

## Great Children's Social Work Supervision looks like this..

1 model 2 vital thoughts and just the 40 essential points to remember in supervision to produce results that will astonish you.

Some of the key elements to supervision that produce astonishing results are counter intuitive and occasionally even counter cultural.

If you were asked what goes into good management and supervision you would probably include some or all of the following:

- a. Financially reward good performance as often as possible
- b. Punish poor performance
- c. Give timely feedback on performance problems
- d. Prescribe corrective action for performance problems
- e. Set measurable objectives
- f. Make an effort to closely supervise employees.

All these seem reasonable and logical. The bad news is that they don't work.

So what does work?

First, two crucial contextual points:

- **'Culture eats strategy for breakfast'**<sup>1</sup>. If your team and workers are child focused and have high morale, then adaptation and change is easier to achieve along with better outcomes for children. If the culture is negative and defensive and morale is low it won't matter how brilliant your strategy is. Pay attention to creating a positive aspirational culture.
- **'Relationship trumps task'**. Relationships, both between you and your supervisee, and your supervisee and the child or young person and their family relationships, trumps task every time. People will go that extra mile for people they have a positive relationship with. However most folk tend not to do much for people they have no relationship with. We have to pay attention to making relationships that are effective.

Second, while we as managers should know that we have to take responsibility for the performance of our supervisees and our teams, paradoxically: -

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<sup>1</sup> Attributed to Peter Drucker

1. The first aim should always be to **get workers to take responsibility for their work**. This may sound obvious but it has serious implications for how we supervise; the ways in which we relate and work together. Rather than giving instruction, what we should concentrate on is questioning workers in ways that relate to their overall goals. Teasing out details of their thinking, getting them to work through what they are seeing and the information they have to build a plan of work that they are committed to. We need to create a **thinking culture**, which we can only do by making staff responsible for their work; while we as managers still share in their responsibility.

And now a list of key elements

2. **Focus on the child**. This may also be obvious but questions that relate to the outcome, the views and the wellbeing of the child help to keep staff on track. *'The questions we ask are fateful'*<sup>2</sup>. Ask questions about what great outcomes for the child or young person would be, and about how your supervisee thinks they will best be achieved.
3. **Listening**. As responsible supervisors we often feel we have to provide the answers and jump in to provide solutions. However if we want supervisees to own the outcomes we need to listen to them. Remember it is the worker that have visited the child, family or placement and they have a lot more information than we do. Next time you want to give advice take a deep breath, and ask a question.
4. **Connect with your own and with others motivation**. Follow your heart and connect with your supervisee's heart; we are all in social work with children for good reasons. If workers motivate themselves your work is easier. Don't be afraid to bring them back to their primary motivation and link it to the work you are supervising.
5. **Think and ask about what works, that's where the answers are**. Get supervisees to reflect on what's working well for them (not for you). Begin each conversation/session with what's working well currently. This may feel counter intuitive but it grounds the supervisee in their own sense of being competent, which is subsequently extremely helpful when moving on to the supervisee's challenges.
6. **Ask great open questions**. For Example: ask workers about their best experiences of the thing they are struggling with; ask them about other cases where they have got past what's stopping them now; ask them how they would feel if they were the child and what would they want; ask them what they would do differently; and then ask them *'what else'*? When you hear or invent a great question keep it, and use it often.

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<sup>2</sup> David Cooperrider

Always
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7. **Treat people respectfully.** Behave with respect even when, and particularly when, there are difficulties.
8. **Case Consultation** is as much needed and important as planned supervision. The classic scenario is when a worker returns from a visit or when a new piece of information surfaces that may change our view. Munro talks about the importance of workers achieving access to a manager/supervisor at times when they need case consultation. The manager does not have to be their own supervisor and this requires an ease and flexibility of management arrangements.
9. **Catch people doing right.** Make sure you notice when things go right and then make sure you let people know what you've noticed and then notice the next thing too. Marcial Losada's research on high performing business teams showed that successful teams had a 6:1 ratio of positive to negative dialogue. Positive dialogue is strength based and opportunity focused. Negative dialogue has a deficiency focus.<sup>3</sup> Barbara Fredrickson has backed up this research with similar work on ratios in relationships. Make sure your positive feedback is true and relates to the work people have done. People often spot false praise and hate it. Staff working with children and families in difficult situations need reminding of what they do well.

Achieving Perspective
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10. **Children are a great source of information.** What are their views? What is their story? Even with young children what is their behaviour telling us? Always remind workers to see children alone, even briefly, to see the differences in their behaviour, even when they are very young and/or have communication difficulties.
11. **Promote and maintain a joint approach.** Make sure all available resources are engaged in all agencies and networks. It may be slower but it's always better. More people, more information, more perspectives, richer wisdom. And once again focus with workers on the important business of making the relationships work.
12. **Draw an accurate map.** If your supervision is based only on what your supervisee says you have only one, some might say *no* perspective. If you want to draw a map you have to stand in at least three points. So look at your supervisee's files between sessions when you can, sit in on meetings and accompany them on visits. Actively seek out feedback from children and young people, their family carers and other professionals and colleagues. Then you can draw an accurate map.

