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Reflective Supervision – Making it Real

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In this Special Report for CareKnowledge, Dr Neil Thompson briefly discusses the concepts of reflective supervision and reflective practice, and then brings a particular focus to the conditions that are needed if that kind of supervision and practice are to be best supported.

Beyond 'snoopervision'

I was once involved as a panel member in some interviews for a training officer post. The questions to ask the candidates had been agreed in advance, and one of them was: 'What is your understanding of supervision?' We got some impressive answers, although one candidate disappointed us greatly. His response was along the lines of: 'Supervision literally means watching over, and so that is how I Interpret it; it is about watching over staff to make sure that they are doing their job properly'. 'Is there anything further to it?' we asked, and were surprised that he replied in the negative. Keeping an eye on people – nothing more, nothing less – was how he understood supervision. This is what is often referred to as 'snoopervision': 'Are your records up to date? What about your reviews? How many cases can you close this month?'

Sadly, I am aware from running training courses, speaking at conferences and being involved in consultancy projects that snoopervision is alive and well, and rather common. Of course, there is a standard-setting or performance management element of supervision, but the problem comes when it becomes reduced to this, when the other vitally important elements are played down or even disappear off the agenda altogether.

When snoopervision is to the fore in supervision, it is clear that the people involved have lost sight of what the process is all about. It has been detached from the broader picture of people management. It is certainly not *reflective* supervision – that is, thoughtful and analytical.

At one time, people management was seen as separate from mainstream management. There were Personnel Departments that specialised in people issues. So, if a manager had a concern about an employee, they would send that person to Personnel, rather than deal with the matter themselves. Then, along came the Human Resources (HR) approach, with its slogan that an organisation's most valuable resource is its human resource – its people. Part of this new approach was the idea that, because people are so crucial in ensuring organisational success, *all* managers needed to be skilled and competent in managing people, not just managing budgets, resources, strategy and so on.

Unfortunately, this new approach has had only mixed success. While most organisations now use the term 'human resources', rather than 'personnel', many have not succeeded in instilling the high-quality people management across their management teams that was supposed to accompany the change in the terminology. It was the underlying philosophy that was supposed to change, not just the words used.

Key to the HR approach is the idea of getting the *best* out of people, rather than trying to get the *most*. Trying to screw every last bit of work and energy out of employees to get the most out of them is not a wise move, as it breeds resentment

and discontent, and is therefore likely to reduce performance and productivity. It relies on treating people as a resource, but forgets that they are a *human* resource. Getting the most out of people, by contrast, is about making sure that they feel valued, supported and safe, that they grow and develop and are therefore less likely to leave, to cause problems or do harm to the organisation.

Supervision, of course, is part of this; it is (or should be) a central part of how organisations get the best out of their employees. In technical terms, what this means is using supervision to get the best return on the investment (salaries and other costs) made in the human resource. In human terms, it means treating people as people, so that everyone benefits from what good supervision has to offer:

- The supervisee gains from having support, guidance, reassurance and assistance with learning
- The supervisor can gain considerable job satisfaction when they see supervisees grow and flourish, and, of course, their job becomes much easier with fewer problems
- Clients of the organisation get a better service and quality of support
- The organisation gets better results and has fewer problems.

It seems sad, then, that the full potential of supervision is not realised in so many organisations.

Making supervision 'reflective'

Some years ago, the term 'reflective supervision' became quite popular. I looked closely into this and, from what I could see, it was mainly a new name for good old-fashioned proper supervision. I remember one workforce development manager telling me that her idea of reflective supervision was a process that made supervisees think carefully about their work, be better prepared for it and able to learn from it. To me, that was precisely the sort of supervision I had been giving and receiving for over 20 years. New wine in old bottles, it would seem.

But, despite that, it is a term that I welcome for two reasons. First, it serves as a much-needed counterbalance to (the largely non-reflective) snoopervision, and that is undoubtedly a move in the right direction. Second, it fits well with the important concept of reflective practice. Supervision sessions should not only be reflective (encouraging careful thought and analysis) in their own right, but also a spur to ongoing reflective practice. Let's look at each of these in a little more detail.

Reflective supervision sessions

Many participants on courses have told me that their supervision has mainly consisted of mechanistically going through their caseload. When I have asked: '... and do you find that helpful?', the answer has always been 'no'. 'And what about promoting your professional development and personal support to help you achieve your full potential?', the conversation would continue, but still, the answer would be no. So, to begin with, when it comes to making supervision sessions reflective, there needs to be a much broader focus than case or workload management.

What reflective supervision should do is provide opportunities to step back and see the big picture, concerning both specific cases (or pieces of work) and the overall workload. This should enable helpful patterns to emerge, patterns that should be useful in developing a fuller understanding and planning how best to move forward.

It should provide the basis for thinking issues through, encouraging an intelligent, well-informed approach to practice that should also be significant in terms of boosting confidence and reinforcing a sense of professionalism.

