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MASTERMIND SESSIONS AS AN INNOVATIVE FORMAT FOR COLLEGIAL SUPERVISION AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF EDUCATORS IN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

Abstract. This article analyzes the potential and structure of mastermind sessions as an innovative format for collegial supervision and professional self-improvement among educators in higher education institutions (HEIs). The relevance of this topic stems from the evident crisis of traditional, predominantly vertical, supervision models. These established approaches are often formalistic, control-oriented, and fail to adequately address contemporary challenges such as digitalization, increased demands for academic autonomy, and high rates of professional burnout. This frequently leads to «professional isolation», where educators are left to face complex pedagogical, scientific, and administrative challenges alone. The purpose of this paper is to provide a theoretical substantiation for mastermind technology, analyzing its principles and advantages in comparison to traditional forms of methodological work. Using methods of theoretical analysis, synthesis, and comparative modeling, the study defines the mastermind as a structured, confidential, and results-oriented form of group work. This model is fundamentally based on principles of horizontality (peer-to-peer), mutual trust, and shared accountability. The paper details the core operational methodology of the «Hot Seat» format, which facilitates a focused, solutions-oriented dialogue. The analysis demonstrates that this format constitutes a significant paradigm shift from «control-focused» supervision to «support-focused» collegial development. The article posits that the implementation of mastermind groups within HEIs can effectively address complex issues across the three key domains of an educator's activity: research – overcoming publication stagnation and refining grant proposals; pedagogy – accelerating the adoption of innovative teaching methods (e.g., adapting to AI) and improving student engagement; organizational/psychological – providing critical support in managing administrative overload and preventing professional burnout. In conclusion, mastermind sessions represent a highly promising pedagogical technology that fosters a robust culture of collegial support, enhances faculty agency, and accelerates innovation within the academic community.

Keywords: mastermind, mastermind sessions, collegial supervision, professional development, professional self-improvement, higher education, educators, faculty, horizontal model, peer support, innovative educational technologies, professional burnout.

МАЙСТЕРМАЙНД-СЕСІЇ ЯК ІННОВАЦІЙНИЙ ФОРМАТ КОЛЕГІАЛЬНОЇ СУПЕРВІЗІЇ ТА ПРОФЕСІЙНОГО САМОВДОСКОНАЛЕННЯ ПЕДАГОГІВ У ЗАКЛАДАХ ВИЩОЇ ОСВІТИ

Анотація. У статті проаналізовано сутність та потенціал майстермайнд-сесій як інноваційного формату професійного розвитку та колегіальної супервізії викладачів закладів вищої освіти (ЗВО). Актуальність теми зумовлена кризою традиційних, переважно вертикальних, моделей супервізії, які часто мають формальний і контролюючий характер і не відповідають сучасним викликам (диджиталізація, академічна автономія, високий рівень професійного вигорання). Метою статті є теоретичне обґрунтування та аналіз структури, принципів та переваг майстермайнд-технології порівняно з традиційними формами методичної роботи. Застосовано методи теоретичного аналізу, синтезу, порівняння та моделювання. Визначено, що майстермайнд є структурованою, конфіденційною, орієнтованою на результат формою групової роботи, що базується на принципах горизонтальності, довіри та взаємної підзвітності. Докладно описано методологію проведення сесії у форматі «гарячого стільця» (Hot Seat). Проведено порівняльний аналіз, який демонструє зсув парадигми від «контролю» до «підтримки». Установлено, що імплементація майстермайнд-груп у ЗВО здатна розв'язувати комплексні завдання в трьох ключових сферах діяльності викладача: науково-дослідницькій (подолання публікаційної стагнації, генерація ідей для грантових заявок), навчально-методичній (управдження інноваційних методів, адаптація до викликів ШІ) та організаційно-



психологічній (профілактика вигорання, розвиток «м'яких навичок»). Зроблено висновок, що майстермайнд-сесії є перспективною педагогічною технологією, що сприяє формуванню культури колегіальної підтримки, прискорює інноваційні процеси й посилює суб'єктність викладача в траєкторії його професійного самовдосконалення.

