Confession Box

Fostering meaningful conversations to learn from error

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Abstract
In this article it is explained how to support the process of learning from error in supervision and intervision. Based on a real-life experience of how a well-intended intervention leads to an unexpected outcome, the choices a supervisor can make to support this process are illustrated. These choices are influenced by one's perspective on errors and the ten error handling strategies. Herein, it is argued that merely identifying and correcting errors does not foster sustainable learning, for which the other strategies should be applied. Helpful questions to apply two of these strategies, analysing and discussing, are offered. Furthermore, the method of the Confession Box is explained as a vehicle to open up about errors and create the beginning of a learning journey. The reflective questions throughout the article invite the readers to become aware of their own perspective on errors in supervision.

Introduction
Learning form errors is something we all want to foster in supervision. However, despite all the best intentions, errors often feel like failure and not a great opportunity to improve. How to open up about mistakes in supervision and turn them into a learning experience is a challenge on its own.

In this article we explain how to support the process of learning from error by relating examples to the theory. Each theoretical part is followed by a reflective question. First, we give an (1) example of how a well-intended intervention leads to an unexpected outcome. Following, we describe our (2) perspective on errors. We proceed by describing (3) different error handling strategies and continue with (4) steps to turn errors into learning experiences. Next, we (5) illustrate the method of the Confession Box based on research of one of the authors. This method can be used in supervision and intervision to reflect and learn from errors. Consequently, we shift the focus to our (6) own intervision as supervisors. We conclude by (7) summarizing how you can create a safe and powerful learning environment.

1. An unexpected outcome
Case: Supervisees write a reflection report about last supervision, whereafter they give each other feedback or ask clarifying questions. In a supervision group the supervisor starts to invite the supervisees to give feedback on their reflections. By asking this question the supervisor aims to contribute to a positive start. The supervisor asks the supervisees: "Could you please give your reaction on the reflections of last supervision?". Usually, supervisees start with compliments about their work. However, what happens is that one of the supervisees starts to accuse one of the others that the reflection is not complete. The accused supervisee reacts very irritated. The supervisor is startled

In everyday conversation we often refer to error as both the action as well as the following consequence (Homsma et al. 2009). However, in learning it is valuable to make a distinction between the two.

Actions can be seen as the goal-oriented behaviour to reach an outcome. Following this definition, an error is the unintentional deviation of the desired goal or outcome. This applies to both avoidable errors and unavoidable errors originating from experimentation and/or conscious risk taking (Cannon & Edmonson, 2005). These types of errors can be divided into two categories. The first category concerns slips and lapses. When these types of errors occur the idea or plan is good, but the following action is not in line with the intended outcome. In case of a slip the action is incorrect (e-mail sent to the wrong person) and in the case of a lapse the action is forgotten (e-mail isn't send). The second category is called mistakes. Mistakes are plans which are not suitable for reaching the intended goal (Reason, 1990). This relates to our case: the intention is to start on a positive note but instead the question yields criticism and agitation.

The consequences of an error can be wide-ranging, since the deviation itself does not imply anything about the nature of the consequence (Homsma et al., 2009). As such, an error can have various small or serious and positive or negative consequences depending on the situation or system in which the error takes place (Van Dyck, 2000). One of the positive consequences of errors is learning (Frese & Keith, 2015).

2. Perspective on errors

When our actions don't have the effect we intend, it creates hassle in the process. Since we are skilled in problem-solving, we often try to stop this hassling. However, what we would like to accomplish in supervision is that people react, reflect, and create meaningful learning experiences. In this way an unintentional outcome can create new opportunities. This means we sometimes must endure discomfort. It also means that we must be able to take a step back, look at the situation from a meta perspective and create a secure base for cooperation.

In our case the supervisor could intervene with a problem-solving skill:
"Wait, in supervision we don't accuse each other, but we accept each other's mistakes because we want to learn from it. So, let's continue with the feedback in a more positive way".

Or a reflective question:
"Sorry, I think I made a mistake by asking this question. My intention was to start with a round of compliments to learn from each other. Instead, I notice agitation and I feel disturbed. Shall we explore our irritation?"

The supervisor admits the agitation could be a result of her own action. By sharing her inner world, she models to be completely open. This is important because now, supervisees can also be invited to actively experiment with self-disclosure (Aerts, 2019). Learning to compare their own opinions and assumptions about, in this case, mistakes with those of others, helps to develop a multi-perspective view. Thus the learning process can continue by reflection and not by problem solving.