Promoting reflective practice

There is little point in having reflective supervision sessions if subsequent practice fails to be reflective. So, it is worth considering what contribution reflective supervision can make to promoting an ongoing commitment to making all practice reflective. In my book [*The Social Worker's Practice Manual*](#) (Avenue Media Solutions, 2018), I offer two definitions of reflective practice, one very serious and one slightly tongue-in-cheek, but none the less significant. For the entirely serious description, I describe reflective practice as intelligent, thoughtful practice informed by professional knowledge, skills and values.

The other way I put it is: You've got a brain, use it. In other words, good practice requires a thoughtful approach to what we do, one that takes account, and makes good use, of our professional knowledge and the associated values and skills – the exact opposite of unthinking, routinised practice carried out on some sort of automatic pilot or driven uncritically by anxiety.

A common misunderstanding of reflective practice is that it is somehow set apart from ordinary practice, that it is something we take time out to do.

I have often been asked by participants on reflective practice courses I have run when the best time to do reflective practice is. I have always answered in the same way, namely: 'If you work 9 to 5, the best time to do reflective practice is 9 to 5'. That is, we need to move away from seeing reflective practice as the exception, rather than the rule. Our practice needs to be intelligent, thoughtful and well informed all the time, not just at periodic intervals.

What reflective supervision should be able to do is lay the foundations of reflective practice, make it clear that relying on routines, habits, guesswork and copying others is not a serious or wise basis for professional practice. The exercises in the Pavilion *Reflective Supervision* learning and development manual (Thompson and Gilbert, 2019) should prove helpful in that regard.

The advantages of reflective supervision

Without a reflective basis to supervision, various problems can arise:

- Supervisees fail to grow, develop or flourish; they can stagnate and, in some cases, allow their practice to fall below a professionally acceptable standard. If they are not continuing to learn and develop, they are getting steadily out of touch as new developments leave them behind.

- They can become defensive and may start playing games (responding to snoopervision by just telling their supervisor what they think they want to hear to keep them at arm's length).
- A process of 'upward delegation' can occur – that is, supervisees fail to take responsibility for decision making. A common, but dangerous, process is for a supervisee to say to the supervisor: 'What do you think I should do about this?' Instead of the supervisor giving a reflective response along the lines of 'What do you think you should do? What are the options?', what will often happen is that the answer is something like: 'I think you should do this ...'. That is, the decision making is made mainly by the supervisor, thereby starving the supervisee of opportunities to develop their decision-making skills and confidence.

But, perhaps the most significant problem is that they are missing out on the value of supervision. By not appreciating how much of a positive difference reflective supervision can make, organisations can fail to produce the best results possible in terms of what they are trying to achieve.

By contrast, where reflective supervision is being put to good use, there can be:

- Higher standards of practice, beneficial to all involved
- Higher levels of morale, engagement and productivity
- Higher levels of confidence
- Continuous learning, creating greater opportunities for ongoing improvement
- Fewer mistakes, less anxiety
- A better working environment to retain existing staff and attract new ones; and
- A stronger sense of professionalism.

The investment needed to develop a consistent level of reflective supervision is therefore likely to be worthwhile in terms of the positive differences that can be brought about as a result. So, what needs to happen to make reflective supervision a reality? Let's have a look.

Making it happen

There is no simple or guaranteed way of making sure that reflective supervision becomes the norm. However, there are important steps that can be taken, and here I explore some of the main ones:

- Is there a supervision policy? Is it real? I have come across many organisations that do not have a policy about supervision, and so, in those circumstances, it is not surprising that there was confusion, a lack of clarity about what was expected, considerable inconsistency and no firm basis of good practice. I have also come across even more organisations that do have a supervision policy, but one that is not 'real' – that is, it may exist on paper or as a computer file, but it has no bearing on actual supervisory practice. For example, on several occasions, I have been given a copy of an organisation's supervision policy as part of my preparation. Yet, while running the course, when I have asked participants about this policy, most have been unaware of its existence or have known it existed but not had sight of it. So, what is

needed is a clear and helpful policy and, importantly, key people within the organisation who make sure that it is known and used.

