

Practice
Tool

Supervising someone from a different professional background

Introduction

Interprofessional supervision means supervising the work of someone from a different professional background (Davys, 2017). In many professions, part of the role of experienced professionals is to offer supervision to others (e.g. RCOT, 2021 and BASW, 2018).

There are many benefits to supervising someone from a different profession. However, there are also important considerations to think about so that the supervision works well and provides all the profession-specific input that your supervisee needs.

The tool supports practice supervisors in adult social care, who are providing interprofessional supervision, to:

- > Consider expectations about supervision in adult services.
- > Reflect on the benefits and challenges of interprofessional supervision.
- > Think more broadly about support and guidance in interprofessional supervision.
- > Start to supervise someone from a different professional background.

Expectations about supervision in adult services

Guidance for effective Supervision applies across all roles in adult services and makes clear that supervisors do not need to be from the same profession as their supervisees (Skills for Care, 2020).

Supervision “*is usually carried out by one person who has some related knowledge and skills, and who takes responsibility and accountability for supporting the wellbeing and performance of the person being supervised*” (Skills for Care, 2020, p. 6).

Some of the key expectations relating to supervision across common professions in adult services, that you need to be familiar with, are summarised below:

- > Registered professionals in many professions are required to participate in supervision (e.g. HCPC, 2023, Social Work England, 2019).
- > Supervisors are accountable for ensuring that everyone they are responsible for is appropriately supervised and supported with the tasks that they undertake.
- > Supervisors can seek input from colleagues with different skills and knowledge when their staff need support (Skills for Care, 2020).
- > Accountability for ensuring that profession-specific input is obtained lies ultimately with the supervisor, who is responsible for ensuring that the supervisee can carry out tasks that they delegate to them (BASW, 2021, COT, 2015).

Occupational therapists:

- > For occupational therapists, supervision for professional matters, clinical work and performance should be provided by someone with adequate knowledge of the profession. This is most likely to be an occupational therapist, but for some areas of work it may not be (COT, 2015).

Social workers:

- > The professional body for social work highlights that social workers should receive “formal, one to one, professional supervision in relation to practice and personal development from registered and appropriately experienced social workers” (BASW, 2021, page 8), alongside peer learning and professional development. If a social worker receives interprofessional supervision, then employers should arrange additional professional supervision by a registered social worker (DHSC, 2018).

Points to note:

When preparing to supervise someone from a different profession, it is helpful to remind yourself that it is not necessary to be from the same field to provide helpful and effective supervision.

However, the supervision you provide does need to be appropriate to the person’s task, role and setting, and cover all the areas that support better experiences and outcomes for adults and carers.

Practice perspective¹

“Core management skills cross boundaries. There isn’t an expectation that you have to have the same professional background to supervise someone.”

Reflection point:

No supervisor will have all the experiences of practice that their supervisee will encounter, whether they are from the same professional background or not.

Spend a few moments reflecting on your own professional approach to practice and consider:

- > What is unique?
- > What is generic?

How might these reflections inform your approach to interprofessional supervision?

Benefits and challenges of interprofessional supervision

Interprofessional supervision can provide many benefits for both supervisee and supervisor. Many practice supervisors, who supervise practitioners from a different profession, say that they find this valuable. This is because interprofessional supervision inevitably raises questions about identity, expertise and approach which are helpful to consider. In particular:

- > Working across professional disciplines means that supervisee and supervisor can learn from each other’s perspectives and approaches (Davys, 2017). This creates many opportunities for reflection and knowledge generation.
- > This can lead to improvements in practice for people who draw on care and support (Davys, 2017). It also affirms professional roles (Davys, 2017).
- > Valuing other professions and being open to them not only results in recognition of the other person’s value but also of your own.
- > There is also scope for collaborative practice to develop from interprofessional supervision which can be shared in the organisation (Davys, 2017).

¹ With grateful thanks to practitioners from the Research in Practice partner network for contributions in the Practice perspective sections.

Practice perspective

“I supervised a particular person from a different background – nurse and social work. We used to go out together and do joint visits. We would take it turns to take the lead and the other would observe, and we’d compare notes afterwards about the emphasis that we placed on different things. And we recognised that there were areas that we were maybe missing out and that gave us a much rounder perspective.”

However, it is also important to pay attention to some common problems that can arise in interprofessional supervision. For example:

- > Professional identity can be undermined if both parties do not respect each other’s different backgrounds and approaches to practice (Davys, 2017).
- > Differences in language can also sometimes be a challenge, leading to misunderstandings (Davys, 2017).
- > Difficulties can arise if the supervisor does not provide clear accountability through their oversight of the supervisee’s work or if the supervisee does not explain their practice clearly. This is more likely to occur when both parties do not sufficiently understand each other’s professional expertise or role (Davys, 2017).
- > Supervision that crosses boundaries can be undermined by hierarchy (Davys, 2017). This can lead to people sticking rigidly to their own professional boundaries and being resistant to interprofessional supervision.

