Supervision, functions and characteristics of a good supervisor

Introduction

Supervision in the workplace has become a fundamentally important exercise for both workers and clients. This article explores and discusses key messages of the supervision. It provides insights and orientation about the functions of supervision and characteristics of a good supervisor in human services. The article is a good resource for those who want to learn about supervision and those who want to advance their supervision practices.

Supervision has been around since 1970s as a form of counselling service to clients. After 1970s it began to move away from counselling model to more educational process which aims to assist workers to reflect on the processes of their practice when dealing with clients or vulnerable victims. In other words, supervision has a history of changing focus from the person doing the work to the work itself. This has come as a result of social roles and developmental frameworks in community services (Carroll, 2007). At present, supervision is about supporting, getting work results to meet administrative needs and being educational to ensure that supervisees are growing professionally in their careers.

The usual expectation from a supervisor is that he or she must have skills in humanity; in other words they must have good people skills. Some supervisors are good at the technical skills of their job but are less able use their human skills which help in building relationships, loyalty and motivations for supervisees to succeed in their profession. In my past experiences, I had the opportunity to supervise supervisees. I was also supervised by some supervisors that had different experiences based on their human skills, training and understanding of supervision in human services.

Having regular supervision with a qualified practitioner is extremely vital for professional development and ethical practising for community services workers. Supervision has become more important in the community services sector. Yet, it is sad to see some supervisors with a less than adequate understanding of what
supervision is. These kinds of supervisors maybe people with less experience in community services or they have not studied humanity subjects to prepare them for the supervision role. On other side of a coin, some workers/supervisees have less or no understanding of the supervision. Full time workers should at least have one hour supervision with their team leader or manager every fortnight. The one hour session is used for reflection and feedback about work performance.

Supervision is about nurturing employees and not about intimidating, challenging, or over powering them. It is about sharing knowledge, skills, work expectations as well as being committed to make supervisees successful in their roles rather than waiting for them to make a mistake. Supervisors need to have clear thinking and a specific idea of how one can support the individuals who work for you and the organisation. It is the same as if you have a specific plan to maintain a service or process. Good supervision requires a road map to get people to where they want to go with their roles and careers (Wenger, 2009).

Theory and function of supervision.

Supervision is all about reflecting on your role, the opportunity to grow professional and remain competent in your role as well as keeping a professional relationship with supervisor and team. Reflection is a process whereby a person reflects on what she/he brings to an interaction and how this may impact on how she/he views and manages that interaction. Supervision promotes a clear understanding of capacity building of individuals and provides leadership and strategic thinking in order to implement work related tasks. Understanding function, role and authority of the position held involves openness, particularly open interaction and honest communication (Borders, 2001). Therefore, supervision should:

- Improve the quality of decision-making and interventions.
- Enable effective line management and organisational accountability.
- Identify and address issues related to caseloads and workload management.
- Help to identify and achieve personal learning, career and development opportunities.

These functions are reinforced by the Alfred Kadushin’s theory and model of supervision. There are many theories written about supervision practice that are not
mentioned in this article. The writer encourages people to visit and read many theories in social work, social psychology and counseling that discusses supervision. Alfred Kadushin argues supervision in social work is useful and helpful in many ways. His argument goes back to earlier theories such as John Dawson (1926) who stated the functions of supervision in the following terms:

- Administrative: the promotion and maintenance of good standards of work, co-ordination of practice with policies of administration, the assurance of an efficient and smooth-running office;
- Educational: the educational development of each individual worker on the staff in a manner calculated to evoke her fully to realise her possibilities of usefulness; and
- Supportive: the maintenance of harmonious working relationships, the cultivation of esprit de corps (morale of the group or team spirit).

Supporting workers to learn and grow professionally is one of the key roles of a manager within an organization. Some theories argue that managers must have a concern for both performance and learning of workers (Smith, 2012). The essentially managerial aspects of a managers’ work are their responsibility for monitoring and improving the work of others; and their managerial effectiveness is determined by their capacity to improve the work of others. If managers are not able to make this contribution, then what value are they adding? The ultimate justification of managers’ existence is the improvement of the work of their subordinates. If managers fail in this way they fail as managers (Smith, 2012).

Characteristics of supervisors

What are they characteristics of a good supervisor? The answer will be somehow the same to answers given by some academics and practitioners who write up supervision theory. A good supervisor seems to have many of the same qualities of good teachers and good practitioners. They are empathic, genuine, open, and flexible. They respect their supervisees as persons and as developing professionals, and are sensitive to individual differences such as gender, race, ethnicity, skin colour and age of supervisees. They appear to be clam, comfortable with strategic thinking.
evaluative and function intrinsically in the supervisor role, giving clear and frequent indications of their evaluation of the counsellor’s performance. Good supervisors must really enjoy supervision, remain committed to helping the supervisee grow, and show commitment during supervision as well as being prepared for the supervision session. Supervisors show high levels of conceptual functioning, have a clear sense of their own strengths and limitations as a supervisor, and can identify how their personal traits and interpersonal style may affect the conduct of supervision. Finally, good supervisors have a sense of humor which helps both the supervisor and supervisee get through rough spots in their work together and achieve a healthy perspective on their work. Such personal traits and relationship factors are considered as significant as technical prowess in supervision (Borders, 2001).

Supervisors are expected to develop relationships and environments that enable their supervisees to work together and respond to change. Both the supervisor and supervisee must be committed to their performance, common goals, and willingness to share knowledge and experiences in a respectful manner (Smith, 2012). In terms of professional characteristics, roles and skills, good supervisors are knowledgeable and competent practitioners and supervisors. They have extensive training and wide experience in the field, which have helped them achieve a broad perspective of the work. They can effectively employ a variety of supervision interventions, and can deliberately choose from these interventions based on their assessment of a supervisee's learning needs, learning style, and personal characteristics. They seek ongoing growth in counselling and supervision through continuing education activities, self-evaluation, and feedback from supervisees, clients, other supervisors, and colleagues (Carroll, 2007).

Good supervisors also have the professional skills of good teachers (e.g., applying learning theory, developing sequential short-term goals, evaluating interventions and supervisee learning) and they are good consultants (e.g., objectively assessing problem situation, providing alternative interventions and/or conceptualisations of a problem or client, facilitating supervisee brainstorming of alternatives, collaboratively developing strategies for supervisee and client growth). In fact, good supervisors are able to function effectively in the roles of teacher,
practitioner, and consultant, making informed choices about which role to employ at any given time with a particular supervisee (Borders, 2001).

CONCLUSION

Supervision can be helpful when both the supervisor and supervisee respect the time dedicated to supervision and focus on the areas that the supervisee needs assistance or support. Being a supervisor can be an enjoyable and challenge role, and the supervisor must be prepared and bring useful skills from a variety of professional roles as well as knowing how to and when to use those in different situations. I must draw on my experience of both being supervisor and supervisee. I have raised some particular points that are fundamentally important for one to think about.

- The central focus of supervision is the quality of practice offered by the supervisee to clients.
- Supervision can be seen as having three aspects: administration (normative); education (formative) and support (restorative).
- Supervisors' authority is derived from their positions in agencies and/or the appropriate community of practice (profession).
- There are particular issues arising from the hierarchical position of supervisors.
- In some forms of supervision direct observation of practice is a major obstacle to the exploration of practice; in others it is an aid.

The author of this article is a social worker by training and has performed supervision in his past works as a supervisor.
References:


