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Knowledge Briefing

PSDP – Resources for Managers of Practice Supervisors:

Meeting the supervisory needs of practice supervisors

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Introduction

This knowledge briefing is written for those who manage practice supervisors and are responsible for ensuring that their supervisory needs are met. It recognises that effective supervision of social work practitioners is reliant on an organisation-wide commitment to reflective supervisory practice, and to consistent application of this approach at every level.

Managers of practice supervisors occupy diverse roles and bring to them different experiences. Some will have undertaken training in social work supervision. Others may be more familiar with supervisory practice in a different professional context, or feel under-prepared for what is expected of them.

Most of the research and literature on social work supervision is focussed on direct practice. And the importance of translating it into 'managing the managers' or 'supervising the supervisors' is often downplayed.

'Annie', a parent who has experienced child protection involvement, describes practice supervisors as the '"invisible hand" guiding practice' (see the **Hearing from 'Annie'** tool written for practice supervisors). But what support and direction is needed for that 'invisible hand'?

There can be a disconnect between what is promoted as quality supervision for practitioners and what is offered to practice supervisors themselves. This has been echoed by many participants on the PSDP as they become aware of what is missing in their own supervision, and the importance of having a structured space for reflection.

Supervising the supervisors is vital work. It shapes the culture and 'models the way' (Kouzes and Posner, 2007). Managers who act in ways which are congruent with core values, and the quality of professional supervision to which the organisation aspires, offer invaluable leadership. They set an example which others can follow, they demonstrate skilled practice from which others can learn and, importantly, they offer 'positive containing supervision' (Toasland, 2007, p. 202) for those more immediately impacted by practitioners' anxieties. In this way, emotional responsiveness can be both mirrored and sustained across organisational levels.

This briefing examines the challenges and dilemmas faced by practice supervisors who 'bridge the divide between direct practice and strategic management' (Patterson, 2015. p. 2,085). It aims to help you, as a manager of practice supervisors, understand how best to support this role and, crucially, it emphasises the part you play in strengthening 'a golden thread' (Wilkins et al, 2018) between supervision and direct practice.

In addressing issues that commonly impact on practice supervisors, the briefing covers:

- the transition from practitioner to practice supervisor
- the developmental stages of supervisors
- working openly with power and authority
- the dynamic tension of professional versus managerial priorities
- restorative supervision and containment
- negative capability and safe uncertainty
- reflective spaces.

Reflective prompts:

Before reading further, it is useful to spend some time reflecting on these initial questions:

- How do you aim to 'lead by example' in your approach to supervision?
- In what specific ways do you think your supervision of others influences how they, in turn, supervise practitioners? And have you discussed this with your supervisees?
- What constraints do you experience in providing reflective, relationship-based supervision?
- What do you think practice supervisors value most in the supervision you offer them? And do you ask them regularly for this kind of feedback?

The transition from practitioner to practice supervisor

This transition marks a significant shift in role and identity and yet many practice supervisors step into it with limited training or preparation. Stoner and Stoner (2013) identify the challenge of moving from a 'doer role' into a 'leader role', which involves achieving things through others.

A supervisor needs to be one step removed but direct practice may exert a strong pull. Some will be in hybrid positions and still carry a caseload. Others will be covering for vacant posts or staff absence. Additionally, practice may represent more secure terrain than the supervisory role where confidence and expertise are less established. Ibarra et al (2010, p. 666) describe a 'process of leaving one thing, without having fully left it, and at the same time of entering something else, without fully being part of it.' If a practice supervisor's own supervision is too managerial in focus, it risks overlooking the psychological dimensions of transition rather than encouraging a new supervisor to explore how they need to adjust and adapt.

For those promoted within their existing team, stepping out of a practitioner role can involve loss of peer support and friendships. Moving from being 'one of us' to 'one of them' is a lonely step at a time when confidence may be fragile. Your supervision of practice supervisors can provide valuable space for reflecting on the necessary balance of involvement and separation.

A supervisor's developmental journey

Developmental models are used to chart progress from novice to expert and from dependency to relative autonomy. The limitations of linear frameworks are well-documented but they nevertheless offer a guide to what characterises different stages of development, and the appropriate levels of support or challenge to offer. It may be helpful for a new practice supervisor to use their own supervision to explore how best to align their approach with the disparate needs of newly qualified workers and more experienced practitioners.

The supervisor has their own developmental journey which runs in parallel, but less attention has been paid to how this may impact on different supervisory relationships. In the early stages, the drive to provide answers and be helpful is often compelling. It requires inner confidence and role security to hold back, fostering a more collaborative approach and trusting in the supervisee's own problem-solving capacity. A middle leader committed to open dialogue and mutual learning with practice supervisors models the kind of enabling supervision which others can work towards.