Ключові слова: майстермайнд, професійний розвиток, супервізія, викладачі, заклади вищої освіти, колегіальне навчання, горизонтальна модель, інноваційні освітні технології, професійне вигорання.

INTRODUCTION

The problem formulation. The modern higher education system operates under conditions of permanent transformations caused by globalization, accelerated digitalization, new labor market requirements, and increased competition among higher education institutions. These challenges place unprecedentedly high demands on the professional competence of academic staff. At the same time, traditional forms of professional development and supervision (advanced training courses, methodological seminars, open lectures, department meetings) often prove to be insufficiently effective. They are typically built on a vertical, «top-down» model of knowledge transfer, are formalized in nature, and do not take into account the specific, individual needs of lecturers (Astremska I., 2017).

This leads to the phenomenon of «professional loneliness», where the lecturer is left alone with complex pedagogical, scientific, or organizational problems (Stanovskyykh Z., 2014).

Traditional supervision is often reduced to a control function (attending classes, checking methodological materials), which creates a stressful atmosphere and hinders open discussion of real difficulties. There is an acute need to search for and implement new, flexible, and effective formats of collegial support and self-improvement.

Analysis of recent research and publications. The issue of the professional development of higher education institution lecturers is the subject of research by many scholars (N. Beshchuk-Venwerska, T. Kirichuk, O. Pyltiay, S. Sysoieva) (Beshchuk-Venwerska N., 2015; Kirichuk T., 2022, pp. 12-13). However, the analysis of existing supervision models indicates the dominance of administrative-control approaches (Briukhovetska O., 2019, pp. 21-33).

Despite the growing popularity of forms such as coaching and mentoring, they do not always take into account the advantages of collegial, horizontal exchange of experience (Sydoruk I., 2019, pp. 283-289). Mastermind technology, which originates from the business environment (where it was popularized by N. Hill) and is actively researched in the West as a management and development tool (Maslach C., Leiter M., Schaufeli W., 2008), remains insufficiently studied regarding its adaptation and implementation in the educational process of higher education institutions, especially in the domestic scientific-pedagogical space.

AIM OF THE RESEARCH

The aim of the article is the theoretical substantiation and analysis of the essence, structure, and advantages of mastermind sessions as an innovative format of collegial supervision and professional self-improvement for lecturers.

The research tasks are defined as follows: to determine the essence and key principles of mastermind technology; to conduct a comparative analysis of the traditional supervision model and the mastermind format; to describe the methodology of organizing and conducting a mastermind session in the teaching environment. In addition, to determine the specific areas of application and advantages of mastermind groups in higher education institutions.

RESEARCH METHODS

To achieve the research aim and objectives, a comprehensive set of methods was employed, including: theoretical methods – general scientific (analysis, synthesis, abstraction and concretization, systematization, classification, generalization, etc.); specific scientific methods: the method of terminological analysis (which facilitated the definition of the etymology of core concepts and terms, their systemic hierarchy, and relevance); the structural method (which enabled the development of the study's framework); and logical-systemic analysis of scientific publications (which ensured the logic of the scientific inquiry for the purpose of collecting and preparing factual material, defining tasks, seeking solutions, and obtaining results); empirical methods – for the symbolic representation of research results in figures and tables and their subsequent generalization. The application of these methods ensured the fulfillment of the set tasks, the conduct of comprehensive research operations, and the formulation of theoretical propositions and conclusions.

RESULTS OF THE RESEARCH

Mastermind (from English «mastermind» – «collective mind» «outstanding intellect») is a form of group work that unites a small group (usually 5-8 people) of practitioners who meet regularly (online or offline) for the purpose of mutual support, exchange of experience, and joint search for solutions to achieve the participants' personal and professional goals (N. Hill, 1937). It is not a «complaint club» nor a formal methodological seminar (Levin Yu., 2024).

It is a structured, action-oriented format based on four key principles (see Fig. 1): confidentiality, horizontality, focus on solutions, and mutual accountability.

