



PSDP - Resources for Managers of Practice Supervisors: Building a positive supervision culture

Introduction

Supervision takes place within an organisational context, not simply as a result of an agreement between its participants. This knowledge briefing is designed to explore that organisational context and its influence on supervision and frontline practice.

Focusing solely on the quality of interaction between supervisor and supervisee is unlikely to maximise the effectiveness of supervision. Due attention must be paid to the broader organisational system, which exerts a powerful influence on what happens in the supervision room. By looking at this broader context, those with power and influence can understand the part they play in creating the necessary conditions for effective supervision to flourish.

There is evidence of a disconnect between the knowledge and skills taught to supervisors and what actually happens in the workplace. For example, regarding supervisors' intention to support the reflective practice of their supervisees, many social workers experience more of a task-focused, problem-solving approach (Wilkins Forrester and Grant 2017). The continual call for 'professional curiosity' in so many safeguarding reviews indicates that supervision is not providing the space for critical reflection that will support practitioners to think slowly (Kahneman 2011) and pay attention to the meaning of their immediate intuitive responses. Consequently, important questions are not asked either in supervision or in direct work with children, families and colleagues. These supervisors want to do a good job – what is it that gets in the way?

One answer is: the culture that supports the supervision process. This knowledge briefing therefore focuses on the relationship between organisational culture and supervision culture and is aimed at those who have responsibility for supporting and sustaining effective supervision across their organisation. In doing so, this briefing aims to articulate some of what might be getting in the way, and provides an opportunity to reflect on the positive role senior leaders can play in establishing a strong culture of supervision.

This is not an easy or self-evident process. So this briefing aims to help those who support supervisors understand the complex dynamics involved and learn how to use their influence to create a positive supervision culture within their organisation. In doing so, it draws on what we know from the literature and on knowledge of organisational cultures in social work elsewhere. In addition, it's informed by practice knowledge, which stems from talking to hundreds of supervisors at training events and from the process of carrying out (what were formerly known as) serious case reviews (now known as Child Safeguarding Practice Reviews).

The intention is that, after reading this resource, those responsible for supervising supervisors at any level in the organisation will have a deeper understanding of the issues that can affect the quality of supervision and what the organisation and individuals within it can do to help supervision thrive.

Organisational culture and supervision practice – why is it important?

Promoting a positive supervision culture amounts to creating the conditions in which effective supervision can take place. Responsibility for this sits at different levels within an organisation but it's most likely to be successful when:

- > there are consistent messages, and congruence between them, about what good supervision looks like
- > expected behaviours for *everyone* responsible for good supervision are communicated
- > a whole-system approach is employed, paying attention to both what is said and what is done at organisational, team and professional practice levels.

We know these criteria vary from organisation to organisation and that evidence suggests supervisors are not always receiving the kind of support they need to do their job well (Patterson 2019). Understanding the way in which the culture of the organisation operates may help to explain why this may be the case.

Organisational cultures are sometimes referred to as the 'way things are done around here', although that's only part of the story. Cultures can perhaps be best understood as a dynamic process and a, 'pattern of beliefs, values and behavioural norms that come to be taken for granted as basic assumptions and eventually drop out of awareness.' (Schein 2017, p6)

Schein has developed a three-level model to explain this pattern. The model helps set the scene for consideration of the interface between organisational culture and the messages flowing from it, and of the behaviours that are more likely to support good supervision practice. Promoting a positive supervision culture demands reflection on where contradictions or mixed messages may be hindering supervision practice.

Schein's three-level model explains culture as:

1. Artifacts – visible and feelable phenomena

These are the physical arrangements and the range of behaviours seen as normal and acceptable, ie 'the way things are done around here, which Schein describes as easy to observe and difficult to decipher.

A supervision policy with expectations of the supervisor and the supervision process may be clearly visible, but the underlying meaning may be less obvious. Does the policy reflect an organisation which believes that policy and procedure alone will achieve good practice or is the policy there to provide the clarity and containment needed to support the supervision process?