The way we react to errors is strongly influenced by our own perception towards errors and their consequences. Herein two dominant perspectives can be identified: error prevention and error management. In the error prevention perspective, errors are perceived as a loss of time or the cause of low-quality work (Gelfand, Frese & Salmon, 2011). People who predominately hold this perspective, mostly focus on implementing processes, tools, or systems aimed at prevention of errors (Frese & Keith, 2015). The first intervention is likely triggered by this view. In contrast, the second intervention is more likely to be promoted by an error management perspective. Herein, errors are regarded as an inevitable by-product of working which can never be completely prevented. The focus lies on minimizing the negative consequences of an error and maximizing the positive outcomes (e.g., learning and future prevention) after an error occurs (Van Dyck et al., 2005).

3. Strategies in error handling

When faced with error, we all have strategies to deal with error. These strategies entail: *analyzing* the error, *correcting* the error as quickly as possible, *improving* from the error in the long term, *communicating* about the error, conscious risk taking, *anticipating errors*, *concealing* the error and *stress* brought about by errors (Rybowiak, Garst, Frese & Batinic, 1999). The research of one of the authors of this article, on learning from errors in teams, found two additional error handling strategies, namely: *identifying* the error and *de-escalating* the emotions that the error brings about (Den Hollander, 2017).
These strategies fall into three core strategies: mastery, awareness, and fear of error. As is shown in figure 1 (Van Dyck, 2000; den Hollander, 2017).

Core strategies	Handling strategies
Mastery	Identify
	De-escalate
	Analyse
	Correct
	Improve
	Communicate
Awareness	Risk taking
	Anticipate
Fear of error	Conceal
	Stress

Figure 1. Strategies of handling error

Research shows that the mastery core strategy is linked to reducing negative consequences of a mistake and developing better plans, while strategies linked with awareness help to recognize errors when they occur. The better you are in applying these strategies, the greater the chance that you will learn from errors. Conversely, fear of error is related to a negative attitude towards errors. This negative attitude can show itself in feeling a lot of tension and thereby wanting to conceal the error. These strategies are found when people spend longer periods of time in contexts in which experience judgment after an error (Van Dyck, 2000; Frese & Keith, 2015).

Reflection: Which strategies can help or hinder learning during supervision?

4. Learning form errors
Learning from errors necessitates a process of extracting insights from the unexpected result and modifying future behaviour and/or processes accordingly (Cannon &

Edmondson, 2001). Such a process requires more than addressing the superficial symptoms or consequences, as otherwise only the underlying problem remains unsolved (Edmondson, 1996). Argyris and Schön (1978), describe this as single loop learning: the error is acknowledged and dealt with, without looking at the broader context in which it occurred. In situations like theses the error handling strategy of identifying is only followed by correcting.

To facilitate sustainable learning, double loop learning is required: a form of learning in which the error is analysed in an integral manner (Argyris & Schon, 1978). Creating a context in which the underlying assumptions and beliefs can be changed. After the error is identified and possibly de-escalated, the error is analysed and discussed. These insights lead to improving and thereby create sustainable learning. Below we relate these steps to our previously mentioned example.

Step 1: Identify (and de-escalate)
In our example the supervisor identified the unexpected outcome through reflection-in-action: a powerful tool for learning (Schön in Peeters, 2015). The supervisor facilitates the creation of new experiences by exploring the irritation in a reflective way. Herein, it helps to de-escalate the emotions the action brought about, namely the negative consequence (irritation and agitation). The next step requires that all supervisees listen openly and without direct judgment. The more transparent the supervisor is about her own mistakes, the more the supervisees are willing to share their mistakes as part of their learning process.

Step 2: Analyse and discuss
When the emotions are calmed down, the error can by analysed and discussed. Creating a valuable shared experience to reflect upon in line with the learning princi-

ples of supervision. Using the context of supervision for moments of knowledge transfer, the supervisor provides expertise linked up with the experience in the situation. This means supervisees learn by connecting experience and reflection to concepts, in this case errors, explored with the supervisor (Bolhuis, 2009; Siegers, 2002; Kessels in Rigter, 1989 in Aerts (2019)). Allowing for investigation of what led to the unintended outcome. By working together in an open dialogue, you can give new meaning to an error, leading to the creation of space for new ideas and actions. Questions to aid this process (den Hollander, 2017) are shown in figure 2.

Objectives and plan	What was your plan and what was the expected result?
What actually happened	What was the actual result? How did it differ from the expected result?
Defining moments	What happened? And why did it keep you from the planned path?
Lessons learned.	What insights did you gain about what is essential to succeed in these kinds of situations?
Plan to apply lessons.	How will you apply these lessons in supervision or other future professional activities?