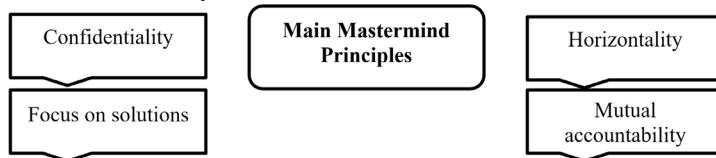


Fig. 1. Main Mastermind Principles

Confidentiality is realized through the participants' agreement that everything discussed in the group remains within it. This creates an atmosphere of absolute trust, where participants can openly speak about real problems and failures without fear of judgment or administrative consequences.



The principle of horizontality is a fundamental social contract underlying the effectiveness of formats such as the mastermind. It represents a conscious renunciation of formal and informal hierarchies for the duration and within the bounds of group work.

Horizontality is not a denial of reality. Participants understand that outside the room, the head of department holds administrative authority over the assistant. However, upon entering the group, everyone agrees to «leave their titles at the door». The roles of «head» and «assistant» are temporarily replaced by a single role – «mastermind group participant». This is the primary condition without which the format does not function.

The main goal of horizontality is to create psychological safety. This is a state in which a participant is not afraid of being punished or humiliated for expressing an idea, asking a «stupid» question, admitting a mistake, or challenging conventional wisdom (Edmondson, Harvey, 2025, pp. 614-632).

Without horizontality, an assistant will never dare to honestly criticize the idea of a Head of Department. They will worry about potential consequences for their career. The Head, in turn, will be unable to openly admit, «I don't know what to do with this problem, fearing a «loss of face» and authority.

With horizontality, a subordinate can say: «Dear manager, I see a risk in your plan...», and this is perceived as a valuable contribution rather than insubordination. The Head can say: «Colleagues, I am stuck» and this is viewed as a request to the group rather than a sign of weakness. The principle of horizontality separates the idea from the status of its holder.

In a traditional hierarchical structure, we often fall victim to the cognitive bias of «appeal to authority». We tend to attribute greater weight to an idea expressed by an «expert» or «manager» than to the same idea expressed by a «novice».

Horizontality forces the group to evaluate the idea itself on its own merits, not based on who voiced it. This leads to the disappearance of rigid «expertness» – the «expert» is not afraid to make a mistake, and the «novice» is not afraid to propose a bold solution. Furthermore, everyone has an equal right to speak and equal time for expression. The word of an assistant in the discussion carries as much weight as the word of the department head.

In our example, a young assistant likely possesses knowledge (e.g., regarding new digital tools or modern pedagogical methodologies) that an experienced head of department may lack. In a hierarchical system, the assistant often resorts to self-censorship («I better stay silent, it's not my business, I am the youngest here»).

The principle of horizontality removes this barrier and grants the group access to the full collective experience and knowledge, rather than just the experience of those at the top of the hierarchy.

Thus, horizontality is an artificially created but vital environment that temporarily eliminates power and status imbalances. This is done for one purpose: to give participants permission to be absolutely honest, vulnerable, and creative, which is the only path to finding non-trivial solutions and achieving genuine self-improvement.

Focus on solution ensures efficiency – the group does not waste time finding fault or engaging in endless problem analysis. 90% of the time is dedicated to searching for specific, practical solutions and next steps (Corcoran, Pillai, 2009, pp. 234–242).

Each participant, having received help from the group, assumes the obligation to implement the chosen action plan and reports on the results at the next meeting. This overcomes procrastination and stimulates real change.

The key difference of the mastermind lies in changing the very paradigm of supervision. While the traditional model is often an instrument of external control, the mastermind is an instrument of internal, collegial development (see Tab. 1).

The most common and effective structure of a mastermind session is the «Hot Seat» format. It is strictly regulated and allows for the most efficient use of time.

Phase 1. Presentation of the request (10–15 min). One of the participants (the «hero») takes the «hot seat». They describe their problem or challenge in detail (e.g., «I cannot get students to read primary sources», «I received a rejection from a reviewer for the third time», «I cannot find a balance between research and teaching»).

