5 Becoming a supervisor

Introduction

Becoming or being asked to be a supervisor can be both exhilarating and daunting. Without training or support the task can be overwhelming:

> Supervising is new to me. It's OK, I suppose, but I'm anxious – I'm never quite sure whether I'm giving the people I'm supervising exactly what they are wanting. . . . I'm really afraid about what they will say about me so I don't ask. To be judged by a colleague is just too much.
>
> (Fineman 1985: 52)

This chapter and the other five in Part II will provide some core frameworks for not only carrying out supervision, but also for reviewing, evaluating and receiving quality feedback on your supervisory work.

Why be a supervisor?

There are many reasons why a helping professional might become or might already have become a supervisor. For some it is the natural progression that comes with promotion. They become nursing tutors, senior social workers or area youth officers and discover that instead of spending time seeing clients, for which they had been

trained, they are now spending most of their time seeing junior staff. Some counsellors or therapists find that they have become over time some of the most senior practitioners in their area and supervisees start coming to them. Some staff find that they greatly miss the direct contact with clients and are nostalgic for their earlier days in the work. Such staff can be prone to turning their supervisees into substitute clients, to keep their hand in with therapeutic work.

Others turn to supervision to get away from the pressures of client work, in the false hope that seeing supervisees provides a quiet life. After several years as a helping professional they opt not for a specialist post but to go into student supervision or to become a tutor in their chosen profession. For some the role of supervisor fits more easily than for others. They find themselves at home in a role that requires both personal development and educational skills.

Others are promoted into management because they are better at administration than they are at working with people, but unfortunately for such people and their organizations management positions in the helping professions nearly always include some supervision responsibilities. These staff then become the reluctant supervisors, who are always too busy with 'important meetings' and finishing 'essential reports' to see their supervisees.

Some supervisors are so able to arrange their work that they can mix some direct work with clients, with being a supervisor of others. We would recommend that wherever possible staff who supervise or teach should still be practising whatever they teach or supervise. It is all too easy to get out of touch with the realities of being at the 'coalface' and to wonder why your supervisees are making such heavy weather of what seems perfectly straightforward from your perspective as supervisor. The mix of work can have advantages in both directions. Many new supervisors in several professions have remarked to us how having to supervise other staff helped them revitalize their own work with clients and start to think afresh about what they did themselves. Many people become and remain supervisors through being attracted to the challenge and scope of the role. Here is an account from a colleague:

> I feel most challenged and excited in supervision by the tension between the loving relationship and holding my own authority. Supervision is the place in my work where I can be at my most free ranging – playful, free to think aloud, able to comment on the process, challenge, take a journey into the unknown. Then there is the opposite side when I really have to hold the boundaries, own my own authority and risk the good relationship for the sake of the truth. Each time this has happened, I have found it risky, self-challenging, lonely for a while, but also very mind clearing and transformational and ultimately very strengthening to both the supervisees, myself and our relationship.

Being a supervisor provides an opportunity to increase one's capacity and skills in helping others to learn and develop within their work. As a new supervisor you

are impelled to stop, reflect upon and articulate the ways you have worked as a practitioner, many of which you may have begun to take for granted. The challenge is then to use your own experience to help supervisees develop their own style of working and their own solutions to difficult work situations.

Another reason for becoming a supervisor, which is often denied, can be that of being one up on the other staff. Many of us will remember the joy when we entered our second year at a school; we were no longer the youngest or most gullible, there were now others we could tell 'what is what' to. New supervisors can be eager to mask their own anxieties by using their supervisees to bolster their own pseudo-role of expert – the one who has all the answers.

Finally, another hidden motive in giving supervision is when staff who do not know how to arrange decent supervision for themselves can compensate by giving to other staff the sort of supervision they need and want for themselves, in the vain hope that this will magically lead to someone offering it to them. This is equivalent to those who find it difficult to ask for counselling help going into training as a counsellor, a pattern that Relate has termed 'training as the preferred mode of treatment'.

Getting started

The first prerequisite for being a good supervisor is to be able to actively arrange good supervision for oneself (see Chapter 4). A useful question to ask yourself is: 'Am I currently receiving adequate supervision, both for the other work I am doing and for being a supervisor?'