Practice supervisor's developmental journey

Adapted from Stoltenberg and Delworth, in Hawkins and Smith, 2006, p.140 and from Davys and Beddoe, 2010, p.108-9

Cousins (2004, p. 180) suggests that 'supervisors do not necessarily become more competent merely by gaining experience in providing supervision.' They need access to training and opportunities to practise supervisory skills. They benefit from active reflection on what is working well in their supervision of others and what could be improved. The supervision they receive ideally models 'relational and reflective methods' (Harlow, 2016, p. 684) which they can then mirror in their work with practitioners.

Reflective prompts:

- How clearly do you recall your own transition from practice to your first supervisory post, and what did you find most challenging?
- How do you create the space and atmosphere where new practice supervisors can open up about doubts or dilemmas?
- How can you support new practice supervisors to find a 'one step removed' position in relation to direct practice?
- Are there ways you could use (or use already) developmental models to help a practice supervisor reflect on the dynamics of different supervisory relationships?
- What changes do you look for and encourage as a supervisor gains experience?

Working with power and authority

A practice supervisor carries delegated role authority but their credibility depends upon earning the respect of those they supervise. Some can struggle to find the balance between an overly directive approach and 'permissive' supervision (Wonnacott, 2012), particularly if they carry residual ambivalence about the shift from a practitioner to a managerial identity. In addition, every supervisor's personal and cultural background influences the way they relate to marginalised groups of people, whether they are conscious or not of how these factors impact. Reluctance to acknowledge underlying power dynamics undermines the integrity of a supervision relationship, limiting the possibilities for expressing difference or appropriate challenge. In contrast, a readiness to address issues of power and authority within supervision models an open stance which can be replicated in work with families.

'Advantage blindness' closes our eyes to the 'subtle and not-so-subtle forms of advantage' we take for granted (Fuchs, 2019). Privileges integral to our life experiences can go unrecognised although their impact on others is significant. A complex array of power dynamics play out in supervision but responsibility for naming these rests, at least initially, with the supervisor as the one who holds a position of power. O'Neill and del Mar Farina (2018) outline a framework of critical conversations aimed at deepening participants' awareness of the ways that 'power and privilege, race and racism, gender, class, abilities and other social and structural inequities' (p. 304) are replicated within supervisory relationships.

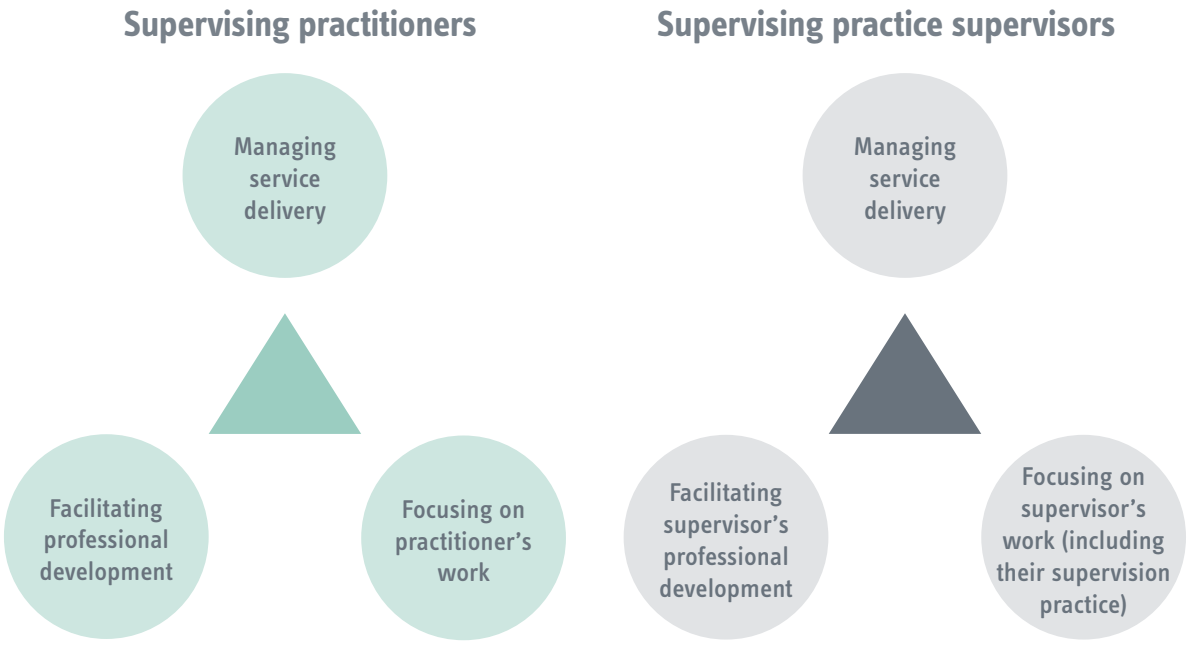
When issues of power are sidestepped in a supervision relationship, there is a risk that collusive behaviours can develop. Whether this involves a lack of appropriate challenge or an overly critical stance towards a specific worker, these kinds of 'supervisory games' are problematic if they remain invisible.

