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An exploration of the importance of supervision practice in the voluntary sector

Abstract

This article discusses the relevance of supervision practice within the voluntary sector and argues that it is a necessary and important aspect of effective practice in this context. The paper examines what is meant by supervision and explores the factors relating to the nature of the work which point to the necessity of supervision for workers. The nature of supervision is explored, providing a discussion of both the functions and practical dimensions of supervision.

Key Words: Supervision, Voluntary Sector, Stress, Support

Introduction

Over the past number of decades, the principles and practice of supervision have become increasingly well established in professions such as counselling and social work, where as in youth, community and voluntary settings the practice of supervision is more emergent in nature. This paper examines the nature of supervision and argues that it is a relevant and essential aspect of work practice within the voluntary sector whilst recognising the particular challenges and constraints posed in developing strong supervision practice within this context. The article begins by defining what is meant by supervision and explores factors concerning the nature of work within the voluntary sector which point to the need for, and importance of, supervision in this environment. The paper proceeds to explore the functions of supervision, and concludes by discussing some practical aspects of supervision.

What is supervision?

For many of us the term supervision conjures up images of being observed by a superior with the specific intent of pointing out errors or monitoring our productivity with the aim of increasing our output. Supervision practice within the helping profession means something very different. It refers to a process which involves a relationship between two people, one of whom has the purpose of using it to improve his work with people, and the other of whom has the purpose of helping him to do so (Inskipp and Proctor, 2001). More specifically, Inskipp and Proctor describe the process as “a working alliance between two people, where supervisees give an account of their work, reflect on it, receive feedback, and receive guidance, if appropriate. The object of the alliance is to enable the worker to gain in ethical competency, confidence and creativity, so as to give the best possible service to clients” (p313). Supervision should be held regularly and provides a space for the worker to reflect on, plan, and process their work.

Types of supervision

Supervision can take a number of forms. Line-management supervision is when the worker is supervised by the person in the organisation to whom they are answerable. This can work very well when there is a trusting and open relationship between these two people and the supervisor has an understanding of the supervision process. In situations where the worker doesn’t have a line manager on the ground and is answerable to a management committee for example, a member of the committee may

provide supervision. However, as Clarke (1997) points out, there is an increasing recognition within community and voluntary organisations, of the benefits of external supervision. External supervision is when the worker has regular support sessions with a supervisor who is independent of the agency. According to Clarke, this is particularly relevant in the voluntary sector when the worker may work on their own rather than in a team setting; and when the management committee does not have the skills, experience or confidence to supervise the staff member (1997). However, often the reality of scarce resources, and how these are prioritised, can limit the availability of external supervision to workers. Whilst the responsibility of the provision of supervision for the worker is clearly management's (Clarke 1997, Thompson 2002, Marken and Payne 1987), Sercombe (2010) believes the issue of self care is so crucial, that the worker should ensure they access regular supervision, even if that means funding it themselves.

Other forms of supervision which can work well in the voluntary sector are peer and group supervision. Peer supervision is when workers, who are not in a line-management relationship, agree to provide supervision for each other. This can be an arrangement between two people or can take the form of a group of peers. It is important for the supervision to have clear goals and structure to ensure it doesn't become a 'grumbling session'. Group supervision refers to a situation where workers are supervised as a group, by a line manager or external supervisor. It can be a time-efficient way of managing supervision and has the additional benefit of each worker having the input of several others; however it should be used in conjunction with individual supervision rather than as a replacement, as the worker will need a space where s/he can raise issues they might not choose to in a group setting.

Why is supervision needed in the voluntary sector?

In this section we will explore a number of reasons why supervision is particularly relevant to those working in the voluntary sector.

Use of self

Work in the voluntary sector is often characterised by long hours, a hectic schedule, working with people facing difficult situations, and a scarcity of resources. Workers are all too familiar with working under pressure trying to deal with numerous situations requiring their attention. The role is varied and can involve responding to the needs of individuals, volunteers, communities, the requirements of funding bodies, relationships with colleagues and management, and the ever-increasing demands of administrative work. As with other helping professions, the worker's main tool is his or herself and so workers spend a lot of time giving of themselves as they seek to engage with, motivate, care for and empower the people and communities they work with. Workers often work independently and need to be self motivating, and thus may be quite isolated in their role (Clarke 2002). This level of personal output on the part of workers in the voluntary sector is only sustainable in the long term, if they themselves are in turn being supported and resourced in the work. Supervision is a key context in which the worker can be supported, providing them with a safe place in which to explore and work through issues that come up for them during the course of their work.