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<sup>3</sup>High performing teams also have a 2:1 ratio of inquiry (learning focused questions) versus advocacy (closed positions) type conversation. Low performing teams have a 1:3 ratio: one positive statement in the team for every three deficiency statements and 1:20 ratios: one inquiry (open-learning type questions) for every twenty remarks based on advocacy.

13. **Find out what helps your supervisee learn and develop best.** Ask your supervisee what works for them? How do they like their feedback and what helps them most from their supervisor? What helps them learn best? Follow their preferences and review this periodically.
14. **Examining one case deeply.** It can be better that 20 cases touched on. To understand a supervisee's thinking and way of working it can be more instructive to drill down to into one case. When you can enable a supervisee to move their thinking on that one case they are likely to take this new thinking across in to other work. And to make sure, ask them 'what are the implications for this in your wider work'?
15. **Culture and Diversity.** Ethnicity religion and background all contribute to the way in which people see things and behave. How does your own religion, culture and background effect you? How about our supervisee's? As these aspects are explored, so do worker's assessments better address the culture religions and background's of the children and families with whom they work.

Important ideas, theories & other things to use
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16. **Hypothesis and antithesis.** Recent neuroscience has shown that we make up our minds more quickly than we think and then find the evidence to justify our views. So good questions to ask are '*what else might the evidence show*'? '*What other theories could we put together about what is happening from the same evidence*'?
17. **Puzzles and Mysteries.** Gregory Tiverton who is a national security expert explains the difference between puzzles and mysteries. Puzzles are where we need more information. Mysteries are where we have information but its contradictory and what we need is good analysis. It can be helpful to clarify: 'is this a puzzle or a mystery'?
18. **In times of conflict, use the indirect approach.** The indirect approach derived from military strategy is often best. Just as running in to the face of machine gun fire is not smart, think about the conflicts you are having with supervisees. It is quicker, more efficient and often safer to start with questions that relate to the issues that sit behind the conflict. While you should not avoid issues, remember that your aim is to strengthen and change your supervisees thinking. *What are the questions you can ask to get them thinking differently?* A good start with this is to listen for the values behind what's being said. Ask about the values the worker has and how they relate to actions.
19. **Focus on the whole system around the child.** We are all connected, even those families who appear to be very isolated. Invisible, absent or disappearing men/fathers are still a common feature. Grandparents, aunts and uncles all have a potential influence and /or a role yet to play. A joint approach incorporating extended family, friends and community networks is crucial in the way the way we work in families.
20. **Slow down to speed up.** Thinking, and the time to think well, is really important. We are often so busy we don't give ourselves time to

think, to prioritise, and to analyse; to really get to the heart of things. So give yourself and your supervisee enough thinking time, and slow down to speed up.

Things to watch for
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21. **What are the mistakes we cannot afford to make?** First up in this category goes not seeing the child alone enough. Do you know and understand why workers wouldn't do this every time? Another potential mistake can arise through over optimism when the evidence doesn't support it. A question to ask of our supervisees directly is *'what is the evidence for your optimism'?*
22. **Creeping Determinism.** This is a phrase from intelligence work. Once you know what the outcome of something is it's very easy to map back and see it as inevitable. The question to always ask yourself is: *'would it have been reasonable to make that assessment at the time'?*
23. **Value difference, not 'Group Think'.** You may feel comfortable thinking that you have a cohesive team, but you and others can easily become the victim of 'group think'. Group think takes place where a group unconsciously colludes together to avoid upsetting one another. Open discussion in a space where it is considered safe and important for difference and disagreement to be shared and aired is both healthier, and more instructive, than the belief that consensus and agreement should always be the ultimate goal. It helps to involve people from outside your team in your discussions and to get your supervisee to think from different angles. Ask questions like: *How would you have felt as the child/parent if this process was happening to you? What is it important for us to hear from this other agency's perspective?*
24. **Is it working for the child?** Remember this is the key question, rather than whether specific documents or tasks have been completed, but is what we are doing getting the results we want for the child?
25. **Drift.** Drift creeps up quietly while we're not looking and no one else seems or is able to bring it to our attention. For a plan to meet a child's needs it needs to be acted upon and updated in a timely way. What is your system for tracking activity and how does it compliment wider systems in your work place?
26. **Combinations of worrying factors.** Any one of: domestic violence, mental ill health, and drug and alcohol misuse is of concern. Any combination is very potentially serious, and requires action.
27. **Don't sign off anything you are unhappy with.** Be clear what your standards are in advance and preserve time in the process to properly consider and agree, or bounce back documents. Once you sign it off you are the most senior manager approving it so the decisions it contains become your responsibility.

