



## **8. Supervision: a space and place for difficult conversations**



By the end of this section the aim is that you will:

- have increased your awareness of the different kinds of challenging conversations which belong in supervision and how you might be better prepared for these.

Earlier in the resource you considered the different functions of supervision and the ways a supervisory relationship should offer a space for critical reflection on:

- practice issues
- professional development
- roles in the organisation
- the support workers need to deal with the emotional impact of the work they do<sup>35</sup>.

As part of this critical reflective space, supervision will sometimes include difficult or tough conversations. Those conversations may be difficult because they explore aspects of practice and painful experiences in the lives of people who use services including loss, loneliness, neglect, abuse, conflict, trauma and illness. The conversations may also be challenging because supervision is a space where workers should be able to explore the impact their work is having on them and their own lives and this may include complex and confusing thoughts and feelings. If the wider environment and culture of the workplace is not one which acknowledges the importance of emotions then it is all the more crucial that supervisors offer support and encouragement for workers to recognise when their work is affecting them on a personal level. Opening up this kind of conversation allows staff to understand that expressing feelings is not a sign of weakness but a part of being professional. It helps them make sure their own emotional reactions to traumatic or demanding situations do not spill over inappropriately into their practice. Equally importantly it can help reduce the risk of work spilling over into their personal life in a way which is damaging to their health and wellbeing. Although the issues discussed may be difficult or painful, the quality of these kinds of conversations will generally be supportive and developmental.

There are other difficult conversations in supervision which belong more clearly to the managerial role. These are situations where a supervisor, as part of their role in overseeing safe practice and quality standards, may have to identify and challenge instances where the conduct or practice of a worker is not acceptable and could be harmful to people who use services.

The best foundation for such conversations is a clear understanding from early in the supervision relationship of the performance requirements for the practitioner's role. This forms the basis for ongoing discussion about how work is carried out and

---

<sup>35</sup>Ruch, G (2007) "Thoughtful" practice: Child care social work and the role of case discussion', *Child and Family Social Work*, 12, pp. 370–9

Ruch, G (2008) 'Developing "containing contexts" for the promotion of effective direct work: The challenge for organisations', in B. Luckock and M. Lefevre (eds.), *Direct Work: Social Work with Children and Young People in Care*, London, BAAF

how it impacts on the supervisee. It is more straightforward than to raise difficult issues if problems arise. Over a number of years Rothwell<sup>36</sup> has used a performance framework (Appendix 6) in training sessions with supervisors from a range of practice settings to help them think about and establish a positive approach to managing staff performance. It is much easier to address concerns about performance if there have already been conversations establishing a shared understanding of required standards of practice. While individual workers must be accountable for their own work performance, it is always important to consider the wider context and other factors which may have contributed to unsatisfactory standards for example staff shortages, poor communication. Responsibility may not rest with a single individual and there may be team or organisational issues which you need to address.

In some instances, however, these difficult conversations may form part of a disciplinary process. For supervisors, as well as supervisees, these are stressful situations to deal with. If you are involved in managing serious concerns about a worker's practice it is important to seek support and guidance from your own manager and from human resources (HR). You may also want to refer to the SSSC Codes of Practice.

If you are in a supervisory role and addressing issues of poor performance with a member of staff, the process below<sup>37</sup> may help you take a balanced and systematic approach.

- Describe – what the person is doing (or not doing) that is problematic.
- Explain – why their behaviour or actions are problematic. Does this impact on people who use services, colleagues, staff from other agencies, the profession they represent or their employing organisation?
- Specify – what they should be doing instead. Depending on the nature of the problem this may include the kind of support needed to help bring about change.
- Consequences – what will the consequences be if they are unable or unwilling to change? Who else will become involved for example, HR and what are the required timescales for change to happen.

Morrison<sup>38</sup> proposes an eight stage process which is similar.

- 1) Describe concerns in clear and evidence-based terms, including what is happening (or not happening), who is affected, what standards/policies/values apply.

---

<sup>36</sup>Rothwell, B (unpublished) adapted from and building on the work of Tony Morrison and Jane Wonnacott

<sup>37</sup>Scragg, T (2003) *Managing at the Front Line: A handbook for managers in social care*, Brighton, Pavilion Publishing

<sup>38</sup>Morrison, T (2005) *Staff Supervision in Social Care: Making a real difference for staff and service user*, 3rd ed., Brighton, Pavilion Publishing

<sup>39</sup>Scottish Social Services Council (2008, updated 2014) *the Continuous Learning Framework*, Dundee, SSSC, [http://www.continuouslearningframework.com/?wpfb\\_dl=106](http://www.continuouslearningframework.com/?wpfb_dl=106)

- 2) Listen to the worker's response.
- 3) Consider the context and circumstances – does this change the nature of the concern.
- 4) Seek agreement on the nature of the problem.
- 5) Jointly agree desirable alternatives.
- 6) Establish an improvement plan.
- 7) Check the worker understands the plan.
- 8) Follow through and evaluate within agreed timescales.

Agencies may have their own competency framework or may make use of the Continuous Learning Framework to support workers' professional development. When addressing issues of poor performance it is important also to acknowledge areas of strength.