Thinking more broadly about support and guidance in interprofessional supervision

Prior to starting to supervise someone from a different profession, it is useful to think about the different forms of support and guidance which your supervisee may need and who might be best placed to provide this.

An important element of this is considering whether your supervisee will need additional support from someone in the same profession and how this might work (Carpenter et al., 2013).

We suggest that you focus on three areas:

- > **Supervisor support:** the support and guidance you can offer as practice supervisor.
- > **Peer support:** how other people in the team, wider organisation or network can support learning.
- > **Profession-specific support:** additional input that can only be provided by someone from the same professional background.

Figure 1 illustrates how these different forms of support can work together to support reflection, practice expertise and professional development.

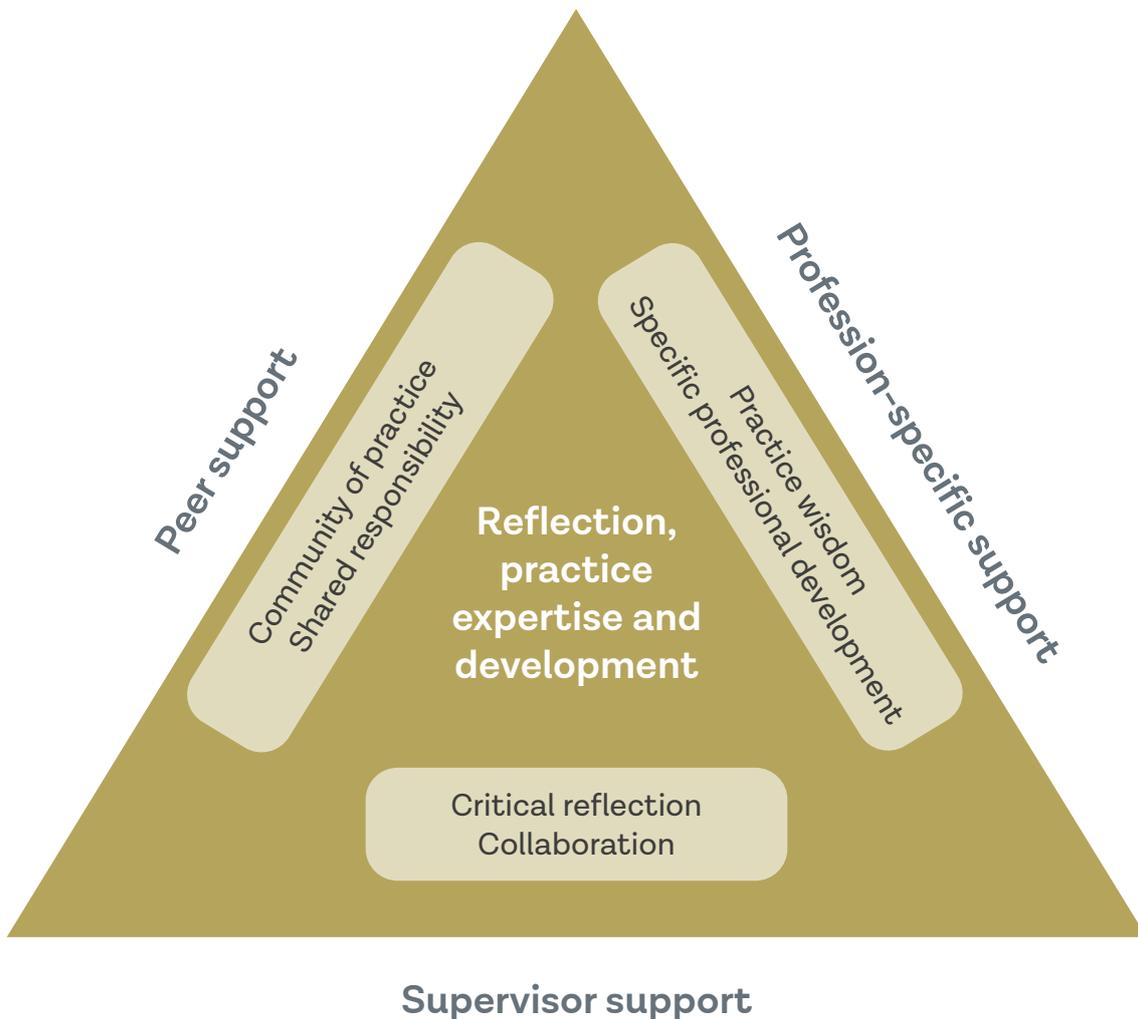


Figure 1: A model of supervisor, professional and peer support for interprofessional supervision

Supervisor support

In addition to providing opportunities for:

- > Support for wellbeing.
- > Management oversight.
- > Learning and development.
- > Communicating organisational priorities (Nosowska, 2018).

