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Your perception of yourself as a practitioner in the marketplace may be very different from how others see you



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A little book that made a big impression on me when I was a novice counsellor back in the 1990s was Gaie Houston's *Supervision and counselling*.¹ Looking through it again recently, a single sentence in her quirky chapter on ethics caught my attention: 'I only want to supervise people I would be prepared to recommend to clients'. It seems a straightforward statement, but it set my thoughts going in an unexpected direction. I found myself reflecting on an aspect of supervision we don't talk about very much, perhaps because it doesn't have a recognised name. I'd like to call it 'reputability'.

Professional reputations have some significance when we recommend a therapist to a client, and especially when we refer a client to a therapist. Although a 'recommendation' and a 'referral' are different things, it seems many of us use the words interchangeably, which is confusing. I want to clarify this usage because it's relevant to defining what it means to be reputable.

There are three kinds of recommendation I assume we're all familiar with: you give someone the name of a suitable therapist you know personally, or a therapist you don't know but who seems suitable from what you've heard about them, or a name given to you by a trusted colleague – your supervisor, for example – after you ask them to make a recommendation. In all three cases, you're looking for a good match between the potential client and the therapist. Through a client-centred lens, it's about suitability. Through a practitioner-centred lens, it's about reputability. What I mean by this will become clearer when we look more closely at what a referral is.

In conventional medical practice, a patient gets a written referral from their GP to see a specialist. The doctor's letter contains confidential information about them, and this is primarily what distinguishes a referral from a recommendation. In non-statutory practice, we're not required to write a formal letter, but we do engage in a process of 'introducing' the client to the practitioner we're referring them to. This careful introduction, which is often a kind of 'handing over' of the client, is, of course, done with the client's knowledge and consent. When a client is referred to you in that way, you probably wonder how and why you were chosen. You might start thinking about – or imagining things about – your professional reputation.

I'm sure most of us entertain some sort of fantasy about our individual reputations, since none of us can

know for certain how we're seen by everyone in our profession. No matter how skilfully you present your business and manage your 'brand' (if that's your thing), your perception of yourself as an independent practitioner in the marketplace may be very different from how others see you, both online and offline. And other people are not all going to have the same impression of you anyway, and some could change their opinion for better or worse over time, based on nothing more substantial than word of mouth. So, any sustained attempt to pin down your reputation would seem a futile exercise. However, I reckon we can take meaningful readings of what we're reputed to be by asking our colleagues directly. The first person to ask is your supervisor.

I'll get straight to the point here. If your supervisor has never recommended you to anyone nor referred anyone to you, I'd say you need to be told why. If you're a supervisor and you're working with a supervisee you wouldn't recommend or make referrals to, I'd say you need to be able to explain why. The reasons may be clear and simple, or awkward and complex, but they should be stated and discussed. The conversation could also usefully include the supervisee's thoughts and feelings about recommending or referring people to the supervisor. Not only does a collegially frank discussion like this help to reveal assumptions and dispel projections, but it also sharpens our awareness of how collaborative or competitive we are as practitioners.

Referring clients and recommending colleagues are vital indicators of competition and collaboration.² None of us can stand apart from this give-and-take with rivals in the professional marketplace – it's intrinsic to how all businesses thrive. What's it like for you to compete and collaborate with your peers? I think your attitude and behaviour in this respect are far more significant for reputation building than, for example, having a dozen letters after your name and several glowing testimonials on a swish website. In other words, your reputability in the eyes of your actual colleagues is what matters most, not what you imagine the public and potential clients might be making of you and your image.

Supervisory practice invites us to be transparent – to show ourselves as we are, not as we think we should be. In this sense, supervision allows you to 'lose' your reputation. If you're not ready and willing to see through it, you may never find out what it really is. ●

REFERENCES

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