2. Shared beliefs and values

Culture is expressed not only by how things are done but also by how they are talked about and justified: beliefs are explicit and conscious.

At this level there is likely to be discomfort if the articulated values do not fit with observed behaviour. 'Reflective supervision' may be promoted via policy documents and training but other behaviours may contradict this message, eg:

- > command and control management techniques
- > task completion being valued over critical reflection and defensible decision-making
- > asking for help being seen as a weakness.

3. Deeper shared assumptions

These are largely unconscious and hard to change. They will have been shaped through personal experiences and professional training, and then reinforced through work and life experiences.

The ways in which power and authority are used (and who feels valued) within supervision are likely to be influenced as much by unconscious biases as by explicit policy frameworks or training. An understanding of the social GRRRAACCEEESSS (a model which describes aspects of personal and social identity that include gender, geography, race, religion, age, ability, appearance, class, culture, education, ethnicity, employment, sexuality, sexual orientation and spirituality – Burnham 2013) is therefore particularly important at this level.

In addition, Luska, Terrazasb and Salcidoc (2017) argue that it is necessary for social work supervisors to engage in critical cultural competent social work practice – practice which will ensure that supervision moves beyond, ‘appreciating and honouring diversity’ to examining and ‘addressing the unequal and dominant relations that are a consequence of oppression based on identity.’ (p465)

This means that organisations will need to consider whether or not aspects of personal and social identity that may be influencing supervision are ‘on the table’? Are the views of supervisees valued and are they given an opportunity to give feedback on how they experience supervision in order to challenge any assumptions and beliefs about how it’s working? Is the importance of the supervision agreement promoted and demonstrated at all levels?

A moment of reflection

Think about your own organisation in the context of the three-level model:

1. How are expectations about supervision articulated? What are the underlying messages? Are they consistent or contradictory?
2. How far do the messages about supervision fit with other dominant messages about expectations of the social work task?
3. How well does the organisation understand the individual assumptions that might underpin supervision practice? Is the voice of the supervisee valued and heard?

A word of caution: this is not meant to be a linear and simplistic explanation for the link between the organisational context and supervision practice. As Mannion and Davies (2018), writing about organisational culture in health care, note:

‘Some of the deeper values and assumptions are taught in early professional education... reinforced through ongoing professional interactions and then made visible as accepted practices.’ (p3)

In order to adequately support supervision, attention must be paid to the influences on and dynamics between organisational, team and professional cultures.



A moment of reflection

At an organisational level: How far do I feel comfortable with the articulated values and expectations of the organisation in relation to supervision? How are these demonstrated at all levels within the organisation?

At a team / peer level: What is the history of supervision in my team / peer group and for those people that I supervise? How has that affected the way in which supervision is delivered and received?

At a professional level: Is there congruence or a disconnect between the values and expectations of my profession and the way in which I supervise / experience supervision?

It's possible that professional identity and culture will become less dominant over time as supervisors become senior managers and therefore responsible for developing these organisational cornerstones.

Tensions arise when the culture is at odds with dominant professional values (the tendency of senior staff to conduct task-focused one-to-one meetings, as opposed to reflective supervision sessions, is an example of this), which can result in supervisees avoiding sessions with their supervisor as, 'they assume that they won't get their needs met or because they feel unsure of their role and don't want the risk of exposure or because to need supervision is equated with "not being able to cope."' (Ofsted 2012)

These tensions help to explain why supervisors sometimes refer to themselves as the 'jam in the sandwich', operating in the space between the needs of their supervisees as professional social workers and the demands of the wider organisation (Gibb 2001). If this link is not made explicit and the supervisor's crucial role of mediation is not valued, it can be extremely emotionally draining, particularly where the stakes in the work they supervise are high.

There are a number of consequences when an unsupervised supervisor has to manage such high levels of anxiety. As described by Menzies-Lyth (1970) in the seminal work on this topic, supervisors may protect themselves unconsciously through depersonalisation and distancing from the supervisee, which likely results in a lack of focus on important details of the work. This may be combined with a reluctance to understand the supervisee as an individual, or what they're bringing to their work, and how this may affect their thoughts and responses. In such circumstances, the critical reflection and constructive challenge needed to explore complex issues will be lost.

