Lesson Proper for Week 8

Understanding the Supervisory Relationship

The field supervisor is instrumental to student learning in any human services internship. You might think of your supervisor in a number of ways. Your supervisor may be thought of as a teacher who can impart new knowledge and skills. He may be thought of as an enabler, a supportive mentor who can help you to achieve your goals. She might be considered a broker and advocate, an established professional who can help you gain access to key experiences and people within the organization as well as within the community (Brashears, 1995).

Ideally, supervisory relationships are based on trust and mutual understanding. Within the context of a trusting relationship, your supervisor becomes your primary and most immediate source of support while you are on the job (Shulman, 2008). Therefore, supervision should be seen as a valuable, desirable part of your working experience, both in your fieldwork and later in your career. Your willingness to draw upon your supervisor's support, knowledge, and expertise will enhance your learning and reduce your stress throughout your internship.

Despite the supportive nature of supervision, many students often have mixed feelings about it, perhaps because they have not experienced professional supervision before. The prospect of supervision may be both reassuring and anxiety provoking. Although you want guidance and support, you might also have concerns about having your work scrutinized. You might have fears of not meeting your supervisor's expectations or of your work being criticized.

Most interns feel more comfortable with supervision once they have formed a relationship with their supervisor. As is the case in every relationship, establishing good communication with your supervisor forms a solid foundation for your work together, so it is helpful to discuss with your supervisor your thoughts about supervision. It may also be helpful to recognize that although supervision starts during the human services training program, it is not unique to your role as a student. Supervision is a working relationship that you will have throughout your career. Wherever

you work, whatever you do, you can be relatively sure that you will be accountable to a supervisor. Working effectively with supervisors is a central element in the growth and development of human service professionals throughout their careers (Kaiser, 1997; Sadow, Ryder, Stein, & Geller, 1987; Shulman, 2008).

Kerson (1994) points out that the supervisory relationship progresses through certain predictable developmental stages. She asserts that the relationship's development loosely parallels the eight stages of human development described by Eric Erikson. Hypothetically, following this model, the supervisory relationship begins with the establishment of trust, then moves into the establishment of student autonomy, followed by the development of student initiative, then student industry, self-defined identity, and generativity. This is a useful way to think about the supervisory relationship because it holds a number of implications. First, it suggests that the relationship develops over time. Second, it posits that the student grows, becoming more independent and productive within this relationship. Third, it implies that the work of supervision is significant, as the supervisor's role theoretically parallels that of the nurturing parent and the student's role parallels that of a young child striving to grow.

The stages of the internship includes information about the supervisory relationship as it unfolds and develops in each stage. From the Preplacement Stage through the Termination Stage, each phase offers its own tasks, possibilities, challenges, and rewards in working with your supervisor. As you begin this chapter with the goal of examining and understanding the supervisory relationship more deeply, review the stages of the internship in previous lesson with special attention to the development of that relationship over time.

Learning to work productively with a supervisor and to use supervision effectively is a professional skill that will help you to continue growing throughout your career.

Supervision and Learning Styles

The role of learning styles in student internships has gained considerable attention in recent years. Perhaps not surprisingly, learning style issues are thought to play a significant role in the process of supervision in internships. (Read or review "Understanding Your Preferred Learning Style" in previous lesson.) A growing body of research examines learning style differences and similarities between human service interns and their supervisors. Developing an understanding of the learning style differences that you may be encountering both in the classroom and in your internship will equip you to navigate those differences successfully through greater insight into yourself and others.

Kolb and Kolb (2005) suggest that professionals in various fields tend to have similar learning styles. This clustering of similar learning styles within professions is thought to result from two processes: self-selection and socialization. Through self-selection people tend to choose professions that are most compatible with their own preferred learning styles. For example, college professors tend to be Assimilators who enjoy working with abstract ideas and constructing theories while those entering the physical sciences tend to be Convergers who enjoy hands-on problem-solving and working in contexts in which there are clear right answers. Learning style theory also posits that once we enter a profession we are influenced by socialization as a variety of social forces shape our preferred

cognitive styles to conform to those dominant within that group. These social forces include modeling, teaching, and mentoring and occur in both formal relationships, such as supervision, and informal relationships, such as the daily interactions between colleagues in the field.

