

Hiring Program Managers and Supervisors with Reflective Capacity

This resource was created to support Healthy Families New York (HFNY) programs to hire program managers and supervisors who can bring a reflective leadership style to their programs. The first page contains information on reflective capacity and the remaining pages provide suggestions (interview questions, vignettes and scenarios) on how to identify it in candidates.

What is reflective capacity?

Reflective capacity is defined as the capacity to exercise introspection and the willingness to learn more about the fundamental nature, purpose and essence of how we, as humans, experience the world and how our mindset is impacted by that experience.

Why is it important to hire program managers and supervisors with reflective capacity?

Healthy Families New York policy requires that program managers and supervisors “have experience with and commitment to reflective practice.” Working with overburdened families and staff can be quite stressful, with challenging situations that may trigger an emotional reaction and be in conflict with the staff person’s own value system. The capacity to show oneself empathy and contain judgment/reaction is critical to maintaining healthy relationships with families and staff. Employees who feel secure sharing their feelings and experiences with a supervisor are more likely to respond in sensitive ways and are less likely to project their own feelings onto the family or the people they supervise; reflective leaders intentionally create and maintain safe spaces for this to occur. The willingness to reflect and participate fully in supervision supports staff retention; this is connected to them having a safe place for their feelings to be validated and processed.

Program managers and supervisors with reflective capacity:

Are self-aware. This means that they are clear about their own values and what triggers them; they notice how these influence their perception/interpretation of situations. They take responsibility for their own contributions/reactions/responses to difficult situations, are aware of their impact on others, and model taking action to repair relationships. Self-awareness also refers to their ability to know themselves, their strengths, and their limitations. They are committed to examining their reactions, thoughts, and feelings about their work, and take time to pause, reflect, learn and improve. Leaders with reflective capacity know that they need to bring themselves back into balance after a stressful incident or time; they are able to consciously self-regulate and model this for others.

Are curious and use careful observation and inquiry. They have an interest in and ability to see things from multiple points of view. They are skilled at deciphering the meaning of what they are seeing and hearing and the meaning of their own and others’ behavior, body language, and reactions. They ask themselves: “*what’s the reason this might this be happening?*” and use inquiry skills to solicit more information. Leaders with reflective capacity can tolerate ambiguity; they do not have to have a solution right away but can sit with “not knowing” and spend time figuring out what the actual issue is before considering options to move forward.

Seek to find flexible responses. They understand that staff need different things from them and they look to respond based on what they know about the person and the situation. They intentionally consider the feelings, needs, state(s) of mind of others and take these into account in their responses. This requires that program managers and supervisors really get to know their staff — what their personal styles are, how they work best, and what motivates them.

Suggestions for Evaluating Reflective Capacity during the Selection Process

General observations:

- In their job interview, are they genuine and successful in connecting with you?
- How do they relate to front-office staff or staff they meet incidentally as part of the hiring process? (*Remember to ask front-office staff how they experienced this person.*)
- How well do they pick up on non-verbal cues from you or others during the interview? (Note: if you are interviewing virtually, you may want to watch the webinar on hiring and on-boarding virtually at <https://rrvhv.earlyimpactva.org/webinar/hiring-and-on-boarding-virtually>.)
- When you are having conversations with them, are they reciprocal? Do they consider, respond, and connect with you?
- Are they comfortable sharing how they are feeling, for example, nervous, excited?
- Do they use “we” versus “I” language when describing previous work projects and accomplishments?
- Do they pause in responding and seem comfortable saying, “I am not sure about that”?
- How do you *feel* in their presence?

Remember: just like in our work with families and the people we supervise, the candidate should be doing most of the talking. Open-ended questions (rather than close-ended) are the most effective means to this end; they will help you to learn more about the candidate as they typically result in more expansive responses to your questions.