The interprofessional supervisor can also offer:

- > Critical reflection – thinking differently about practice.
- > Collaboration – sharing insights and knowledge.

Remember that supervisor support is not just restricted to one-to-one supervision discussions. It can also be provided through:

- > Ad hoc supervision.
- > Contributions by the practice supervisor in group supervision.
- > Coaching or joint work in practice alongside the practice supervisor.

Peer support

Peers can offer:

- > Opportunities to reflect and jointly consider challenges, dilemmas and learning.
- > A sense of shared responsibility, joint ownership or co-working resulting in communal solutions and service improvements.
- > A community of practice – sharing and developing best practice. For example these are all helpful in encouraging colleagues to talk openly, reflect and learn alongside peers:
 - > peer forums
 - > communities of practice
 - > support networks
 - > case discussions
 - > action learning sets (Wilkins, 2019).

Profession-specific support

Mentors/leaders from the same profession can offer:

- > Practice wisdom – advice and guidance from someone who has ‘walked the talk’.
- > Specific professional development – transfer of detailed skills, knowledge and values and support to meet professional registration requirements.

This can be provided through:

- > clinical and group supervision
- > action learning sets and case discussions
- > ad hoc advice
- > mentoring and coaching
- > practice observations, learning audits and debriefs
- > learning and development sessions (Wilkins, 2019).

Point to note:

You do not need to provide every aspect of practice support to your supervisee. This can be considered more holistically and draw on a range of different sources (Wilkins, 2019).

Practice perspectives

“Professionals from a shared background, can get together for group supervision to challenge and help each other. This can be done without their line manager, particularly if the line manager is from a different background. It can be good not to have the supervisor listening so that peers are putting forward ideas and solutions themselves.”

“We wouldn’t expect anybody, no matter what profession, to get all their supervision from one person.”

Starting to supervise someone from a different professional background

At the start of any supervision relationship, it is important to jointly discuss the purpose of supervision and how you will work together. A supervision agreement should then be written, which reflects the main points from this discussion.

Starting to supervise someone from a different professional background means that more detailed discussion is needed in the following areas for a supervision agreement:

- > **Fit** – how good the fit is in terms of appropriate capabilities, status, trust and ability to respond to expectations (Davys, 2017).
- > **Expectations** – how agreed expectations will be met; what the supervisor, profession-specific support and peer support will provide to meet the agreed purposes of supervision. People from different backgrounds may approach supervision differently (Davys, 2017). Asking your supervisee to tell you about their supervision history and expectations of supervision is helpful here.
- > **Accountability** – lines of accountability for the different elements of support, how the supervisor will monitor what is happening, and how the supervisee will feedback.
- > **How differences and problems will be navigated** – what you will both do if there are any problems with fit; what support each of you might need to resolve any issues.

Moving forward, it is important to consider how you can build an effective supervision relationship with a supervisee from a different professional background.

You can do this by:

- > Paying attention to (and inviting feedback about) your supervision relationship.
- > Encouraging reflections on difference and power.
- > Taking a facilitative approach that helps the supervisee to find the answers themselves.
- > Being curious and avoiding assumptions.
- > Checking in regularly about expectations and fit.
- > Responding respectfully to misunderstandings or problems.

This provides the foundation for transparent and thoughtful discussions about difference and about what each person brings to supervision (Davys and Beddoe, 2016).

Practice perspectives

“It’s about the supervisor understanding where the person they supervise is coming from. That way you build up their trust. Being open and non-judgmental and honest.”

“It’s about being open to other professions and recognising the value in each other’s profession.”

Tips from interprofessional practice supervisors

- > Know what supervision is and what it’s trying to do so that you can see if it’s working.
- > Be honest and open – that’s where trust comes from.
- > Have a genuine curiosity about the other person.
- > Remember it’s not just one person learning from another; it’s two people learning from each other.
- > Value and respect all professions.
- > Be enthusiastic about learning from each other.
- > Become familiar with each other’s language.
- > Have a clear agreement.
- > Ensure your organisation knows what interprofessional supervision is happening and how it is going.

When supervising someone from a different professional background for the first time:

- > Don’t be anxious – you don’t have to know everything about the other profession.
- > Encourage your supervisee to see the positives of interprofessional supervision.
- > Be clear about the limits of supervision and where else support will come from.
- > If you can’t give the person what they need then help them find someone else.

Contributions from interprofessional supervisors in the Research in Practice partner network and from Davys (2017).

Reflective questions

- > How do you feel about offering interprofessional supervision?
- > How might you clarify expectations and lines of accountability in interprofessional supervision?
- > Did any of the suggestions about different ways to provide supervisor, peer and profession specific support strike you as something you might like to explore?
- > What support might you need to develop as an interprofessional supervisor?

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