Case study

Jon had recently become a team manager and wanted to prove himself within an organisation that was aiming to be 'outstanding'. As a result, he was anxious to be seen to be coping and doing a good job. The organisation outwardly promoted supervision as a core activity and had provided comprehensive training for supervisors, which Jon attended. An overriding message from the organisation was that social work caseloads needed to be reduced and families provided with early help where possible. Alongside this was an equally powerful message that this should include a focus on the safety and wellbeing of children.

Jon's own supervision consisted of a focus on targets achieved within the team and when asked if he needed more support, he said he was fine. One of Jon's supervisees was Beth, a very experienced social worker. As there were newly qualified staff on the team, he focused on them and trusted Beth to get on with her work. He also found Beth to be a prickly individual who did not allow him to get to know her well and so he was reluctant to challenge her.

Beth was working with a family where the issues were complex and Jon knew that she was very focused on supporting them and working towards case closure. So he trusted her opinion that they were doing well. Later, it came to light that Beth had missed crucial appointments, failed to carry out important pieces of work and had not understood risks within the family.

A moment of reflection

- > What assumptions about supervision do you see being made here and by whom?
- > What would have naming them potentially achieved?
- > What can we learn from this case?
- > What could have happened differently?
- > How might the supervisor / supervisee relationship, and its associated power imbalances, have impacted on effective decision-making and reflection on practice?

Promoting a positive culture

Strategy, behaviour and relationships

The case study illustrates the complexity of factors affecting the quality of supervision. The first step must be to zoom out and take a strategic look at how these interact in a given organisational context. In psychodynamic terms, those responsible for developing the supervision culture within an organisation need to be mindful of how well that organisation provides a safe, contained environment within which supervision can flourish.

‘It is out of the interrelatedness of the members of the organisation and the organisational holding environment that organisational culture develops. In effect, what happens is that members of the organisation adopt forms of behaviour that they feel are appropriate to them under the circumstances imposed on them by the organisational holding environment.’ (Stapley 1996, p40)

What might this mean where supervision is concerned?

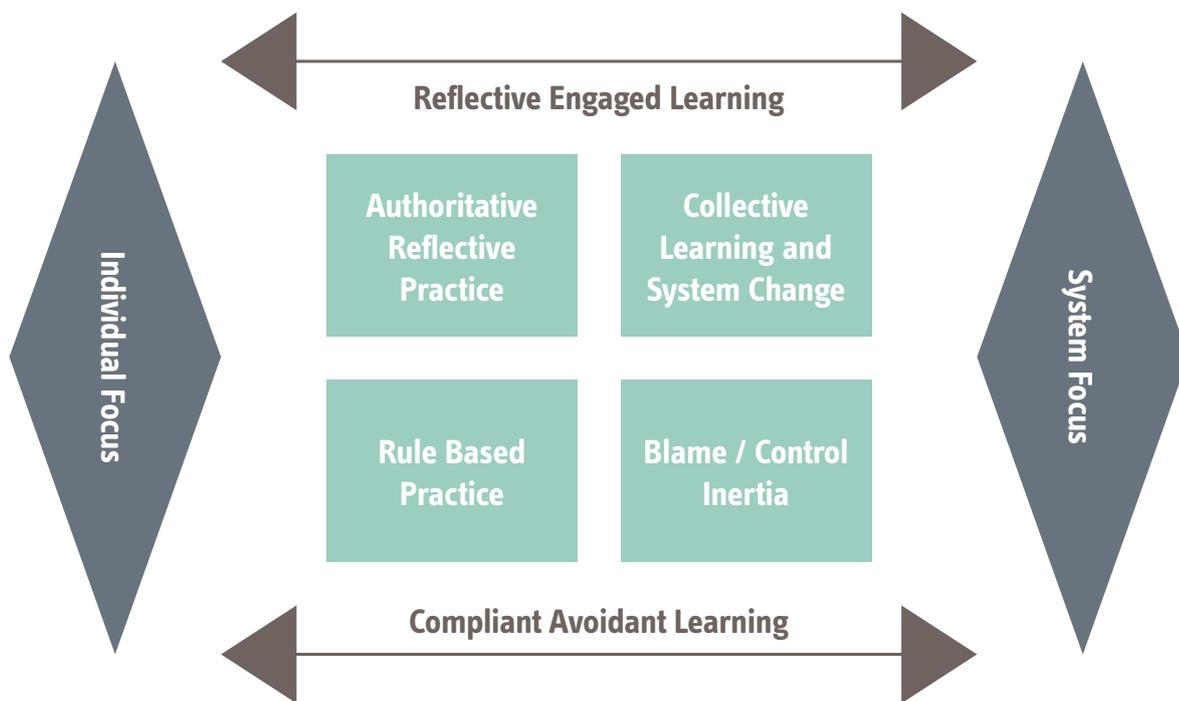
The evidence presented so far argues that there needs to be congruence between statements about what good supervision looks like and behaviours throughout the organisation. Where disconnects and tensions are perceived, those with responsibility for ‘creating the conditions’ need to acknowledge these tensions and move beyond blaming ‘the other’ to demonstrate curiosity about how the organisation behaves. Relationships within