Factors contributing to occupational stress

Factors recognised to contribute to occupational stress often abound in the voluntary sector. Such factors include; responsibility for lives, work overload, lack of funding

security, lack of job security, role ambiguity, and poor physical working conditions (Ross and Altmaier 1994, Grimshaw 1999, Cartright 1997). Sound familiar? Unfortunately, experience of working in the voluntary sector ticks many of these boxes. As 'helpers' we are often drawn to working in sectors where people's needs need to be met and it gives us satisfaction to be part of that process. Grimshaw (1999) highlights that there is a high level of stress associated with having responsibility for the wellbeing of others, especially in the human services.

Work overload is an all too common feature of work in the voluntary sector. Research carried out by the UK Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, in 2004 reported that the rate of absenteeism due to work related stress had increased significantly in the voluntary sector. Furthermore, 71% of these respondents cited volume of work as being the cause of this stress (cited in Woolnough, 2004). Lack of resources and funding are key factors in many voluntary organisations and staff find themselves with unmanageable workloads and not enough staff to cover it all.

Typically funding provision in the voluntary sector is short term and insecure in nature, thus making long term planning and strategic development very difficult. More and more time is spent filling out funding application forms from an array of sources which can be bewildering. Recessionary times have had the effect of many organisations experiencing cuts in funding which has had a significant impact on what it is possible for organisations to achieve whilst at the same time being acutely aware that the economic downturn has increased the difficulties and hardships experienced by service users and communities. Insecurity in agency funding has a direct impact on the job security of individual workers. Ross and Altmaier (1994) identify lack of security around one's job is a key stressor in the workplace, leaving people feeling very vulnerable and prone to emotional strain. In addition, scarcity of resources has a direct impact on the physical environment voluntary sector in which staff work. It can be demoralising to spend one's working day in poor conditions which the organisation cannot afford to improve.

Sometimes in the voluntary sector, workers struggle because of role ambiguity. What exactly does their job entail? What are the boundaries of where the responsibilities of their role begin and end? Sometimes the needs of the client group are so vast and multifaceted it is difficult to find and maintain a focus in one's work without feeling the burden of all that is being left undone. It may be that organisations are not clear with workers regarding their specific job description, or perhaps the job description is unrealistic or too vague. Reviewing research into the effect of role ambiguity, Grimshaw (1999) concludes that it is strongly associated with high stress levels, job dissatisfaction, and feelings of futility.

So we can see that there are many factors within the voluntary sector which can result in high stress levels for workers. Long periods of stress which left unattended to can lead to a deterioration in the individual's physical and emotional wellbeing, eventually resulting in burnout (Thompson 2002).

So how can supervision help? Supervision is not a magic wand which when waved dispenses of all these occupational stressors. It won't make ample funding suddenly appear, or result in state of the art buildings for the work to be carried out in. However, supervision has a significant role in ameliorating the stress experienced by workers in that it provides a space where they can stand back from their work and reflect on the issues arising for them. It is an environment in which they can process how the work is affecting them, and where they can be facilitated to develop plans and strategies in order to achieve their goals. Supervision also provides a context for the worker to gain clarity about their role and, together with their supervisor, monitor their workload, with the aim of realising an appropriate balance. I like how Thompson sums it up:

> ‘Effective supervision can often be the difference between: success and failure; stress and job satisfaction; worry and reassurance; good practice and excellent practice. Its significant role should therefore not be underestimated’ (Thompson 2002:57)

Supervision is beneficial for service users and contributes to quality services

When evaluating the worth of an intervention it is important to do so through the lens of its effect on the end user. The end goal of supervision is to improve practice and therefore enhance services provided to individuals, families and communities. According to McNamara et al (2008), supervision plays a key role in facilitating workers to contribute effectively to the achieving the goals of the organisation. This view is supported by Richmond (2009), who asserts that the main purpose of supervision is to ensure high standards of service delivery are maintained. According to participants in previous research carried out by the author of this paper, supervision practice within a voluntary agency benefitted service users in that they were participating in programmes which were more efficient and better able to respond to their needs. They also highlighted that staff being less stressed meant they were able to be more present and available to the people they worked with. In their view, supervision also contributed to a positive atmosphere, enhanced communication and sense of teamwork within the agency (Jenkinson 2009).

Supervision – the practicalities

So what does supervision look like in practice? What should its focus be in order to be effective? In this section we will explore the functions of supervision, as well as its practical aspects.

The functions of supervision

The most helpful framework, in my view, for gaining an understanding regarding the functions of supervision has been developed by Tony Morrison (2001). He outlines four functions of supervision. These are supportive, managerial, educative and mediation.