The 'seven zones of silence' (Grenny, quoted in Davys, 2019, p. 79) describe areas of conversation such as poor practice, errors or lack of competence, which can be difficult to broach and necessitate a 'courageous conversation'. Within their own supervision, a practice supervisor can be encouraged to notice patterns of interaction which limit open and honest discussion with supervisees, and can rehearse the difficult conversations which need to happen.

Balancing professional and managerial priorities

Holding the tension between professional and managerial imperatives involves role strain for social work supervisors (Wong and Lee, 2015). There is widespread recognition that a narrow technical-rational approach has a damaging impact on social work practice and that the value of relationship-based work needs to be reflected in supervision not subsumed by administrative priorities. Heightened preoccupation with risk can still, however, lead to a dominance of 'surveillance over reflection' (Beddoe, 2010). An effective counter-balance is supervision for the supervisors which focuses not only on organisational priorities but attends to the different facets of their role.

There is broad consensus on the core functions of supervision. Represented as a triangle (Hughes and Pengelly, 1997), these are translatable to supervision at different organisational levels.



Adapted from Hughes and Pengelly, 1997

Managers often receive supervision which is driven more by organisational than professional priorities. Sometimes called a 'business meeting' or a 'one-to-one session', this can focus primarily on managing service delivery while marginalising other dimensions. If supervision is the space where 'organisational authority and professional identity collide, collude or connect' (Middleman and Rhodes, 1980, cited in Morrison, 2005, p. 32), then the dynamic tension between these needs to be held or there is a risk of splitting.

Reflective prompts:

- In your experience, what difference does it make to supervision when power dynamics are acknowledged and explored?
- How would you support a practice supervisor struggling to exercise appropriate role authority with a challenging supervisee?
- What kind of issues take priority in your supervision of others, and are there any areas which get side-lined?

Restorative supervision and containment

> 'Restorative supervision provides a parallel process where the leader feels supported and understood and is able to provide that experience to their staff.'
>
> (Wallbank, 2013, p. 176)

'Restorative' is the term used by Inskipp and Proctor (1988) to describe the support function within supervision. It has been developed by Sonya Wallbank and used primarily in healthcare settings to ensure that the emotions evoked by close involvement with pain, loss and grief are processed rather than suppressed, enabling staff at all levels to remain open and empathetic.

The importance of containment for the emotional impact of practice is recognised but there is a critical disjuncture if this stops at first line management level. Emotional work seeps through the whole fabric of a social work organisation yet 'positive containing supervision' (Toasland, 2007, p. 202) is not always available for those in management roles. Practice supervisors are potentially 'on the receiving end of practitioners', referrers' and senior managers' cumulative anxieties' (Patterson, forthcoming). Just as a worker's capacity for empathy can be blunted if their support needs are neglected, so too can a supervisor become overwhelmed and unable to sustain emotional responsiveness (Cousins, 2004). Effective professional supervision enhances the capacity of first line managers to hold the projections of others without either colluding or withdrawing. Powerful and unconscious dynamics can impact below the surface of a supervision relationship, potentially undermining the supervisor's capacity to stand back and recognise when defensive responses at individual, team or organisational level have been triggered by work deeply laden with emotion.

Typically, these will be protective strategies for coping with distress engendered by direct practice but could also include deep-rooted assumptions linked to race, disability or other aspects of difference. When practice supervisors have a safe, reliable and consistent space in which to process powerful feelings of confusion, distress or inadequacy, they have a better sense of what belongs where, and how best to facilitate their supervisees' own exploration of how practice affects them on a personal and professional level.

Negative capability and safe uncertainty

The apparent paradox of 'negative capability' is increasingly recognised as a valuable attribute (Cornish, 2011) and has relevance to the supervisory role. It describes the capacity to sit with un-knowing and to resist grasping for clear direction prematurely. It is at odds with organisational cultures which are overly task-focused and accountability-driven, and offers instead a searching for deeper understanding. Being comfortable with having no answers is particularly challenging for a novice supervisor keen to prove their worth and yet the willingness to acknowledge uncertainty opens up space for mutuality and shared learning.

