



We live in a political world  
In the cities of lonesome fear  
Little by little  
You turn in the middle

Bob Dylan

# A wild, bouncing ball

## Supervision attitude in a complex world

■ Dr. Jean-Paul Munsch

Supervision as a reflecting process is in itself a contradiction to some ongoing political processes in a disruptive society. What could be the function of supervision in a world where everything can be said derogatorily, where a demanding and aggressive underdog attitude is regarded as common sense and where the ego perspective is paramount? This article outlines three steps to act upon: steps that take personal boundaries and capacities into account without denying political and social distortions.

In one of my supervision groups sits Karen. Recently she opened up with a bodily perception, sharing it with the others in the round. She said: "I can feel a ball in my body. It is a wild, bouncing ball in my stomach." Karen works as a teacher in a daytime institution. I asked her

to describe the ball. She did so very clearly. Then I asked her: "What does this ball represent?" Karen said: "The future of this institution." And she began to tell the story of parents who send their children there. Children who behave like their parents (of course): rude, attacking others, viewing everything from an ego perspective, not taking into account the existence of another human being as other human being.

We know that police officers, people working in administration and social services, physicians, and teachers are particularly affected by hate speech, unrealistic expectations, and personal attacks. Supervisors and coaches are confronted with difficult cases arising from inappropriate behavior on the part of barking clients and increasing pressure on costs. What kind of advice can be given in

such complex situations where aggression, political helplessness, and tight financial corsets are more and more common for professionals in many sectors?

The approach proposed here is reflected in Karen's supervision case and developed in the following three steps:

1. Accept reality
2. Acknowledge capacities
3. Act upon the two above

The first step culminates in one of my favorite sentences, pronounced by Karen when she begins to explain her work conditions which are marked by a lack of professional staff in her team, the absence of an overarching strategy of the institution, and cramped premises. It goes like this: "That's shit — and so it is."

This has by no means to be understood as being cynical or ironic. Rather, spoken from the heart and with compassion, this acceptance of reality has a huge impact in the learning process. Accepting reality as it is (tough as it may be and as it was in her case) brought Karen away from pondering on how the world should be and what others should do and what doesn't work. It is the first and foremost step towards change.

She then describes how the energy of the ball increases in discussions with other people about her place of work. In these discussions, the members of her team enter into a problem trance, which gives the "problem ball" more energy and power. Karen realizes that this way of acting isn't helpful. She says: "I don't want to pass this energy on to another person."

Of course, there are other things that can be done. They all don't achieve the desired leverage, and not in the desired period of time, but these are things that can be done: voting for political parties that support the educational system and the development of children; supporting

associations that defend the work conditions of teachers and other people working in education; taking action to propose a strategic plan to the management of Karen's daytime institution; engaging in project groups, etc. Of course, time and energy are limited and one must decide where to invest one's energy and where there is realistic hope for successful change. And again: change often doesn't happen in the short run but it also has to come from within and bottom-up.

These approaches and ways of acting demand, after all, flexibility and calmness. And as the session goes on, I can fully appreciate Karen's sensibility; her way of having a clear-cut bodily sensation of what is going wrong in her place of work; her perception of the nervous atmosphere in her team and in the whole organization, and maybe even beyond. My acknowledgement and also calling her perception a gift calmed her down: her voice changed, her body relaxed visibly, and she breathed more deeply. Calmness entered her.

This ongoing process of finding inner peace helps to develop the capacity for flexibility. The more we accept realities surrounding and affecting us, the easier it becomes to develop flexibility towards these realities and the more we become able to act from an inner freedom upon what is going on.

Karen wants to use this capacity to bring the institution forward. Others, including members of her team, spontaneously offer their assistance in supporting a strategic initiative. "If I fail and look for another job in another institution," she says. Love it, change, or leave it. And they all love their job! That's what all in the group say repeatedly. I believe them and it is what studies show as well: teachers and other professionals in social and helping systems love to work. At the same time, burnout rates increase more and more. And not everyone is free to leave.

So, living in a political world means to break up lonesome fear in a safe supervision setting. That doesn't sound as poetic as Bob Dylan describes the condition humaine of our time in his song Political World. But it means acknowledging the competences and capacities of every human being. In this brief case, by acknowledging Karen's sensibility and by using the wild, bouncing ball as a precious indicator for what is going on (and wrong). It means, little by little, turning furious anger, resignative narrowness and helplessness into connected acceptance in which flexibility, calmness, and a distinct NO at the right moment and in the right place can grow and establish themselves. ■

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## Biography

Dr. Jean-Paul Munsch is a lecturer and consultant for school and organizational development at the University of Applied Sciences and Arts, Northwestern Switzerland School of Education. After completing his education as a secondary teacher Jean-Paul Munsch studied philosophy and history in Zurich and Amsterdam. Several years of work as a teacher, headmaster and lecturer at various universities. Further education in systemic coaching, clinical supervision, dialogue facilitating, family therapy and organizational consulting.

The main areas of work and research are leadership coaching, team supervision, development of personal relationship and leadership skills, organizational and conflict counselling, the development of organizational culture and dialogical skills. Publications on these topics: Selfmanagement, next stage evolution in groups and organisations.

Jean-Paul Munsch is born 1968 in Zurich, Switzerland. He lives with his wife in Zurich.

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