Diagram 1: Functions of supervision (Morrison 2001)

Supportive	**Managerial**
Educative	**Mediation**

Supervision is commonly identified with the supportive function where the aim of the process is to provide a safe space, to listen and support the worker in relation to their work. It involves helping the worker process how the work they are engaged in is affecting them and helping them articulate and work through any difficulties they are experiencing. It is also an opportunity to acknowledge the worker's achievements and celebrate their successes. Another aspect of this function is to help the worker to develop strategies in relation to the areas addressed in supervision.

Where the supervision is carried out by a line manager, there is a clear managerial aspect to the process which involves monitoring the workload and tasks carried out by the worker. In this regard the supervisor exercises their responsibility in ensuring that the work of the supervisee is being carried out in accordance with ethical, legal, and organisational requirements. It also involves ensuring the worker is clear about their role and responsibilities and that they are adequately resourced to achieve what is required of them. At times this facet of supervision will require the supervisor to introduce an element of challenge into the process, if, for example the supervisor identifies aspects of the worker's practice which is unhelpful, unethical or contrary to agency policy.

Many authors acknowledge the tensions which can exist between the supportive and managerial functions of supervision (Hawkins & Shohet 2000; Richmond 2009; McNamara et al 2008; Arnold et al 1981; Tash 1964). In this regard Arnold et al (1981) make the point that it is difficult to be honest about your weaknesses, failings, and feelings of inadequacy with someone who has the power to renew your contract (or not). Fineman (1985) reinforces this assertion from the point of view of a supervisee;

> 'I have regular meetings with my supervisor, but always steer clear of my problems in coping with my report work. Can I trust her? I need her backing for my career progress, but will she use this sort of thing as evidence against me? There are some painful areas that are never discussed but need discussing so much. It's an awful dilemma for me.' (Fineman 1985:52 cited in Hawkins & Shohet 2000:25)

Tensions as outlined above will exist within the managerial supervisory relationship. It is important to acknowledge this factor whilst at the same time aiming to optimise the levels of trust and honesty within the relationship. Proctor sums up the challenge well when she says 'The task of the supervisor is to help him (the supervisee) feel received, valued, understood on the assumption that only then will he feel safe enough and open enough to review and challenge himself' (1988:25).

Another function of supervision is educative. This focuses on the learning and development of the worker and aims to promote their understanding and skills. It involves helping the worker identify their needs in terms of skill development and training and supports the worker in pursuing these. However it is not only the worker who benefits in this regard; supervision is a place where both parties are continually learning. According to Sapin: 'Supervision can be a developmental process for both supervisees and supervisors as they learn from each others' practice and identify ways forward' (2009:187). In relation to this educational element of supervision Turnbill asserts that supervision can be 'one of the most useful learning forums in our working lives' (2005: 216).

The final function of supervision is mediation. This refers to how supervision can facilitate communication and understanding between workers and management. For example, supervision can have a mediation role in helping to implement changes introduced by management. It can also facilitate the needs and issues of workers being made known to management. This can include needs in relation to training, resources,

or other practical matters. This function is particularly relevant in the voluntary sector where management committees have a key role in the development of services and strong communication between workers and management groups is very important for effective service delivery.

Supervision – practical considerations

In order for supervision to be effective it needs to occur on a regular basis. In some agencies this would be weekly, others every two weeks and others monthly. This depends on the nature of the work, and the availability of both people. The supervision session should be uninterrupted (phones off, both parties unavailable to third parties), and should be about an hour or an hour and a half in duration. A supervision contract should be drawn up at the outset, identifying the goals of supervision, when and where it will take place, if and how it will be recorded, and how the agenda would be drawn up for the sessions. It should also identify when and how the supervision would be reviewed, and the scope of confidentiality. It is also helpful to have a broad outline of how the supervision session would be structured.

There are no hard and fast rules about this but I find the following format useful:

- Brief overview of work since last supervision session
- Briefly identify highlights and lowlights
- Items for further discussion- agenda
- Supervisor's items for agenda
- Discussion and exploration of issues on agenda
- Review - identifying action points

This format allows the supervisor to get a qualitative overview of the supervisee's work whilst at the same time facilitates a more in-depth exploration of particular issues.

Conclusion

This article has aimed to explore the relevance and importance of supervision within the voluntary sector. We have seen that supervision, far from being a monitoring and checking up exercise, is an empowering, equipping, and envisioning space for workers. We have also examined the challenging terrain negotiated by organisations and workers within this sector and how several factors acknowledged to contribute significantly to occupational stress, are all too familiar features of voluntary and community organisations. In light of these challenges the case for regular supervision within this sector is compelling on a number of levels. Not only does it support and protect staff, it improves the quality of their work and in turn the efficacy of the organisation. Ultimately it benefits individuals, families and communities who are the end users and primary concern of the organisations who work with them. I agree with McKay (1987) who asserts that supervision should be an ethical requirement of practice rather than a desirable luxury.

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