the system are central to this work. But they need time, care and attention to develop, which can be a challenging reality for senior management teams that change frequently (often as a result of a drive for improvement born of poor inspection) and experience minimal senior-level investment in relationship development across the organisation. There is also a lack of career progression opportunities for black and ethnic minority practitioners in particular, which also needs to be addressed by senior management (Palmer 2020).

Commenting on the role of senior leaders in managing complex practice, Morrison (2010) highlights the centrality of relationships throughout strategic partnerships and the dangers of rule-based cultures where there is a disconnect between senior leaders and frontline practice. He notes:

‘...these forces can lead to the simplification of complex practice issues and dissemination of negative stories, in which practitioners may be cast as incompetent and non-compliant and which reduce managers to the status of internal regulators. In the process, the supervision, mentoring and support of practitioners are lost. Crucially, practitioners and managers are deprived of their own rich information which comes from the sharing and comparing of different narratives, including those of service users, critical reasoning and emotional reflection... In summary, compliance-based systems lack both engagement with front-line staff and the knowledge about practice that is necessary to evaluate and improve it.’ (p319)

From this analysis, good practice will thrive within organisations where there is an ongoing opportunity to engage in collaborative learning, and where supervision is encouraged to be a positive part of the whole.

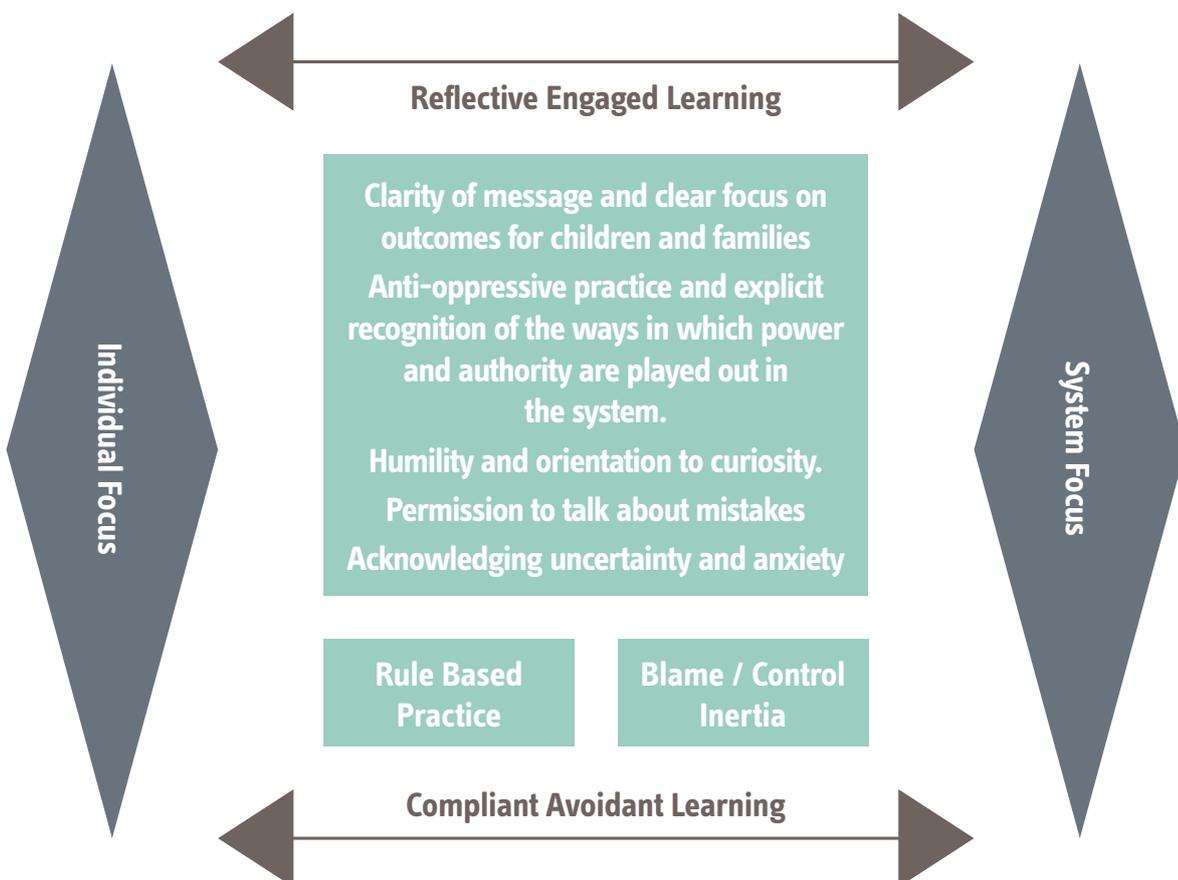


Key to this will be effective relationships flowing up and down the organisation, providing the basis for the support and challenge required for authoritative practice.

Supervision as the golden thread

Promoting a positive supervision culture may be more successful when supervision is recognised as a golden thread that aligns policy, values and practice. Although the empirical evidence for the link between supervision and practice outcomes is weak (Carpenter et al 2013), practice evidence suggests that supervision can play a crucial role in supporting practitioners faced with complex and emotionally challenging work (Brandon et al 2020). It is not unreasonable to suggest that where the organisational environment demonstrates behaviour congruent with good practice outcomes, supervisors will be better able to operate at the interface of management and frontline work, manage ‘up and down’ and support good practice.