Accommodating and Diverging styles tend to be prevalent among human service professionals (Kolb, 1984; Kolb & Kolb, 2005). Individuals with these learning styles enjoy learning from concrete experiences (such as interactions with people). These two styles differ though in the ways that they prefer to process those experiences. Accommodators tend to stay grounded in the experience itself and engage in problem-solving through trial and error that is based on that experience. Sometimes this approach is described as intuitive. Divergers process their experiences through reflective observation and taking into account multiple perspectives on the experience.

The prevalence of Accommodating and Diverging as the dominate styles in human services has been well documented through research. It is not surprising then that recent studies have found these two learning styles to be predominant among both students and professionals in the human service field as well (Massey, Kim, & Mitchell, 2011; Wolfsfels & Haj-Yahia, 2010). The learning style socialization process suggested by Kolb finds some support in this research as human service students are found to be more diverse in their learning styles as compared to supervisors and to shift in their learning styles toward the Accomodating and Diverging styles as they progress through their academic programs (Raschick, Maypole, & Day, 1998; Wolfsfeld & Hay-Yahia, 2010). Wolfsfeld & Haj-Yahia (2010), for example, found 93 percent of field supervisors in their study to be Accomodators (15 percent) and Divergers (78 percent). In contrast, this same study found that students represented more diverse learning styles: Divergers 38.6 percent, Assimilators 22.3 percent, Convergers 7.9 percent, and Accommodators 31.2 percent. These findings, while showing more diversity among student learning styles, also indicate that the Accommodating and Diverging styles were overrepresented even among students, suggesting support for the selection process. Even so, only about 70 percent of students fell within these two dominant styles in contrast to 93 percent of field supervisors. Interestingly and predictably, academic faculty in human service fields tend to have more abstract learning styles with far greater numbers of Assimilators among them as compared to their colleagues who are practitioners and as compared to their students (Wolfsfeld & Haj-Yahia, 2010).

A key question for both interns and their supervisors is how these learning style differences might manifest themselves in the process of supervision. Research has shown that it is more likely than not that students and their supervisors will have different preferred learning styles (Raschick, Maypole, & Day, 1998) and that supervisors tend to modify their approach slightly in supervision if their learning style and that of the student are similar (Wolfsfeld & Haj-Yahia, 2010). From an educational standpoint this behavioral shift in supervisors might be a good one in terms of student learning since learning style differences between students and their supervisors is generally thought to be positive, exposing students to a wider range of cognitive approaches and skills in supervision.

Since the most effective learning requires gaining skill and practice in using all of the various learning styles, the literature expresses some concern about the relative lack of diversity in learning styles among supervisors in the field (Bogo & Vayda, 1998; Kadushin, 2002; Wolfsfeld & Haj-Yahia, 2010). The lack of Assimilators might mean that less attention is given to abstract conceptualization and application of theory in supervision. Similarly, the lack of Convergers might mean that less attention is given to active experimentation, problem-solving, and developing action plans. It is noteworthy that the high value placed on experiencing a range of learning styles in supervision seems to be in tension with student preferences as students tend to rate their supervisors more highly when the

supervisor has the same learning style as the student (Raschick, Maypole, & Day, 1998). While this positive reaction to matched styles might be understandable in terms of student comfort level, more variance in style is generally considered ideal for maximizing student learning.

As you work with your supervisor, keep in mind that the goal of working through all four steps of the learning cycle and practicing all of the learning styles will be achieved most effectively if both of you are aware of the need to practice this flexibility of thought. Now that you have some awareness of learning styles, you might choose to discuss the topic with your supervisor. Supervisors vary in their awareness of learning styles and, even among those who do have a background in the topic, the learning style model that they follow might be different from the one presented here. Fortunately a great deal of information about various learning style models is easily accessible on the Internet, including Kolb's Learning Style Inventory. You and your supervisor can obtain this information fairly easily in order to facilitate a discussion about learning style issues if that is an interest that you share. Understanding their intern's preferred learning style is often helpful to supervisors since they can then understand where to start in the supervision process. Although all students can benefit from being challenged to more fully develop all of the learning styles, this process often goes more smoothly if the supervisor understands the intern's preferred learning style as a starting point (Raschik, Maypole, & Day, 1998; Wolfsfeld & Haj-Yahia, 2010).

