contribute to this endeavor.

> Strategic resilience is not about responding to a one-time crisis. It’s not about rebounding from a setback. It’s about continuously anticipating and adjusting to deep secular trends. It’s about having the capacity to change before the case for change becomes desperately obvious.” (Hamel and Välikangas 2003: 53f.)

In this sense the quest for extended models of transformation and system change is connected with a different approach of coping with uncertainty. Uncertainty, derived from complexity and non-knowledge, is presumably the most important and influential factor for societal decision-making. The term “governance” is used in this context as a comprehensive term for describing the problems of management, guidance, adaptation, transformation, and strategic alignment of the actors and institutions within a given society. The governance mode of a system describes its set of principles, concepts, methods and instruments by which the system is coordinated and/or coordinates itself. The expansion from “government” to “governance” means that actors from civil society now become part of the policy process and in this sense actively contribute to political decision-making.

Although the future in general and future challenges to governance in particular remain uncertain, stakeholders and institutions have choices about how to prepare for the unexpected. Fostering resilience means leaving the comfort zone of incremental adaptation and incipient crisis management. In fact, resilience calls for a more strategic inspiration to build governance regimes that go beyond the mere correction of malfunctions and mistakes: “The quest for resilience can’t start with an inventory of best practices. Today’s best practices are manifestly inadequate. Instead, it must begin with an aspiration: zero trauma” (Hamel and Välikangas 2003: 54).

The traumas of system failure and political mismanagement have been many, and they include bitter historical experience of misconceptions and misreading of signals. Still, thinking about governance and advanced modes of adaptability should not be traumatic but should instead be inspired by the successes of new forms of governance. Even if political governance today seems manifestly inadequate for many areas at issue, it contains all the elements that are necessary to rebuild/recover resilience as a mode of governing highly sophisticated and complex systems in the context of a global knowledge society. Achieving resilience then translates into broadening the base of governance and providing the governance of complex societies with mechanisms for fast learning and strategic reconciliation of diverse and centrifugal dynamics. In this endeavor, supervision can make a relevant and important contribution. Aspiring to resilience starts with the
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indicate an undercurrent of discon­
course by chance. These concepts
the supervision and governance dis­
stability, high­reliability systems or
decision­making strategy” (LaPorte
aptation to “a proactive, preventive
"third options" which might over­
flicting actors in order to develop
interdependent and competing/con­
aims at opening up the options of
sion may take effect. Supervision
at this point that the role of supervi­
dynamics (Ashby 1958). It is exactly
external demands and external
sense, i.e. in the sense of provid­
societies “ultra­stable” in Ashby’s
leveled” (Hamel and Välikan­
turnaround is transformation tragi­
systemic intelligence appears to be
society needs additional support or
or more specifically, an overall upgrad­ing
of its infrastructures, compo­
nents and operating principles.

A second level of systemic intel­
lgence aims at high reliability and
high trust qualities of collective de­
cision­making in conditions of turbu­
ent change. It implies second order
learning capabilities and strategic
intent supported by instruments of
collective intelligence, evaluation of
performance and other standard op­
erating procedures. This kind of sys­

tic intelligence means monitoring
external challenges and opportuni­
ties on the one hand and providing
strategic options and operational ex­
cellence on the other. Admittedly, it
still seems a bit preposterous to im­
pose the discipline of supervision on
something as intricate/ challenging
as system governance. However, in
times of serious crises from local to
global level the idea of offering the
capacities of supervision in relation
to perceived challenges on all levels
(from individual to organizations to
societies) may not be too farfetched
after all. If the impacts of supervi­sion
helped to succeed in making
political governance more reliable
and more resilient, the effort would
seem particularly worthwhile: “Reli­
able systems are smart systems”
(Weick and Roberts 1993).

Collective intelligence of
Professional Associations for
Supervision

Intelligence is defined as the ability
of a system to cope with the chal­
 lenges posed by its environment.
Intelligence includes the system’s
competencies to adapt, to learn
and to build resilience in relation to
the sum of noxiousness and opportu­
nities or risks and chances presented
by its environment. In higher order
social systems a specific knowl edge
base is provided by the idiosyncratic
experience of the system supple­
ments and eventually dominates the
basic biological intelligence (survival
intelligence). It would be more ap­
propriate, therefore, to speak of col­

tive expertise instead of collective
intelligence. Both terms are used
here as equivalents.
The core of collective intel­
gence is the empirically observable
fact that the same people act and
cooperate differently in different
social contexts. LaPorte and Con­
solini have described one amazing
e xample:

"Extensive field observations on
board both aircraft carriers and
within air­traffic control centers
found an unexpected degree of
structural complexity and highly
contingent, layered authority pat­
terns that were hazard­related.
Peak demands or high­tempo
activities became a solvent of
bureaucratic forms and pro­
cesses. The same participants
who shortly before acted out
the routine, bureaucratic mode
switched to a second layer or
mode of organizational behavior.
And, just below the surface, was
yet another, preprogrammed
emergency mode waiting to be
activated by the same company
of members. There appear to
be richly variegated overlays of
structural complexity comprised
of three organizational modes
available on call to the members of hazard-related units. Authority structures shifted among (a) routine or bureaucratic, (b) high-tempo, and (c) emergency modes as a function of the imminence of overload and breakdown. Each mode has a distinctive pattern, with characteristic practices, communication pathways, and leadership perspectives” (LaPorte and Consolini 1991: 31).

In quite different situations similar experiences are described as “flow” permeating high-performing teams on a run or entranced jazz combos or classical quartets when the common cause transcends the individual contribution. The point always is to combine the capacities and expertise of a team, a group, a network or an association in such a way that the system becomes more than the sum of its parts. This additional quality is worthy of pursuit because it enhances the resilience of the system and thus strengthens its capacity to overcome trauma, crisis, and adversity.

There is no doubt that political systems of all kinds are in dire need of collective intelligence in order to achieve a higher level of resilience. Therefore, the practical question is how to improve the concepts, instruments and strategies of political decision-making in highly complex societies. One promising way to do this is for the political system to take advantage of the competencies and expertise of civil society organizations – and for these organizations to actively offer their contributions to politics.

The German Association for Supervision, for example, has almost four thousand members which cover all fields and varieties of supervision. The association itself monitors the activities of its members by way of communication, conferences, professional exchanges, conflict resolution, and in many other ways. It also documents, in its day-to-day operations, procedures and standard business processes, as well as, in the evolution of its rule systems, some of the collective experiences of its members. Consequently, there is a basis for an emergent “common view” of the possibilities, offerings and strengths of the concepts and practices of supervision. Whereas the individual members have the advantage of their highly specific situations, experiences and expertise, the association has the advantage of a generalized idea and an overarching concept of supervision built on the combined efforts of its members.

**Resilience through supervision**

Supervision and accommodation become all the more important as the division of labor intensifies, as supply chains and production chains become fragmented and global, and as innovation is happening in “hybrid environments” where different disciplines, different technologies, and different perspectives are brought together in order to create something new. One primary goal of systemic supervision, therefore, would be to support and enable cooperation in the face of heterogeneous or even conflicting interests.

The obvious need for supervision, however, does not mean that the actual implementation of cooperation/accommodation is trivial or largely successful. Quite often, the actors disregard that sustainable cooperation needs a framework or a frame of reference which defines the terms of cooperation. The principles of supervision may provide this framework. Supervision establishes a communicative order within a distributed network or social system – and thus prepares the ground for successful cooperation.

Cooperation comes easy when both parties (or all parties involved) understand their mutual advantage. Cooperation becomes much more difficult when the distribution of advantages and costs is unclear or when benefits are delayed while costs are immediate. In a classic study on the evolution of cooperation, Robert Axelrod found three major factors which support and sustain cooperation even under difficult conditions (Axelrod 1984). These factors are (1) the shadow of the future (meaning: the relevance of the future for the actors involved); (2) the possibility of a positive-sum game; and (3) cooperation as a learning process.