Table 1

Comparative characteristics of supervision models

Parameter	Traditional Supervision in higher education institution	Mastermind model
Goal	Control, evaluation, adherence to standards	Development, support, finding solutions
Structure	Vertical (manager → lecturer)	Horizontal (colleague = colleague)
Atmosphere	Formalism, stress, defense, evaluation	Trust, openness, confidentiality
Focus	Finding errors, analyzing the past	Finding opportunities, focus on the future
Process	«How it should have been done» (directives)	«How can it be done?» (brainstorming)
Result	Act/report, formal plan	Concrete action plan, accountability, insight

Phase 2. Clarifying questions stage (15–20 min). The group asks the «hero» questions exclusively. Advice and criticism are strictly prohibited at this stage. The questions help the «hero» understand the root of the problem deeper and see the situation from unexpected angles (e.g., «When does this problem not occur?», «What have you already tried?», «What do you feel at this moment?»).



Phase 3. Collective brainstorming (20–30 min). The «hero» stops speaking and only silently records ideas. Now, each participant shares their own experience, specific advice, contacts, and resources. This is the stage of generating the «collective mind».

Phase 4. Formulating an action plan (5–10 min). The «hero» takes the floor, thanks the group, and based on the insights and ideas received, formulates 1–3 concrete, measurable steps they commit to taking before the next meeting.

Let us consider the specifics of application and the advantages of mastermind sessions in higher education institutions. The uniqueness of masterminds lies in the fact that they can be both highly specialized (e.g., a group of associate professors from one department) and interdisciplinary (physicist, philosopher, lawyer), which enriches the discussion. Three key areas of application can be distinguished, corresponding to the three directions of a lecturer's work:

Educational-methodological work. Problem – the lecturer does not know how to adapt the course to AI challenges or how to engage passive students. Solution in the mastermind – colleagues share real, tested tools (e.g., «flipped classroom», «peer review using AI» methodology). This accelerates the implementation of innovations much faster than a formal seminar.

Scientific-research work. Problem – «publication stagnation», procrastination in writing a dissertation, grant rejection. Solution in the mastermind – the group acts as a «support group» and a «collective reviewer». Colleagues from other fields can pose «fresh» questions regarding methodology, forcing the researcher to look at their data in a new way.

Organizational-psychological work. Problem – excessive administrative load (bureaucracy, accreditation processes), professional burnout, conflicts within the department. Solution in the mastermind – this is a safe space for discussing these «uncomfortable» topics. The group helps find solutions in time management, automation of routine tasks (e.g., joint development of syllabus templates), and provides psychological support, breaking the sense of isolation.

In our opinion, it is also worth highlighting weak points or «omitted aspects». There are risks that a group of «like-minded people» will begin to suppress critical or non-standard ideas in favor of conformity; problems related to unequal levels of participants, internal conflicts, or unstructured facilitation may become active; or the group may turn into a «complaint club» or friendly gathering without a focus on concrete actions.

CONCLUSIONS AND PROSPECTS OF FURTHER RESEARCH

Mastermind sessions are an innovative, flexible, and effective technology for professional development and collegial supervision that addresses the current challenges faced by academic staff in higher education institutions.

In contrast to traditional vertical models focused on control, the mastermind offers a horizontal, trust-based, and solution-oriented approach. It shifts the paradigm from «evaluation» to «support». The methodology (the «hot seat») and key principles (confidentiality, accountability) allow the discussion of problems to be transformed into the generation of concrete, actionable solutions across the scientific, pedagogical, and organizational domains.

The implementation of mastermind groups into the practice of higher education institutions is capable of significantly accelerating innovation processes, improving the quality of teaching, reducing the level of professional burnout, and fostering a culture of cooperation and continuous self-improvement within the university environment.

Prospects for further research are seen in conducting an empirical study (pedagogical experiment) aimed at the quantitative and qualitative measurement of the impact of regular mastermind sessions on specific indicators of lecturers' professional activities (publication activity, quality of teaching indicators based on student feedback, level of professional stress), and in developing methodological guidelines for their implementation into official professional development programs within higher education institutions.

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