Supervisor Characteristics

Beyond the issue of learning styles, there are many additional qualities in supervisors that have a significant impact on an intern's learning experience. The ideal supervisor for one student, however, might be less than ideal for another. Before reading about the range of supervisor characteristics that students might encounter, the following exercise will help you think about the characteristics that you personally value.

Effective supervisors are knowledgeable, supportive, and skillful in giving feedback. They must be willing to address difficult issues as they arise, teach their supervisees important information and skills, and model high standards of professionalism and expertise. Supervisors also must maintain appropriate boundaries with supervisees, avoiding dual relationships or other such complications that might create conflicts of interest and jeopardize objectivity. One of the most challenging aspects of supervision in many settings is the issue of time availability. Even the best supervisors cannot provide adequate supervision if they do not have sufficient time for the task.

Supervisors vary in how much structure they provide for their interns and the range of roles that they might assume. Some supervisors provide a great deal of structure and assume the role of a teacher with the intern, providing extensive support and information to enable the student to perform a task successfully. Others are far less directive. These supervisors, for example, might assign their interns a project or task and expect that they will tackle it more independently, asking for help only as needed. Still other supervisors vary the roles they assume depending on how prepared they perceive the student to be in accomplishing a particular task or how the difficult they perceive the task to be. Likewise, students vary in how much structure they want; some like a great deal of guidance and support while others prefer a high degree of independence and self-direction. Developmental models for supervision generally suggest that more mature and experienced students prefer and benefit from a less structured coaching or consulting role in their supervisors while less experienced, less mature students require a

more structured, teacher-like approach (Stoltenberg, McNeill, & Delworth, 1998). All of this suggests that there is not one right way for supervisors to conduct their work. Supervision is more about the right approach, for the right student, at the right time. As an intern, your communication with your supervisor will be a key element in ensuring that there is a good match between the role your supervisor assumes and your development and learning needs.

Although most supervisory relationships develop fairly easily, sometimes there are special barriers to developing a positive relationship. Experiencing your supervisor as overly critical or unavailable to you are obvious examples of this. By the same token, having a supervisor who is far younger than you are or one who has a vastly different background can make forming a relationship more challenging. At times, supervisors and their students simply have very different personalities and personal styles, resulting in distance that may take a longer time and more effort to bridge.

Whatever the challenges, communication, patience, and flexibility are fundamental to ultimately building a satisfactory relationship. Although in some cases the relationship may develop slowly, most students and their supervisors find ways to work together in a satisfactory manner. If you should find that your situation is particularly difficult and is creating an obstacle to your learning, discuss this with your faculty liaison.

Keep in mind that any requests you might make are just that, requests. Supervisors must decide how to conduct supervision according to their own supervisory styles and their perceptions of their students' learning needs. Sensitive supervisors, however, will try to respect your preferences whenever possible, and they can do this best when you have clearly communicated with them about your interests and needs.

Because supervision is a relationship based on two-way communication involving both the supervisor and the student, it is necessary to look at your own contribution to the relationship as well. We now turn our attention to student characteristics and how they influence the supervisory relationship.

Student Characteristics

Most supervisors are fairly comfortable working with a wide range of student interests, abilities, and developmental levels. Even so, certain characteristics are commonly considered to be desirable in all students because they are conducive to a positive learning experience. The "ideal intern" might be described as

- Reliable and honest
- Having a strong work ethic
- Open to feedback and instruction
- Eager to learn
- Inquisitive and energetic
- Knowledgeable on at least a basic level
- Realistic about his or her own skills and knowledge
- Willing to take risks in order to gain new skills and knowledge

- Appropriately assertive, taking responsibility for his or her own learning and demonstrating initiative
- A good listener, observer, and communicator
- Respectful toward the agency and its staff, policies, and practices
- Possessing a good balance of both confidence and humility

The best way to find out about your particular field supervisor's expectations regarding students is to discuss the topic directly. In fact, you and your supervisor probably discussed these expectations at least briefly during your initial meeting prior to the beginning of the internship. At this point, if you do not feel that you are sufficiently clear about your supervisor's expectations of you, initiate some discussion about it.