It is useful to sit down and reflect on the overt and covert motives that you bring to the role of supervisor. This is not in order to suppress the more shameful motives but to find some appropriate way to meet the needs the motives represent. It may be worthwhile to write out examples of positive and negative supervision experiences you have received. What are your positive role models and what sort of supervisory experiences are best to avoid repeating with supervisees? These expectations may well set the tone of what happens in the supervision sessions you give. If you go into supervision expecting the sessions to be full of conflict or to be problematic they may well end up that way. If you go in expecting them to be interesting, engaging and co-operative, you may well produce the necessary climate for that to happen. Brigid Proctor (1988a) suggests that it is most useful to start with the assumption: that workers in the human service professions can be relied on:

- to want to monitor their own practice;
- to learn to develop competence;
- and to respond to support and encouragement.

Starting with this basic assumption, even though at times it may not appear totally true, is helpful in setting a positive tone.

You may be part of an organization where there is a negative culture about supervision, or where supervision is totally absent. You may find it supportive to recognize that some of the difficulties are not all yours and to understand them better read Chapters 14 and 15.

Qualities needed to be a good supervisor

We believe that the essential qualities needed to be a supervisor include the following:

1 **Flexibility:** in moving between theoretical concepts and use of a wide variety of interventions and methods.
2 **A multi-perspectival view:** being able to see the same situation from a variety of angles.
3 **A solid knowledge of the profession and orientation in which they supervise.**
4 **The ability to work transculturally** (see Chapter 8).
5 **The capacity to manage and contain anxiety**, their own and that of the supervisee (see Chapter 9).
6 **Openness to learning** from supervisees and from new situations that emerge (see Chapter 2).
7 **Sensitivity to the wider contextual issues** that impact on both the therapeutic and supervisory process (see Chapters 8, 12–15.
8 **Can handle power appropriately** and in a non-oppressive way (see Chapter 8).
9 **Humour, humility and patience.**

You will notice that most of these qualities, awareness and skills are ones you will already have or have developed in order to be a competent practitioner within the helping professions. Carifio and Hess (1987: 244) quote a variety of sources in looking at the qualities of the 'ideal supervisor' which they see as similar to the qualities of the ideal psychotherapist, but employed differently. These qualities include empathy, understanding, unconditional positive regard, congruence, genuineness (Rogers 1957); warmth and self-disclosure (Coche 1977); flexibility, concern, attention, investment, curiosity, and openness (Albott 1984; Aldridge 1982; Gitterman and Miller 1977; Hess 1980, Gilbert and Evans; 2000). Good counselling or coaching skills are also a prerequisite for being a competent supervisor (Bond and Holland 2010; de Haan 2012).

Brigid Proctor (1988b) makes this point well when she says:

> The task of the supervisor is to help him (the supervisee) feel received, valued, understood on the assumption that only then will he feel safe enough and open enough to review and challenge himself, as well as to value himself and his own abilities. Without this atmosphere, too, he is

unlikely to be open to critical feedback or to pay good attention to managerial instructions.

It will also be the case that a worker often comes to supervision stressed, anxious, angry or afraid. Only if the supervisee feels safe enough to talk about these uncomfortable feelings and fully acknowledge them will they be clear enough to re-evaluate their practice.

The wealth of skills and experience you have had as a practitioner are also relevant to the new role of supervision. Some new supervisors need to be helped to adapt their useful counselling skills to this new context: Others hold on to their counselling skills too tenaciously and, as mentioned earlier, turn their supervisees into quasi-clients.

To start supervising it is important to understand the boundaries of supervision and be able to make clear and mutually negotiated contracts. Many new supervisors are concerned about where supervision ends and therapy or counselling begins. Some new supervisors are anxious that they will be flooded by their supervisees' personal problems. Others are only too eager to play therapist with their supervisees. Sometimes supervisees want to turn their supervisor into a 'quasi-therapist'.

Kadushin (1968) describes a similar pattern in social work, when supervisees play the game of 'Treat me, don't beat me'. This game can be extremely alluring to the supervisor in several ways:

1 Because the game appeals to the . . . worker in him . . . who is still interested in those who have personal problems.
2 Because it appeals to the voyeur in him (many supervisors are fascinated by the opportunity to share in the intimate life of others).
3 Because it is flattering to be selected as therapist.
4 Because the supervisor is not clearly certain as to whether such a redefinition of the situation is not permissible.

Good supervision inevitably focuses some of its attention on the dynamics of the supervisees, but this must always arise out of work-related issues and be done in the service of understanding and being able to manage the work better.

Having understood the boundaries of supervision it is important to develop a framework for supervising, which is appropriate to the setting in which you work. This framework needs to be clear enough to be explainable to your supervisees, but also flexible enough to be adapted to meet the changing needs of different supervisees, at different levels and with a variety of situations.

