

Professional Support Services - Supervision

By Jason Brennan, Director of ThinkWell Limited

Brief

This article is for persons unfamiliar with Professional Supervision Services. I will initially outline a brief history of supervision to allow some context, with the main focus of the article concentrating on the function and purpose of the service, how the supervision relationship works, and the benefits of this type of service within a professional environment.

Introduction

As a psychotherapist, I was first introduced to supervision services and a supervision relationship as a requirement of my initial training. Although the purpose of it at that time was to allow continued practical training outside of the scheduled training workshop, the main thrust was to improve my ability to sit, work and be with psychotherapy clients. At the beginning of my training, however, I had very little client contact and wondered why I was required to attend supervision at all. It seemed somewhat pointless without client material to bring and talk to, and it felt initially more like an obligation to attend than a necessary requirement of the course.

It wasn't long before I realised that supervision itself is a purposeful and practical way of learning, regardless of the subject material being brought to or discussed at the session. My initial scepticism in attending supervision (and the cost of paying for the fortnightly sessions) was unfounded as I began to realise it had more to do with my own resistance to the process than to the value of the service and the formation of a supervision relationship. In recognising this initial reluctance and talking about it with other colleagues, I have subsequently found that I am not alone in this experience. In actuality, a similar resistance has been expressed by many supervisees—especially within professional sectors that are unfamiliar with a supervision relationship. Some of this resistance is from a basic misunderstanding of the process of supervision, the purpose of a supervision relationship, the role of the supervisor and the initial setup for supervision. I hope to improve and deepen the understanding of supervision through this article, or at least clarify any misunderstandings.

Many of the misunderstandings or misgivings associated with supervision come from the origin and history of the development of the supervision relationship and how it has struggled at times to cross over to other professions and other professional sectors. To get an insight into this, I have outlined a brief history of the origins of supervision.

Brief History of Supervision

The use of supervision and the supervision relationship was first developed in the U.S. in the early 1900's and was used as a continued and ongoing training requirement for clinical social workers (although supervision was being used as early as the 1830's to inspect the performance of teachers in an educational setting).

The premise of clinical supervision was that developing clinical social workers needed further support in their roles and this could be achieved by relying "on the guidance and supervision of those with more experience" (Brashears, 1995; Kadushin & Harkness, 2002; Munson, 1979, 2002; Tsui, 2005). This reliance upon experienced social workers soon went a step further by emphasising that "without such supervision, the intermediate clinical social worker lacks the experience to proceed with the more demanding aspects of clinical social work and to reach the competency levels of an advanced practitioner" (Barretta-Herman, 1993, 2001).

From its origin, it is clear that the setting of supervision was within a clinically-based environment (primarily within the social work field) and its function being that of "an educational process" (Robinson, 1936). The setup for the dynamic of the relationship can be seen as an inexperienced practitioner seeking support, guidance and learning from a more clinically experienced practitioner.

This made sense for a number of reasons, in particular that during the 1930's "there were few graduate schools of social work, (and) supervisors were virtually the only means of providing new clinicians with the training and education they needed to become effective, autonomous practitioners" (Kadushin & Harkness, 2002). (The phrases "effective" and "autonomous" are important keystones in the later development of supervision.)

During that decade, a national event in the U.S. caused the practise of supervision to evolve in another direction. The Great Depression of the 1930's caused a split in purpose between public and private agencies: the public function was to provide financial relief, while the private function was to provide treatment. Under these circumstances, clinical supervisors found that their services were valued in private agencies only. The trauma created by the Depression caused a greater need for social workers and resurgence in social work education, with more graduate schools opening and more people enrolling. This in turn created a larger role for field instructors, or supervisors of students who were placed in internships and worked with people while still in graduate school. In the schools, and with the field instructors, the agency and hospital clinical supervisors, there was much reliance on teaching psychoanalytic theory and technique, since it was widely recognized as credible and it offered a "practical theory of

interpersonal relationship” that met “the personality needs of the client.” (Munson, 2002, p. 61).

Here we find the origins of a more generalised supervision relationship—moving into other sectors with an emphasis on “interpersonal relationship”—that became the foundations of the practice of supervision as we know it today.

Early supervision, however, remained intrinsically attached to clinical social work, but gradually moved into other clinical practises and over time became a staple process in such other fields as nursing, medical practising, psychotherapy and counselling, where it has remained strongly utilised and a recommended part of ongoing training and development for clinicians to this day.

Present Day

More recently, supervision has evolved both in practise and availability. Its use has branched out into professional sectors that are much less familiar with the process and function of meeting on a regular basis with a supervisor. One area that I am very familiar with and have seen the growth of supervision services in is that of emergency services. It is here that I began to observe how supervision services were being misunderstood through lack of communication and poor promotion.

Another area of need for supervision is within professional sectors that have high levels of stress associated with their roles: GPs, lawyers, accountants, etc., and it is within these sectors that supervision has not only gradually been introduced but at times has been introduced as a mandatory relationship to be developed in order for a professional to be allowed to perform a certain service.

This increase in awareness and accessibility to supervision has been both welcome and challenging for many professionals. The welcomed aspect is that, when initiated, it can provide a valued service and support to professionals who are working in stressful conditions, trying to do well in roles where support and recognition may be being neglected or considered unnecessary; or in roles that are, by nature, quite isolating.

