

# **Middle/Work Phase Skills of Supervision**

## **Sessional tuning-in skills**

- Tuning In to self
- Tuning In to others
- Responding to indirect cues

## **Sessional contracting skills**

- Preparing of agendas for individual conference or group meeting
- Inquire what the staff would like to discuss
- Allowing staff to voice concerns at the beginning of the session prevents the illusion of work

## **Elaboration skills**

- Moving from general to specific
- Containment
- Focused listening
- Questioning
- Reaching into silences

## **Empathetic skills**

- Reaching for feelings
- Acknowledging feelings
- Articulating workers' feelings

## **Skills in sharing own feelings**

- Showing vulnerability
- Showing anger

## Middle/Work Phase Skills of Supervision (continued)

### **Skills in making a demand for work**

The skills in making a demand for work are:

- Facilitative confrontation;
- Partializing the worker's concerns;
- Holding to focus;
- Checking for underlying ambivalence; and
- Challenging the illusion of work.

Despite efforts to ensure that both the staff and the supervisor understand the interactional nature of the supervisory relationship, and despite the attempts of both to invest the work with feelings, there is a point in the supervision process at which the staff reaction is likely to be marked by ambivalence and possible resistance. At this point, the work phase skill of making a demand for work enters the process. The supervisor must have the ability to make a demand for work that will help the worker take the important next steps.

As the work proceeds, supervisors often find that the staff is of two minds about taking direction. In part, as an expression of the need for growth, they want to move toward understanding and to risk new endeavors. But in another part, as an expression of resistance, they pull back from tackling a difficult new procedure. Effective work requires staff members to deal with troublesome subjects and feelings, to recognize their own contributions to a problem, to take responsibility for their own actions, and to lower their established defenses. In response to such difficult demands, many of them demonstrate some ambivalence.

The skill factor of making a demand for work is not limited to a single action or even a single group of skills. Rather it pervades all supervisory work. The demand can be gentle and coupled with support; it is not necessarily confrontational.

**Facilitative confrontation:** Supervisors who are only able to empathize with staff members can develop a positive relationship, but they are not necessarily helpful in getting the work done. Supervisors, who make only demands on the staff, while ignoring the empathy and the working relationship, often seem harsh, judgmental, and unhelpful. The most effective help is offered by supervisors who are able to synthesize caring and demand, each in his or her own way.

Facilitative confrontation describes this role. It is the efforts of the supervisor to confront the worker with reality in a supportive manner. It is an important and normal part of supervision and potentially provides help to the staff members.

Through this process, the supervisor points out a worker's poor work pattern, reaches for the worker's feelings about the job, and sets clear expectations for job performance as participants learned in the coaching process.

## **Middle/Work Phase Skills of Supervision (continued)**

**Partializing concerns:** The skill of partializing concerns when used with other Interactional Helping Skills can help the supervisor create a demand for work. Staff members often experience their concerns as overwhelming. A worker may present a number of complex issues, each with some impact on the others. His or her feeling of helplessness is as much related to the apparent difficulty of tackling so many problems as it is to the nature of the problems themselves. The worker may feel immobilized and not know where to begin. Furthermore, it is not unusual for such multiple problems to be presented to the supervisor at the last minute, such as 4:00 p.m. on a Friday afternoon. The supervisor can quickly feel as overwhelmed as the worker.

Partializing is essentially a problem solving skill. The only way to tackle complex problems is to break them down into their component parts and address them one at a time. The way to move past feelings of immobilization is to begin by taking one small step toward solving one part of the problem. While listening to the worker's concerns and attempting to understand and acknowledge the worker's feelings of being overwhelmed, the supervisor begins the task of helping the worker reduce the problem to smaller, more manageable portions.

Though partializing does not alone solve a problem, breaking large, overwhelming problems into their smaller components is a first step and an important beginning in the problem-solving process.

**Holding to focus:** As the worker begins to deal with each issue, the connections with other concerns can often cause a rambling presentation. The worker will often have difficulty concentrating on one issue at a time. Asking the worker to stay focused on one question only is using a problem-solving skill incorporating a demand for work.

Moving from one concern to another can be evasion of work--that is, not staying on one issue means not having to deal with associated feelings. Holding the focus sends the message to the worker that the supervisor intends to deal with the disturbing issues and feelings.

**Checking for underlying ambivalence:** One danger in any helping situation is that the staff may appear to go along with the supervisor and may express agreement with an idea or proposed change but all the while may feel ambivalent about it. Staff may not want to upset the supervisor by voicing doubts, or they may simply be unaware of their true feelings. The supervisor may even sense this lurking ambivalence, but fail to confirm it for fear of exposing and thus reinforcing their doubts.

A supervisor may prefer to stress the positive aspects of the strategy or try to further convince or sell the staff on the idea in the belief that bringing the doubts to light could frustrate the required action. Actually, the reverse is true. Only after ambivalent feelings are fully discussed and dealt with do they lose reluctance to act, the supervisor helps most effectively by listening, understanding the ambivalence, and then making the demand that staff members act in spite of their mixed feelings.