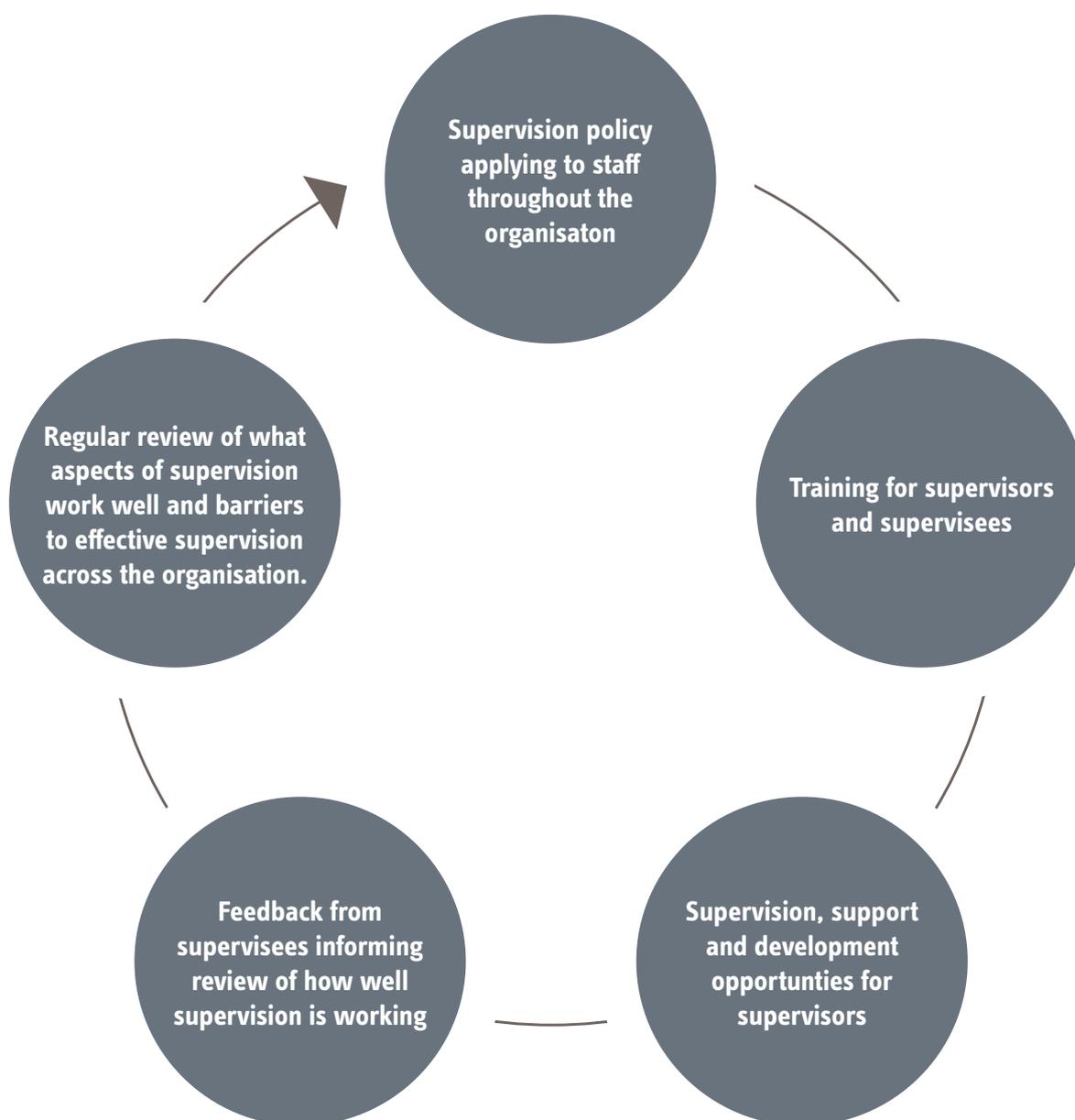
Extending Morrison’s strategic model, it is possible to begin to articulate the behaviours that need to be evident at both organisational and individual levels in order to develop this golden thread.



Maintaining a positive culture

What does this complex set of relationships mean on a practical basis for developing *and maintaining* a positive culture of supervision?

This has been depicted as a series of building blocks (Morrison 2005) but is perhaps better thought of a cyclical process which needs constant review and evaluation.



The table below is designed to help those with responsibility for both supervisors and the quality of supervision to think about where they are on the 'road' to developing a positive supervision culture, and what strategies they can implement to better support supervisors. This will help to move supervision beyond the 'quick fix' of training and towards a position where it becomes the golden thread linking policy and practice.

Question	Yes	No	What do I need to do next? How can I influence improvements to supervision practice in my organisation?
Does our supervision policy promote a style of supervision that is in line with the values and practice expectations of our organisation?			
Is it clear that the policy applies to staff at all levels?			
Are supervisors supervised?			
Is the organisation clear about minimum training requirements for supervisors?			
Are there ongoing development opportunities for supervisors through observation, action learning sets and other forums?			
Is feedback about supervisees' experience of supervision obtained regularly in order to understand how well it is working across the organisation?			
Do audits of supervision identify good practice, areas for improvement and any organisational barriers that may impact on its effectiveness?			
Is the <i>quality</i> of supervision always considered during audits of practice?			

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