Figure 2. Reflective questions from error to learning

Step 3 Improve

Based on the insights gained in the previous steps, new experiences or experiments can be formulated. In our case the outcome of the problem-solving skill to continue with positive feedback could have an effect both ways: supervisees share more positive feedback and change their mindset. Alternatively, the irritation could grow because this intervention doesn't address the possible underlying emotions.

If the supervisor continues with the reflective question she can restart after exploring the underlying emotions. In this way supervisees experience the effect of using the supervision context as learning environment.
Reflection: What way would you prefer?

5. The Confession Box

When dealing with errors during supervision, context for the reflection on action and learning can be initiated relatively easily. However, while starting their research Verdonschot & den Hollander (2016) soon realised that its often quite difficult to start a meaningful conversation about errors when it occurs without such context.

Reflection: Can you recall your last mistake and what you have learned from this mistake?

Challenged by this notion, they started an experiment with a Confession Box during Next Learning (congress for professional learning in the Netherlands). The aim of the Confession Box is to create meaningful conversations about error in a safe environment. Since, the participant and the listener do not know or see each other, the method uses a three-step process to guide this process. During each step the participant can choose a conversation starter. Thus, creating a situation in which they can start their own learning journey while being guided by the listener who asks deepening questions.

Note: The participant can also be translated to the supervisee and the listener to the supervisor.

Inquiring into the perspectives on error

In the first part, the participant chooses one out of six statements, whichever is most appealing. All the statements relate to perspectives towards error. For instance, "making mistakes is one of the most meaningful ways to success" or "the fear of error hinders the learning from error". The statements are intended to evoke discussion about attitudes towards error. An elaborating question could be: how does this statement relate to your work?

Detecting one's own frame of making mistakes.

In the second part, the participant selects a card which expresses a view towards errors most suitable to one's own way of thinking. In the following conversation, the participant is challenged to think about situations where this way of thinking helps or hinders. This step in the supervision learning process is known as generalisation: in what other situations have you come across this behaviour. The purpose is to raise awareness of their own values. The views are related to the error handling strategies mentioned before. Examples are: 'I'd rather make mistakes than do nothing' (prevention), or: 'I think it's important to correct a mistake as quickly as possible" (correction).

From error to learning

In the last part, the participant chooses one of four questions they want to answer. The questions are all indirect ways to inquire about mistakes in real-life situations, since questions about errors that are put too directly, usually stimulate going back to negative associations with errors (Verdonschot & den Hollander, 2016). Examples of questions are: "When did you do something that turned out differently than you expected?", and: "How do you and your colleagues ensure that you continuously adjust your approach and getting smarter by doing?

As such, the use of the confession box method and the conversation starter cards provide a "slide" to create meaningful conversations and learning about error. Furthermore, by specifically questioning the beliefs and values prior to inquiring into an error, double loop learning is facilitated.

Reflection: How will you be inquiring into the perspectives and beliefs while inquiring into a mistake?

6. Intervision as a vehicle to support learning from error among supervisors

In the Netherlands, intervision is used as part of the qualification system for registered members of LVSC to ensure the quality of professional guidance. One of the requirements to renew registration is to have participated in at least 15 intervisions in the last five years. During such meetings, the central focus lies on expertise development of professional guidance of attendees.

A group of at least three LVSC registered peers comes together to unravel challenges they come across in their daily practice as professionals. Using different methods of dialogue and reflection, a deeper contribution to professional development is made. Within intervision methods used can vary, since the group is autonomous, deciding how they want to work and learn together. Of course, learning from our errors requires a safe learning environment. As such, the Confession Box is a very helpful method to guide the process of learning.

In our example, the supervisor can bring in her "error" as a case. By reflecting on her beliefs and values which led to the error, the method helps to develop learning at the

double loop level. Additionally, the 'conversation starters' of the confession box can be used as a foundation to start an open conversation to learn together, in situations without a predefined error. Metaphorically they are "the slide" to dig deeper into the conversation. The group can help each other by sharing their concepts of error, how to cope with various errors and what they have learned from their experiences with errors in supervision.

7. Summary

In this article our ideas how to learn from errors were pointed out and how this process can be facilitated during supervision and intervision. To explain the perspective on errors an example of the professional practice of a supervisor was used. Different error handling strategies and steps to turn errors into learning experiences were worked out. The method of the Confession Box was further elucidated in how to facilitate a safe and powerful learning environment. A way to make this method suitable for intervision was described. Each theoretical part was followed by a reflective question to stimulate development of individual perspective on errors. From our experience there are various possibilities to use the confession box method in supervision as well as in intervision. Hopefully you are inspired to experiment in your own groups using (parts of) this method. ■

Resources

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Interested in all conversation starters from the Confession Box? Let's link: : https://www.linkedin.com/in/kirste-den-hollander/

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