## **Middle/Work Phase Skills of Supervision (continued)**

**Challenging the illusion of work:** One of the greatest threats to effective supervision lies in the ability of the worker to create what William Schwartz termed the illusion of work. That capacity to engage in conversations that have no meaning is easily developed. The ability to talk a great deal and not say anything meaningful can quickly become part of the supervision repertoire. For staff members, this can often be a subtle form of resistance because, by creating the illusion that work is proceeding, they do not have to tackle the difficult issues. The empathic skills that encourage the staff to share feelings as well as facts in the supervision process are one way in which the supervisor encourages work of substance. In addition, it is often necessary for the supervisor to call attention to the illusion of work. By exposing it to view, he or she can begin the process of returning the staff to effective work.

### **Skills in pointing out obstacles**

The Skills in Pointing out Obstacles are:

- Exploring taboo areas; and
- Dealing with the authority theme.

As the work progresses, it is not unusual to encounter some resistance from staff members, who are more often of two minds about proceeding in difficult areas of work. In part, they want to enter the taboo areas, while at the same time, they want to pull back. Evidence of this ambivalence often emerges just as the session starts to go well. It can be seen in the staff's evasive reactions (for example, jumping from one issue to another), defensiveness, expressions of hopelessness, or other forms. For the worker, the inquiries may touch a painful place and may cause the worker to change the subject and return the focus to the case. Resistance is both normal and to be expected. It can be a sign that the work is going well.

**Exploring taboo areas:** Our culture imposes taboos against discussing certain sensitive subjects including, but not limited to sex, race, money, and anger. From an early age, individuals are either directly or indirectly encouraged to not acknowledge feelings about these topics. Most of these topics surround areas where an acknowledgement exists that there is a great deal with diversity of human experience. The real world is so complex. Child welfare professionals are called upon to help individuals around very personal issues. Often these issues are associated with strong feelings. Many of these times, a taboo subject may be attached to the issue at hand. Other times, a taboo area may impede the child welfare professional's ability to build a relationship with the client. Child welfare professionals need to be able to deal with their own feelings about these subjects and gain some comfort in being able to discuss such topics if they are going to be able to help clients. The supervisor is the resource for helping staff increase their comfort in exploring taboo subjects.

Likewise, it is possible for taboo areas to impede the supervisor's and employee's ability to establish a working relationship with each other. The supervisor must take the lead in letting staff know that the taboo topic is open for discussion. It is the responsibility of the

## Middle/Work Phase Skills of Supervision (continued)

supervisor to address the taboo topic when something makes it difficult for either the child welfare professional to work with a client or when it is impeding the ability for the child welfare professional to work with the supervisor.

For example, a supervisor acknowledging a race difference between her and her employee could serve to convey that she is sensitive to the potential significance it could play in building a relationship or affect the dynamics between herself and families served. It also conveys to the staff that the supervisor is okay with discussing staff and client feelings about race.

For example, a white supervisor in an agency that serves predominantly African American families may hire a new African American child welfare professional. The supervisor could ask “How do you think my being white and your being non-white might affect our working together?” Or the supervisor could say “If you or your families have concerns or issues about race that affects our helping children and families, please feel free to discuss them. I want to work hard at understanding different situations.”

In addressing taboo area, there are some do’s and don’ts for supervisors. While it is important to address taboos as they have the potential to effect the work, it is not the supervisor’s responsibility to explore taboo subjects for their own sake. For example, it would be inappropriate for a supervisor to engage in a discussion where an employee actively explores his/her sexuality. Such conversations become an invasion of privacy or a form of therapy for the employee. When staff recognize the difficulty of discussing the subject and identify their feelings about it, the supervisor should connect it to practice. For example, “What is it about your feelings that make it hard for you to deal with the clients?”

**Dealing with the authority theme:** Throughout the work phase, obstacles may emerge to frustrate the staff’s efforts. Staff’s reactions to the demands of the supervisor, for example, can generate negative feelings that affect the working relationship. The supervisor must be able to point out obstacles such as the authority theme and the issues of authority need to be identified early on in the supervisor/staff relationship. The supervisor can do this by making a demand for honesty with staff regarding feelings. The supervisor challenges staff to not treat him as a symbol of authority, but as a real person.

Never is it a goal for a supervisor/staff relationship to alleviate all negative feelings. However, the supervisor can set a climate for dealing with negative feelings head on. Otherwise, these feelings of negativity tend to go underground only to surface as passivity, defensiveness, the illusion of work, low productivity or even sabotage.

For example, the supervisor can invite staff to be honest by saying:

“I want to encourage you all to level with me about your feelings in terms of how I do my job. I’m sure there will be times when you get angry with me or want something from me I’m not giving. It would help a great deal if you could level with me, because I need to really know what you’re feeling.” (Shulman, 2003).

## **Middle/Work Phase Skills of Supervision (continued)**

Staff, upon hearing this, may still be skeptical. It is likely that staff have had supervisors in the past who invited honesty, then upon receiving negative feelings from staff became defensive, fought back or sought retribution. However, if the supervisor is careful to handle these feelings with acceptance, staff will be inclined to bring other harder issues to the supervisor's attention.