The most difficult new skill that supervision requires is what we call the 'helicopter ability'. This is the ability to switch focus between the following areas:

- the client that the supervisees are describing;
- the supervisees and their process;
- your own process and the here-and-now relationship with the supervisees;

- the client within their wider context and to help the supervisees do likewise;
- the wider context of the organization and inter-organizational issues.

This skill cannot be learnt before starting and indeed takes many years to develop. What is important is to know of the existence of all the possible levels and perspectives and then gradually to expand the focus within the sessions (see Chapter 7). However, it is not necessary to include all the possible perspectives in every session or your supervisees will get indigestion.

Finally, before we go on to present the different maps and models of supervision, we would like to spend some time looking at the complex roles that a supervisor has to combine. Clarifying the role(s) of the supervisor is half the battle in achieving a clear framework.

Supervisor roles

A supervisor has to encompass many functions in their role:

- a counsellor giving support;
- an educator helping your supervisees learn and develop;
- a manager with responsibilities for the quality of the work the supervisee is doing with their clients;
- a manager or consultant with responsibilities to the organization which is paying for the supervision.

Several writers have looked at the complexity of roles that this provides for the supervisor (Hess 1980; Hawkins 1982; Holloway 1984, 1995; Ellis and Dell 1986; Bernard and Goodyear 1992; Carroll 1996; Hawkins and Smith 2006).

In our training course on core supervision skills we involve all the trainee supervisors in looking at the variety of helping relationships that they have experienced in their lives and the expectations and transactions that these roles involve. We ask them to brainstorm types of people they have gone to for help in their lives; what needs they take to these people and what they expect to receive. We end up with a list that typically looks like Table 5.1.

When the more legitimate roles are not clearly contracted for and defined in supervision and to a lesser extent even when they are, supervisors and supervisees will fall back on other patterns of relating which may be one of the typical transactions mentioned above. It is possible to have *crossed, collusive* or *named* transactions.

A *collusive transaction* happens when the supervisee expects a reassuring mum and the supervisor obliging plays out that role by constantly saying that everything is fine. Such a collusive transaction may feel good to both parties at the time, but is unproductive as it feeds the neurotic needs of both parties rather than the needs of the supervision.

If on the other hand the supervisee expected a reassuring mum and the supervisor played judge, there would be a *crossed transaction*. In the latter case the

Table 5.1 Helping roles

Helping role	*What you take to them*	*What you expect to receive*
Doctor	Symptoms	Diagnosis, cure
Priest	Sins, confessions	Penitence, forgiveness
Teacher	Ignorance, questions	Knowledge, answers
Solicitor	Injustice	Advocacy
Coach	Poor performance	Improved performance
Judge	Crimes	Retribution
Friend	Yourself	Acceptance, listening ear
Mother	Hurts	Comfort
Car mechanic	Mechanical failure	Technical correction and servicing

supervisee would probably feel misunderstood and put down and that the supervisor was very unsupportive.

A *named transaction* is when one or other of the parties names the patterns and games that are being played, so they become a choice rather than an unaware and possibly compulsive process.

The supervisor has to be able to combine the roles of educator, supporter and at times manager in an appropriate blend. As Hawthorne (1975: 179). notes: 'It requires effort and experience to integrate these into a comfortable and effective identity.'

Taking appropriate authority and power

Much of the conflict around the role of the supervisor emerges from the difficulty that many supervisors have in finding an appropriate way of taking authority and handling the power inherent in the role. Lillian Hawthorne (1975:179) has written about this difficult and yet crucial task:

> Many supervisors, especially new ones, have difficulty adjusting to their new authority. . . . The balance which they have worked out for their personal lives between dominance and submission is upset by the new responsibility. The supervisory relationship is complex, intense and intimate . . . Sometimes the effort (to take on authority) is hampered by the supervisor's unfamiliarity with the requirements of his role, by difficulties stemming from personal experiences with authority, or by discomfort in the one-to-one relationship.

Hawthorne goes on to describe the sorts of games that supervisors play either to abdicate power or to manipulate power. These draw on the work of Eric Berne and other writers in transactional analysis approaches to counselling, coaching and psychotherapy. Abdication games include the following:

- *'They won't let me.'* I would like to agree to what you are asking, but senior management won't let me.
- *'Poor me.'* I'm sorry about having to cancel our weekly conferences, but you have no idea how busy I am with these monthly lists for the director.
- *'I'm really a nice guy.'* Look at how helpful and pleasant I am being to you.
- *'One good question deserves another.'* How would you answer that question?