We will not go into details but instead focus on the third factor – cooperation as a learning process – which is becoming increasingly crucial as the traditional industrial society is in its first steps toward transforming into a knowledge society. The preconditions for cooperation are manifold and include mediation, moderation, coaching, consulting, conflict resolution and compromise in various combinations. Supervision is understood here as an overarching concept which serves to prepare the ground for cooperation (in its many flavors) between interdependent and competing/conflicting actors within a complex policy field. This means that in many crucially important and contested policy fields an input and influx of supervision and supervisory competencies might help to disentangle complex conflict constellations and prompt options of cooperation.

Early on, Gregory Bateson has distinguished three levels of learning and, without going into details, we should focus, for a moment, on the third level of reflective learning. Gregory Bateson assumes that learning III, that is reflection, happens only rarely even at the level of persons. “But it is claimed that something
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of the sort does from time to time occur in psychotherapy, religious conversion, and in other sequences in which there is profound reorganization of character” (Bateson 1972: 301). This formulation has the charm of old-European serenity. Today, “profound reorganization of character” is commonplace in persons and organizations. The entire former Second World of socialist states is engaged in an ongoing process of reconstructing their societal and national identities in a profound reorganization of character. Even in the First World, particularly in Europe, the ongoing overall restructuring of the welfare state aims at reinventing societal identities. It presupposes nothing less than a profound reconfiguration of the mode of operations of modern western societies. It is an interesting question, worthy of further analysis, why Bateson’s “profound reorganization of character” has changed, within a comparatively short period of time, from a rare exception to the rule of self-transformation of complex dynamic social systems.

The surprising normality of processes of self-transformation seems to be one of the consequences of the fact that social systems, particularly complex organizations, have generated powerful ways of intervening and influencing not only each other but also themselves. To a considerable degree these strategies derive from new opportunities and constraints of cooperation/moderation between systems which, at the same time, compete fiercely in a global market. This coincidence of opposing demands calls for highly developed reflexive competencies in shaping one’s own identity in response to equally developed strategies of learning. The pressures of these changes on individuals, particularly on professionals, are enormous, and they are producing considerable risks to physical and mental health, to proficiency and general wellbeing. Again, competencies in supervision might help to diagnose and treat instances of overload, burn-out, excessive stress and other factors which, to a great extent, impede the optimal functioning of persons, organizations and entire societies (Volk 2011).

Learning presupposes the ability to reconstruct information and knowledge from “foreign” data within a different frame of reference or within a different context of criteria of relevancy. Learning implies transferring implicit knowledge in processes of socialization (Nonaka 1994: 20) within a “community of practice” but, of course, the hard part is to establish that community. Professional associations for supervision are established communities of practice. Therefore their specialized competencies can be used in coping with societal problems and crucial policy arenas.

A serious decision of an organization or a policy arena to submit to supervision marks an important step in setting the stage for learning. It means to accept partners as autonomous and, as a basic principle, equal, and it means to send signals that you are prepared to respect the partners’ identities and the appropriate mode of operation selected by them. Unsurprisingly then, supervisory modes and settings depend on mutual trust, which must be built up patiently and painstakingly. Trust functions as a general medium to reduce differences. It enables actors and systems to operate and proceed in spite of missing information on general assumptions of compatibility. Trust thus creates a realm of virtual commonality and community.

Supervision based on trust turns out to be one of very few serious strategies to instigate organizational learning. Trust based on processes of supervision is reflexive in that each partner needs to imagine the situation of the other one, building an internal model of the partner’s operational logic, and to imagine itself in the eyes of the partner in order to understand what it looks like to its partner. In realizing these differences step by step it becomes apparent that trust is needed to overcome them and to start operating as if these differences did not make any difference in relation to the common project. Supervision is reflexive also in that it needs the projection of a common future in order to work, and in order to give trust the space to unfold. Cooperation based on supervision requires the ability to imagine future events that make a difference to present operations.

In a very simplified form, we might say that successful processes of supervision lead to mutually beneficial learning and a sharing of knowledge resources. Collective learning leads to collective intelligence, in particular an intelligence of networks and fragmented supply and production networks. In turn, collective intelligence enhances a system’s resilience. One of the goals of professional associations for supervision, therefore, can be to offer its collective expertise as a resource to improve the collective intelligence of our present modern societies.

Literature


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