When the supervisor does hear about widespread negative feelings about a work decision through the grapevine, the supervisor who has previously created this agreement with staff can directly address the issue of authority:

"I want to talk about how this issue was raised. You know, even though I invited you to level with me if you were not happy with how things were going here, I had to find out about how mad you were through the grapevine. Let's talk about that for a minute. How come you didn't raise this directly?" (Shulman, 2003)

Dealing with issues of authority should be anticipated as a regular part of the supervisor's work.

### **Skills in sharing data**

Skills in sharing data are:

- Providing relevant data;
- Monitoring the learning process; and
- Presenting data in a way open to challenge.

During the work phase, staff members must have access to the supervisor's relevant data. Data can be facts, beliefs, values, policies and practices. Sharing such knowledge and judgments is an important part of the educational supervision process, and how it is shared can have far-reaching effects on its usefulness to staff. When a supervisor uses the skills in sharing data, the educational role of supervision is being used.

**Providing relevant data:** It is important to provide data to staff at the right time. For newly hired workers, this means providing data in a manner that will allow them to connect it to their view of their work. Providing a new worker an orientation that requires them to read the agency's policy manual may not be particularly beneficial. However, having a new employee learn how to find certain subject matter in the policy manual would be beneficial. That way, when a policy question comes up in practice, the employee will know where to go for answers that can be applied immediately.

When a new worker experiences his first resistant client, it is a good time for a supervisor to provide information on how to deal with resistant clients.

**Monitoring the learning process:** It is important for a supervisor to monitor staff's non-verbal cues that can indicate that there is a barrier to the learning. Merely making a statement is often not enough for the data to be heard, understood, and remembered.

## **Middle/Work Phase Skills of Supervision (continued)**

Cues such as eyes glazing over or staff drifting off to sleep can be signs that the learning has stopped.

The supervisor should call attention to it to explore the meaning behind the cues. It could be that the supervisor has gone too fast through material or the supervisor needs to show how the data is applicable to the work. It can also mean that the learners are not confident about their ability to make the necessary changes to their work. In this case, the ambivalence should be explored before new learning can truly take place. For example, the supervisor could say “There is something going on in your eyes, but I’m not quite sure what it means. Some of you seem to be somewhere else right now. What is going on?”

**Presenting data in a way open to challenge:** Data that a supervisor presents can be objective data such as statistics or benchmarks. Data can also be subjective data such as beliefs, values, policies, and practices. Subjective data is open to interpretation. The supervisor needs to know the difference and welcome a wide range of interpretation. Staff often may not accept a statement as fact and offer their own interpretations. Some supervisors may jump to the conclusion that those questioning the data are being resistant. However, the fact that they are questioning it, provides evidence that they are learning.

Many new supervisors feel compelled to show their staff how much they know so that staff will be more inclined to accept their ideas. When supervisors feel insecure in their position, they often become defensive when staff challenge their thoughts and ideas. What results is that learning stops. Shulman believes that if staff never become resistant, they are not being challenged enough (2003).

### **Sessional ending skills**

Sessional Ending Skills are:

- Summarizing;
- Generalizing;
- Identifying next steps;
- Rehearsing; and
- Identifying doorknob communications.

Finally in the work phase of supervision, the dynamics of ending a session must be considered. The skills useful in this phase include summarizing, or taking a few minutes at the end of a session to review the encounter, and identifying the next steps that each person will take.

**Summarizing:** Summarizing involves identifying agreements and understandings made during the session and areas requiring further discussion. Summarizing is helpful to staff as it supports effective learning. It also alerts the supervisor to areas that the supervisor thought agreement was reached, but was not.

## **Middle/Work Phase Skills of Supervision (continued)**

**Generalizing:** This skill involves moving the conversation from specific items for discussion and relating them to general principles. It is the opposite of the elaboration skill, moving from general to specific. For example, by showing how a specific case is similar to others, the worker can identify how general principles can be applied to other cases.

**Identifying next steps:** It occurs all too often when staff leave a meeting certain that another staff person will be doing something. By developing an action plan before leaving the session all parties know who is responsible for completing each task.

**Rehearsing:** When a worker that is leaving the meeting is assigned a next step involving a conversation that requires careful words, the supervisor can practice the skill of rehearsing. This involves role playing with the worker to practice the discussion. This allows the worker to practice solving the problem while finding the right words. The worker leaves the session feeling more confident about the upcoming encounter.

Similarly, the supervisor and worker can also do a role reversal. Role reversal allows the worker to take on a new perspective on an issue in order to prepare for a future encounter.

**Identifying “doorknob” communications:** “Doorknob” communications are those topics or concerns brought up by workers as they are heading out the door. This skill can be practiced when the supervisor identifies a pattern of “doorknob” communications. The skill involves identifying it as such and discussing the difficulty of bringing up these issues at the beginning of a session. This is usually enough to encourage workers to bring these issues up earlier on in the session.

Adapted from Shulman, L., 2010