The challenge however, has been how supervision is to be effectively promoted and accessed within a *business-as-usual* type environment. The idea that “we never had it before, so why should we need it now?” professional thinking, or more commonly, the “I don’t need to talk to anyone about what I am doing, I have always functioned adequately by myself - what would a supervisor know about my role anyway (I am the most experienced about what I do)”. Perhaps the most common reaction is “I just don’t have time to see someone - I’m just too busy!”

Resistance of this nature to supervision is very common and can create an obstacle to a service that can be of great value to a person if conquered.

The Supervision Relationship

The essence of supervision is the meeting of two intelligent, mutually focused and respecting individuals who both wish to enhance their ability to perform well within their various roles - both as supervisor and supervisee. It is the coming together of two minds to enhance the other's ability to problem solve, access potential, increase awareness, provide perspective, reinforce ability, brainstorm, utilise experience and achieve a result based on what is being discussed during their time together.

It ought to be collaborative and collegial in its creation, open and honest in its initiation, and establish a safe and secure relationship to allow things to be discussed in a confidential and ethical way.

Imagine if you had someone to go to, to work on anything that arises within the workplace or while doing a job; someone who is there to actively focus with you on what is being brought, who can actively be with you during the time together and explore a solution; someone who can listen to the situation and connect to what it is that is happening. Someone who is not judging, not criticising and not trying to get one over on you in your role (which, sadly, is not always the case with some colleagues within the workplace).

It is an adult-functioning relationship based on adult learning skills and techniques, that ought to connect to the adult abilities and capabilities of both parties to create a greater understanding of a situation.

To allow this adult learning process to be applied and to develop, it is important that the supervisor is trained and accredited. A supervisor needs to have at least one working model with through which they perform the service of supervision. Without this, and without a varied level of experience, i.e. the experience of being supervised themselves, there runs a risk of the supervision relationship developing into something other than supervision or even getting bogged down in unhealthy dynamics and misunderstandings/expectations of each other as supervisor and supervisee.

At the end of the day, it is important to bear in mind that it is a professionally paid for service and a suitable level of service needs to be provided by the supervisor in performing this role. It is also important to acknowledge that a supervisor does not necessarily need to be experienced in the type of profession or role of the supervisee. The supervisor is not a "mentor" and ought not to be expected to know more about your job or your business. At the heart of the

supervision relationship is the relationship itself and how it develops. A good supervisor is able to provide a space into which a person can go to talk about themselves in their roles, the role and the other relationships that affect their role. This then allows a holistic approach to the person and not just the function.

Finally Then, Why Do It?

Other than it being a mandatory requirement in certain professional services, the benefits can be far-reaching. Some examples are:

- “Super” Vision - two sets of eyes, ears and minds are better than one in problem solving, solution development, and avoidance of error
- Time out to reflect - not staying caught up in the doing
- Tapes - theory, assessment, parallel processes, ethics and strategies
- An outlet for challenging aspects of the role and expectations (on self or by others)
- Stress reduction
- Awareness and assertiveness development
- Confidence-building in role and approach

Often supportive professional services such as supervision can have a secondary gain and result in the reduction of stress leave, prevention of costly exercises such as personal grievances, challenging unproductive behaviour and even averting hasty decisions that might result in loss of job, loss of client or worse—complaints and disbarment.

Supportive professional services such as Supervision, Mentoring, Coaching or Counselling achieve the best results when they are approached openly and not through a sense of obligation or as a result of mandating.

These relationships are forums or platforms from which the participant can chose to engage themselves, and are an opportunity to increase growth and development within a role.

References

1. **Supervision of Instruction - The History of Supervision, Roles and Responsibilities of Supervisors, Issues Trends and Controversies**

Read more: [Supervision of Instruction - The History of Supervision, Roles and Responsibilities of Supervisors, Issues Trends and Controversies - Teachers, School, Students, Learning, Curriculum, and Teaching](http://education.stateuniversity.com/pages/2472/Supervision-Instruction.html#ixzz1PF39JvGd) <http://education.stateuniversity.com/pages/2472/Supervision-Instruction.html#ixzz1PF39JvGd>

2. **Clinical Supervision: A Practice Specialty of Clinical Social Work** - Published October, 2004 © American Board of Examiners in Clinical Social Work 2004, all rights reserved. Download pdf online: www.abecsw.org

Bio

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Jason is a psychotherapist, counsellor, coach and supervisor working in private practice in Wellington, New Zealand. His clients are both private and professional individuals throughout New Zealand. As well as seeing clients individually, he spends much of his time promoting Thinkwell services to various organisations and associations.

He is originally from Ireland, where he began his initial training as a psychotherapist and completed a BA in Psychoanalysis and a two-year certificate in Humanities (Philosophical Studies). After moving to Wellington in 2000 and working for a number of large corporate organisations, he resumed his studies, and completed his training as a psychotherapist by specialising in a theory based on effective communication between individuals called Transactional Analysis (T.A.).

He has been working as a therapist since 2003 and made the move into coaching and supervision to help support individuals more effectively within their workplace. He is motivated to help individuals to develop and maintain healthy communication with other colleagues and with clients, to avoid unnecessary stress in their roles, and to more easily have the 'difficult' conversations - especially related to challenging certain behaviour or to increase performance.