Manipulation of power games includes:

- *'Remember who is boss.'* Artificially asserting the power of one's role.
- *'I'll tell on you.'* Threatening to pass on information about the supervisee to more senior management.
- *'Father or mother knows best.'* Acting in a parental or patronizing manner.
- *'I am only trying to help you.'* Defending against criticism from the supervisee by pleading altruism.
- *'If you knew Dostoyevsky like I know Dostoyevsky.'* Showing off your knowledge to make the supervisee feel inferior.

In Chapter 8 on transcultural supervision, we explore the interplay between personal power, cultural power and role power. With the role of supervisor comes the responsibility to be aware of our own power in each of these three areas and to learn ways of utilizing this power in ways that are appropriate, well-intentioned, anti-oppressive and sensitive to the particular background of the supervisee.

In Hawkins and Smith (2006) there is a useful model that shows how a supervisor can develop their own 'authority, presence and impact' and how all three are necessary to create both a safe place to explore and enough edge to enable a transformational shift in the supervisee and their work.

In the next chapter we will go on to look at positive ways of combining the roles of educator, supporter and manager, and at taking the appropriate authority, depending on the experience of the supervisees and the supervision contract you have with them.

Ethics

It is important before starting supervising to revisit the ethical standards that underpin your professional client work and to consider how each of these standards applies to working as a supervisor. Some professional bodies have their own specific ethics and professional standards for supervisors and we recommend that you familiarize yourself with your own profession's latest code of practice and ethics for supervision. You could also list the principles you think the supervisor and supervisee should espouse and enact. We discuss ethics much more fully in Chapter 9.

Managing your development as a supervisor

There are two attitudes that are often held by new supervisors:

- Now I have been made a supervisor I should know how to do it and should just get on and do the job.
- I do not know anything about supervision and the only way I am going to learn to be a proper supervisor is from a full supervision training course.

Both ways of thinking are unhelpful and prevent new supervisors from carefully assessing their own knowledge and abilities and what they need to learn beyond these. It prevents them from realizing that learning to be a competent supervisor can come from a great variety of sources and is a lifetime process. A good training course is an essential component of any supervisor's development, but it should be part of a great variety of learning possibilities that can be used in different combinations to feed into each other.

A possible learning programme could look like Figure 5.1. This learning cycle can flow in any of the directions and be reordered in any way that most suits individual learning needs and opportunities. However, if your learning is to be systematic we need to start the process by carrying out a self-appraisal and learning needs assessment. It is important to recognize that the craft of supervision has many dimensions and requires a range of competencies, capabilities and capacities. Hawkins and Smith (2006) define these different levels:

- **Competencies** we see as the ability to utilize a skill or use a tool.
- **Capability** is the ability to use the tool or skill, at the right time, in the right way and in the right place.
- **Capacity** is a human quality rather than a skill and more to do with how you are, rather than what you do.

We provide our own supervision trainees with a self- and 360-degree assessment tool which they can fill in and use to get feedback from their supervisor, supervisees,

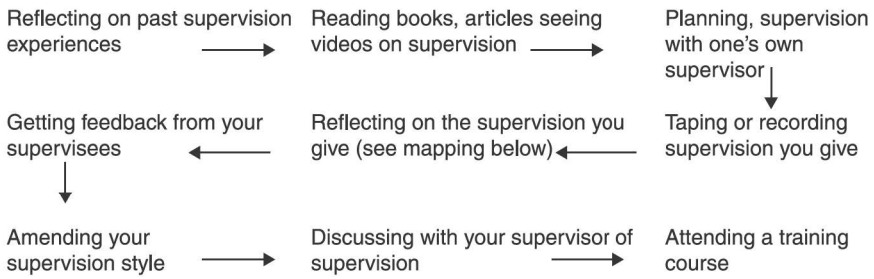

Figure 5.1 A possible learning programme

peers and their tutor on the supervision training. This is available from our website (www.cstd.co.uk).

Conclusion

To be a supervisor is both a complex and enriching task. It is deceptively similar to and uses some of the skills of one's work with clients. However, the supervisor must be clear about how it is different in content, focus and boundaries and that it entails a more complex ethical sensitivity. It is also important to explore the feelings, motives and expectations of being in the role of supervisor, as they will have a large effect on the supervision climate that is set in the sessions. Above all, supervision is a place where both parties are constantly learning and to stay being a good supervisor is to return regularly to question not only the work of the supervisees but also what we ourselves do as supervisors and how we carry it out.