A positive relationship with your field supervisor, though beneficial, is a means to an end and not an end in itself. As in working with clients, a good working relationship is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for change and growth to occur. Within the context of this supervisory relationship, a good bit of work must occur throughout the internship.

Working Within the Supervisory Relationship

The process of supervision requires work on the part of the student and the supervisor. You will probably interact with your supervisor in a number of different ways. You will ask a quick question in the hall; she will briefly check in with you on how a particular meeting went. Maybe you will have lunch together at times, and issues related to your work will weave in and out of your lunch-time conversation. At times you might observe your supervisor's work, and he might observe yours. All of these are valuable parts of your learning experience, but none of them constitute formal supervision.

Formal supervision occurs when you and your supervisor have a *planned contact* with one another, which both of you have *prepared for*, for the express purpose of thoroughly discussing *professional issues*, *planning* subsequent interventions or projects, and generating *feedback* (Alle-Corliss & Alle-Corliss, 1999; Chiaferi & Griffin, 1997; Thomlison, Rogers, Collins, & Grinnell, 1996). To understand the work of supervision, it is helpful to consider individually each of the key components italicized above.

Supervision is a Planned Contact

You and your field supervisor should schedule a routine one-to-one meeting time, if at all possible. The norm in most field placements is about one hour per week of formal supervision time. This may vary, of course, depending upon the nature of the work and the issues at hand at any given time. Planned contact ensures that supervision time is a priority and not an activity that occurs "whenever things slow down." In most human service agencies, things almost never slow down. Another benefit of planned contact is that planned meetings allow sufficient opportunity for both you and your supervisor to prepare for supervision.

Supervision is Prepared For

Your supervisory time is valuable and possibly difficult to arrange. You will want to use the time well. The best method for ensuring this is to prepare for the meeting by developing written summaries of important events that you need to discuss and an agenda of your concerns and questions. Prior to each supervisory session, your preparation will involve taking a pulse on your current work. Reflect on the work you have been doing, the meetings and other interactions that you have observed, the decisions currently confronting you, the preparations you are making for future contacts with clients or for projects, and the interactions you have had with other staff members. Supervision obviously cannot focus on every experience that you have had and every pending event, so you will have to set some priorities. Questions to ask yourself as you plan for supervision are "What issues in my work currently concern me most?" and "What are the time-sensitive issues that need my supervisor's attention now?"

Once you have decided upon a few priority items for supervision, your preparation continues by gathering the necessary data and organizing your thoughts and questions so that you are ready to present your concerns concisely. Plan your agenda for supervision with the awareness that your supervisor may also be planning to bring in items for discussion. Your supervisor might want to follow a certain project or case closely or might need to use some of the conference time for launching a new task or project in your learning plan. In order to coordinate the concerns that both of you are bringing to the meeting, it is helpful to your supervisor to receive your agenda a day or so in advance. If more time is needed, then perhaps this can be scheduled.

Supervision Involves Discussing Professional Issues

As you and your supervisor bring items into the supervisory conference, a twofold purpose is served: (1) the quality of your work for the agency is being monitored and enhanced, and (2) your knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, and behaviors as a developing professional are being encouraged, developed, shaped, and reinforced. Toward these ends, the professional issues discussed may cover a wide range of topics, including but not limited to the following:

- Your work with clients, if any
- Your work on projects, if any
- Your work and interactions with colleagues
- Your understanding of your responsibilities to the agency
- Your professional values and ethics
- Your personal reactions, feelings, attitudes, and biases as these relate to your work
- The supervisory relationship itself

As this list suggests, the potential topics for discussion are fairly wide ranging. Keep in mind, however, that all discussions in supervision are in service to the goals of supervision identified previously—enhancing the quality of your work and your learning. Although supervision can, and often does, touch upon personal issues at times,

supervision is not counseling or psychotherapy, nor is it a friendship.