There are interesting parallels with the concept of 'safe uncertainty' as 'a place where doubt, uncertainty, unhelpful difference, can be safely, if at times uncomfortably, explored' (Mason, 2019, p. 347). In the context of direct practice, Mason (2019) describes elements integral to 'safe uncertainty' which resonate with constructive and collaborative supervision:

- the value of curiosity
- the ability to take relational risks
- holding positions of authoritative doubt
- developing a culture of contribution.

(see Using a systemic lens in supervision, p. 15).

The art of leadership lies in asking good questions rather than providing answers (Grint, 2010). Those who are supervising the supervisors can model these leadership capabilities and support others to engage with complexity by being alert to insights which surface in unexpected parts of the system.

Reflective prompts:

- What does restorative supervision look (and feel) like for you?
- What are the signs which alert you when anxiety is not being contained within your team or organisation?
- How do you judge when to provide an answer and when to hold back?
- What does 'safe uncertainty' mean to you in the context of supervision?
- How might you explore the value of negative capability as a core supervisory skill when working with practice supervisors?

Reflective spaces

Managers at every level need time and space for reflection. For some, this may be a solitary pursuit, with habits of contemplation and self-reflexivity well established. For others, dialogue with a supervisor, coach or a group of peers can offer helpful structure and more diverse perspectives. Reflection encompasses the head, hands and heart of the work; the 'being' as well as the 'doing'.

Critical reflective practice requires a willingness to question our assumptions and recognise how these are shaped by social, structural and cultural factors. It involves humility in acknowledging the limitations of our own experience and a readiness to challenge our understanding of other people and situations.

The first line manager's role is renowned for being fragmented and reactive. Without deliberate strategies to prioritise and protect time away from the clamour, promoting the value of reflective practice can come across as insincere.

Those responsible for supervising the supervisors have the potential to affirm an organisational culture of thoughtful practice, one which is congruent across every tier and demonstrates a collective commitment to reflection as a core principle not an add-on. Alternative approaches such as peer supervision, action learning and coaching circles can all complement the reflective discussions which form part of one-to-one supervision.

Conclusion

> 'Where managers find it hard to provide more helpful, practice-focused supervision, we need to question what support they have been given, whether they have had proper training, whether they get good-enough support from their own managers, and whether they have adequate time and space to think.'
>
> (Wilkins et al, 2018, p. 502)

Wilkins et al's (2018) research examines the links between supervision, practice and family engagement, and the quote above reminds us that, if supervision is to make a difference to the lives of children and families, the 'golden thread' needs to be woven through all the layers of an organisation.

All too often the aspirations and expectations of professional supervision fall short when it comes to managing the managers. Other demands take precedence and priorities for discussion shift with the increasing distance from direct practice. But this is the arena where quality supervision is modelled, where practice supervisors are nurtured and developed and where the organisation's values are mirrored.

Reflective prompts:

- As a busy middle leader, how do you ensure that you have adequate time and space to think?
- What is your most significant contribution to a culture of reflection across the teams that you manage?
- Imagining a golden thread connecting your supervision to direct work with children and families, what are the qualities you would want to see mirrored?
- Having read this knowledge briefing, what themes have resonated most strongly with you and how will this shape and influence your supervision practice going forward?

Learning points and implications for practice

> A practice supervisor's capacity to provide consistent, thoughtful and containing supervision is dependent on their own supervisory needs being met.

> If we want to support direct practice which is reflective and relational, these qualities should be mirrored in the supervision offered to both managers and practitioners.

> The transition from direct practice to being a supervisor involves a shift of role and identity. Support to adjust and adapt to a new position can be helpful, i.e. acknowledgment of the fractures and continuities as well as the developmental journey which lies ahead.

> Supervision histories indicate that people tend to emulate the supervisors they have valued and reject the behaviours of those they found unhelpful. Here are some of the ways you can lead positively by example:

- Power dynamics are inherent in all supervision relationships. Ensuring that issues of power and authority are openly discussed is the starting point for building trust, valuing difference and avoiding collusion.
- Holding the tension between professional and managerial priorities models an approach which is balanced and responsive to the breadth and complexity of supervision.
- The value of emotional containment is undermined unless it is congruent across all levels of an organisation. Consistent and containing supervision provides a vital buffer against defensive responses.
- Being able to sit with un-knowing and hold back from problem-solving can allow new capacities to develop and deeper insights to surface.
- Acknowledging and addressing your own supervisory needs affirms reflection as a core professional responsibility, not an add-on.

Further reading

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We want to hear more about your experiences of using PSDP resources and tools. Connect via Twitter using #PSDP to share your ideas and hear how other practice supervisors use the resources.

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