28. **Beware Weak Signals.** Weak signals<sup>4</sup> are the ones where people mention issues, sometimes quietly, but as the message comes up it doesn't fit with your view of what is happening. Particularly where there is an established view, weak messages that don't fit can be ignored. An example can be the strange anonymous call on a case that already has an apparently clear plan. The same is true for staff communications, e.g. sometimes people ask to speak to you "about a couple of things". The first thing is the easy thing the second or last thing in a longer list is often where the real issue is or where the emotional investment is.
29. **Assess, re-assess and then re-assess.** Remember that even when assessments are completed they are already almost out of date. We are Always Assessing. Unusual and unexpected events occur and new information comes to light. We must be open to and able to adjust to these events and not get completely locked into positions or perspectives.

A few more things to remember
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30. **You are better being with a great teacher in a lousy school than with a lousy teacher in a great school.** Statistics show that what is most important for a child in school is the quality of the teacher, not the school. This is equally true for social workers. We have a responsibility to match workers to the children and young people they will be most effective with. We have a responsibility to make sure all social workers are of a good or even better outstanding standard.
31. **Conversation and stories are really important** in supervision. Good supervision requires engagement from both parties in a connected conversation. The stories we tell can be powerful and can be significant. Asking supervisees to tell their stories and listening to them is a critical ingredient in building a supervisory relationship that works.
32. **Data accuracy and cleansing.** We share an important responsibility to record information accurately and in a timely way. As a supervisor it is now easier to quickly record case consultations on the electronic record. Think about your daily routine and how you can make the time to do this. It is also really important that managers and workers actively use management information to map both case and team activity.
33. **Distrust technological solutions.** The work is with children and their families. Technology supports this work, but it can suck us in, and also create more work. Don't be fooled into believing that when you see staff slaving away over a hot PC that this means their core task of working with children is being achieved.
34. **Model the behaviour you want to see.** Always.
35. **Capability.** We want people's strengths and abilities to develop. We begin best by looking at what people are good at and building on

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<sup>4</sup> Weick and Sutcliffe

that. We do this best when we are clear about our minimum standards. What are the showstoppers? Be clear with your supervisees what they are. With staff that are not meeting minimum standards, begin by clarifying what will help them achieve the standard. As you focus on what you want to see more of, apply capability procedures. Issues often fester on without clarity. You can always suspend a capability process as performance improves. You can less easily repair poor work with a child or young person.

36. **All the levers all the time.** Supervisors sometimes hold tools or levers back. You are much better using as much as you can simultaneously.
37. **Trial and Error** is a generative fact of life. There are no perfect answers and sometimes you just have to try something and if it doesn't work, then learn the reason why and try something else. Ask yourself: Would it work for me? Do I know it works for others? Some of the greatest developments of our time came from trial and error.
38. **Everyone needs some control over their own work.** If you can do so safely, let people prioritise and time manage their own cases. If you can't e.g. because staff are new or because their time and priority management may not yet be safe; be clear what they need to do and what input they will enjoy to enable them to get to where they need to be.
39. **Give Specific Positive feedback.** Where good pieces of work have been done, including the small things, new understandings, ways of working and tiny improvements; notice, specify and applaud. The road to big change is made up of small steps. Don't use this as a reward system but as encouragement to what you, and hopefully they, are aspiring to.
40. **Be aspirational.** As you work towards achieving great outcomes for children through each conversation that you have, ask: 'What will be happening with this child / young person when everything we wish for them comes true'? Ask workers to imagine the children they are working with turning 40. As they look back and reflect how important the support and work done by all the services involved in their care was in helping them lead a flourishing, fulfilled joyous life and succeed beyond their wildest imagination. What did we do? What really made the difference?

And finally a simple appreciative model for supervision: The 333 system

This simple tool works brilliantly for staff supervision. Ask workers for:

- 3 Successes; achievements that you are really proud of.
- 3 Strengths you have brought /are bringing to the work / 3 areas that you are really developing / 3 areas of strength in the work you are doing.

- 3 Areas to pay attention to/you would like to become more effective in/do more of/particular children's cases.

This simple user friendly model was borrowed from a successful oil business manager David Gilmour, who turned the BP Castrol Marine business around. This is a multi national company a part Castrol Oil. He used it in all his interactions with his staff around the world as the framework for discussion. It is applicable for a variety of tasks.

It helps to ground people in their own competence by looking at their successes and strengths before proceeding on to what needs to be tracked and receive new or additional attention.

It can feel when you first try it as if some or all of the tricky issues will be missed. They never are. The model can be scaled up and down, you may use one of each or two of each or you can make it more. Initially people may struggle with identifying their own successes and strengths, but stick with it and don't answer the question for them.

Remember it's their thinking you are trying to develop.

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