Supervision Includes Planning

There are numerous points of departure for discussion in supervision, but all of them essentially lead to one overarching question in the end: "What are the implications of this discussion for improving my future work and professional development?" Attention is placed on such questions as "What are my next steps toward completing this project?", "What will I do in my next contact with this client?", "How will I relate to this particular staff member in the future?", "How will I handle myself in the next meeting?", and "How will I approach the next task at hand?" You and your supervisor will examine various options for how to proceed with your work, select an appropriate plan, and discuss its implementation. As was discussed in Chapter 4, an essential element in developing any plan for your future work is to consider your ability to implement it. Your supervisor is an excellent resource in helping you to assess this. In addition, your supervisor can help you develop reasonable plans for gaining the knowledge and skills that you need. In some cases, you might need to implement a given plan with another worker present for support, or you might observe another worker implement the plan as the next step in your learning. Through the process of making and implementing plans, your skills are continuously being reviewed and expanded.

Supervision Generates Feedback

Getting feedback is one of the most crucial yet potentially difficult aspects of the supervisory relationship. Emphasis is placed on the issue of feedback in this chapter because your ability to both accept feedback and give it effectively is pivotal to your success in your fieldwork and in your career.

As a student of human services, you might have learned about giving feedback to others effectively. One of the principles to remember in giving feedback is that feedback can be difficult to receive. Interestingly, receiving feedback of any kind (both positive and negative) can be among the most difficult and challenging tasks of supervision. Yet ongoing evaluation is an indispensable component of your learning and development, not just as an intern but as a professional. Your field experience provides a good opportunity to work on receiving feedback effectively. As you receive feedback, both internal and external factors can influence your ability to accept it.

The following internal issues, for example, affect how people receive feedback:

· Feedback is easier to receive when it matches a person's self-perception and is more difficult to receive when it conflicts with a person's self-perception.

· Internalizing feedback requires time and reflection on the part of the receiver.

· Feedback is easier to receive if the receiver trusts the source of the feedback. (Welfel & Patterson, 2005)

A person's ability to accept feedback depends not only on internal factors but on external factors as well. How the feedback is delivered can strongly influence whether that feedback is accepted or rejected. Effective feedback should be:

- Direct and specific, describing specific behaviors or actions.
- Offered calmly and respectfully.
- Timely—that is, delivered soon after the experience.
- Balanced, recognizing both strengths and weaknesses.
- Offered, not forced, allowing the receiver to reflect and respond.
- Helpful in generating ideas for alternative ways of doing things. (Bogo & Vayda, 1998; Egan, 2014; Welfel & Patterson, 2005)

As your relationship progresses, you and your supervisor might discuss how your supervisory relationship is working. Some supervisors are eager for feedback from their students, asking for suggestions as to how the student's learning needs can best be met. Other supervisors may be less open to suggestions. The relationship works best when the student and the supervisor can give one another feedback about how the supervisory relationship is working. Each of you probably has some suggestions about how you can work together most effectively. If you should have such a conversation with your supervisor, remember that it is important to evaluate your contribution to the success of the supervisory relationship, not just to evaluate your supervisor's role.

In addition, students must develop the assertiveness required to express any concerns they might have directly to their supervisors. At times interns will express a concern to their faculty member that their time is not being used well or that the work they are asked to do is not substantive or educational. In response to such concerns, Milnes (2001) asserts, "Approaching one's boss with work-related issues is a reality of employment. The internship is an opportunity to experience that reality" (p. 4). Through taking responsibility for the quality of your own experience, solving problems with your supervisor as they arise, and making the effort to shape the internship into the learning opportunity you want, you will develop important skills that are necessary in any workplace. You will not develop these skills if your faculty member handles these situations on your behalf. Discussing issues of concern with your faculty member, however, is an appropriate way to prepare for a conversation with your supervisor about your concerns.

Conclusion

Your supervision may be best thought of as a helping relationship in which a professional worker assists you in your learning. Supervision serves the dual purposes of monitoring the quality of your work and enhancing your professional development. For this relationship to work effectively, it must be allowed to develop over time. The supervisory process should include certain key elements such as planned contacts, preparation, discussion of

professional issues, plans for future action, and feedback. The quality of the supervisory relationship is one of the most critical features of successful internships. Therefore students are encouraged to approach this relationship thoughtfully, with seriousness of purpose and eagerness to learn.

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