- Training for both supervisors and supervisees is also important. It may seem evident that training for supervisors would be necessary, but I have a lot of experience of also running courses for supervisees, helping them to appreciate, and be committed to, their role in making supervision a success. Having supervisees on board as a result of having attended training can significantly increase the chances of supervision being effective. Supervision needs to be seen as a two-way professional process, with both parties actively endeavouring to make it work, rather than a one-way bureaucratic process, something that the supervisor does to the supervisee who just receives it passively.
- Supervision for supervisors also has a role to play. Ideally, everyone in an organisation should be receiving supervision, and yet in many organisations, it is only basic grade staff who receive it. It is as if, once you reach a managerial level, you don't need supervision. Perhaps if supervision is nothing more than snoopervision, there may be a case for such an assumption. However, when it comes to seeing supervision as being a process of achieving the best results for all concerned, then there is no reason why all employees should not receive some level of supervision. This gives inexperienced supervisors the opportunity to learn from being supervised by someone who – hopefully – is modelling best practice.
- Dovetailing with appraisal is also important. Ideally, annual appraisal (or performance review as it is called in some organisations) should identify each employee's strengths and areas for development. Then, regular supervision should focus on making the strengths even stronger and addressing the areas for development. The following appraisal meeting should then review the progress made. This helps to ensure that developmental issues are incorporated.
- Clarity about expectations is also an essential part of all this. Both parties need to be fully *au fait* with what is expected to happen in supervision and what it is supposed to achieve. What can be very helpful in this regard is the use of contracts. Such a contract need not be anything complicated, just a straightforward clarification of what the supervisor and supervisee can expect from each other. Establishing these 'ground rules' provides a basis for nipping any problems in the bud as they start to emerge, as the contract can be used as a reminder of what has been agreed.
- Recognising that supervision should be a two-way professional process is also a positive step forward. As I mentioned earlier, the active involvement of both parties to achieve professional goals is to be preferred to a simple box-ticking exercise. The former boosts morale, the latter undermines it.
- Honesty, openness and trust are both signs of good supervision and an important basis for it. There should be no room for game playing or deception in supervision. If the two participants cannot operate on the basis of mutual trust, then there is little hope that the process can be an effective one, let alone reach optimal standards. Where serious problems arise in this regard, there may be a need for a third-party mediator to help resolve the situation, or even for a change of supervisor.

Underpinning all this is leadership. In a very real sense, supervision is a form of leadership. Leaders work collectively with teams and groups of staff to move forward towards achieving their shared objectives. Supervision is a one-to-one version of this – in a sense, a micro version of the macro process of leadership.

How do you know it is working?

That's an easy question to answer: people look forward to it! A good litmus test is this: Which is a supervisee more likely to say, a or b?

- a. 'I've got supervision tomorrow, that's great';
- b. 'Oh damn, I've got supervision tomorrow'.

If the answer is (b), then clearly, there is much work to be done to improve the quality and effectiveness of supervision. If supervision is offering you valuable guidance and reassurance, is helping you grow, develop and flourish, then why shouldn't you look forward to it? By contrast, if it is purely a tedious process of going through cases, tasks or projects, with little or no apparent benefit, why would anyone want to look forward to that?

Conclusion

I have been fortunate in my career in that I have received both excellent and appalling supervision. It taught me what helps and what certainly doesn't. I have seen what an incredibly positive difference good supervision can make, but I have also noticed that poor-quality supervision can be a complete waste of time and effort, and even counterproductive (creating resentment, lowering morale, undermining confidence, contributing to staff turnover, and so on). The significance of supervision is, therefore, of major proportions.

As part of my 'portfolio' career over the past 20-plus years, I have been involved in providing expert witness services. This involves reviewing documentation in cases where a service provider is being sued for negligence or malpractice. I have learned a great deal from undertaking this work, and various important themes have emerged from it. One of those themes has been the crucial role of supervision, or rather the lack of it. Time and again, when working through the files and being concerned about the poor practice, I have wondered: 'Where was the supervisor in this? Why were they not ensuring that what are often fundamental errors are being avoided? Why were they not teaching the worker concerned how to practise much more safely and effectively?'

Time and effort invested in developing high-quality supervision are going to be worth it when we consider how much good it can do and how much harm can arise from its absence or the problems caused by inadequate levels of supervisory practice.

As we have seen, supervision needs to be reflective in two senses. Each one-to-one meeting needs to be reflective by stepping back, seeing the big picture and learning from it. The supervisory process needs to be geared towards promoting and reinforcing reflective practice – that is, intelligent, thoughtful practice rooted in professional knowledge, skills and values.

About the author

Dr Neil Thompson is an independent writer, educator and adviser. His recent books include *Promoting Resilience* (co-edited with Gerry Cox) and *Childhood Trauma and Recovery* (with Mary Walsh). He is series editor for the Pavilion *Learning from Practice* series of learning and development manuals. His Manifesto for Making a Difference: From Surviving to Thriving is available for free from the Learning Zone at <https://neilthompson.info/> .

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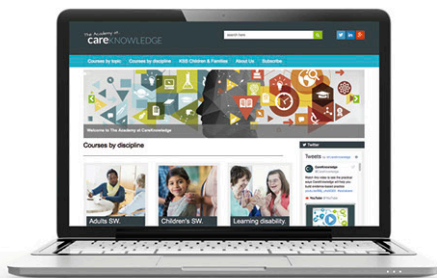
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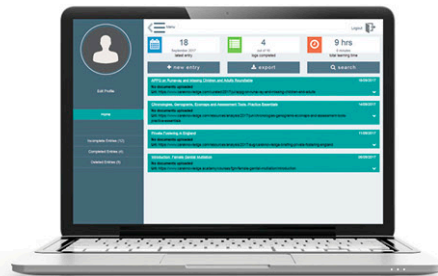


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