Sample interview questions and scenarios: We want thoughtful responses from candidates, so let them know that they can take their time in responding. (*As an interviewer, remember to be comfortable with a little silence to give the candidate time to respond.*)

- Think of someone you have supervised, if possible, for more than just a couple of months. (*Note: As HFNY direct service staff are sometimes promoted from within to supervisory positions, you may need to modify this question to “a relationship with a co-worker.”*)
 - Approximately how long were you in this supervisory relationship with this person?
 - Describe your relationship with this person.
 - Think of five adjectives that you would use to describe this person and elaborate on your reasons for choosing them.
 - Think of a time when this person was upset. How did you respond? In what ways were you able to find out what was going on for this person and what they were feeling? (*Look for how much they communicate a sense of interest in and understanding of someone else’s internal, emotional world.*)
 - How did it affect you when this person was upset? (*Look for tolerance of strong affect, what they do when a staff person gets really sad or angry.*)
 - What is the reason you chose this person to talk about?
 - How do you think this individual would describe you? For instance, name 5 adjectives this person might use to describe you.

- How would you define Reflective Supervision? What strengths do you find in the Reflective Supervision model? What challenges do you have in implementing it and how have you addressed those challenges? *(The goal is to get a sense that they have experience with this model. Ideally, you will hear evidence that they have thought about it and provided it successfully.)*
- Share a vignette of a situation that might happen or has occurred in your program (in supervision, in team/staff meeting, the broader community) and ask the applicant how they feel and how they would respond. Programs can craft scenarios that fit their program and community. Additionally, here are a few examples of vignettes you might use:
 1. (PM focus) During supervision, one of the supervisors shares that she knows she is late getting her paperwork and reports in but feels like the workload is just too heavy.
 2. (PM focus) During a staff meeting, several staff bring up concern for their personal safety as they visit communities where there has been an increase in violent crime over the past few months.
 3. (Supervisor focus) During supervision, a staff person shares with you that they would like to close a family that they have been working with for about a year. The family has been sporadic at keeping their visits and the home visitor says “we never really clicked and weren’t getting anywhere anyway. I think we should just serve families who really want the program.”

With all the vignettes used, look for evidence that the candidate would:

- Provide thoughtful support as opposed to problem solving and responding as “the expert.”
- Consider multiple contexts, such as what might be going on for the supervisee in their personal life or the impact on staff regarding events in the larger community.
- Inquire about the meaning of the behavior, asking how this has been dealt with in the past.
- A sense that they would explore solutions with the people involved, and wonder about the possibility of using other specific solutions- for example, the applicant might say something like “I would ask her for her thoughts,” and “I wonder what it would look like if...”)
- Outside of work, what experiences in your life have helped you be ready for this kind of work? What kinds of things do you do to nurture yourself, reduce stress and maintain a balanced life?
- What is your process to learn something new? *(This doesn’t have to be work related, it could be a musical instrument, a new piece of technology, etc.)*
- What do you think it is like to be your supervisor? What do you think a previous supervisor would say about your strengths and challenges?
- Think of a specific difficulty you have had with a colleague or supervisor. Please describe what you think was going on in that situation and how it was (if it was) resolved. *(Specifically,*

look for their ability to see the other person's point of view and evidence of their curiosity of what was going on from various vantage points. Look for indicators of their self-awareness reflected in how they share their understanding of their own role in the situation.)

- Describe a time when you found yourself in a challenging professional situation in a community you worked in, and share how you handled it. *(Look for awareness of the importance of professional boundaries and flexible responses to situations.)*
- How will you approach building a safe, supportive program culture in this position? Can you share activities you've implemented or ideas you have on ways to maintain and boost staff morale?
- How do you seek out support in your work? What kinds of circumstances make seeking help easier and harder for you?
- As a manager or supervisor, what do you think you could do more of, what could you stop doing, and what is one thing that you've really figured out and think you could continue doing? *(This is called a "start, stop and continue" exercise.)*

Potential questions to ask when interviewing references to evaluate reflective capacity:

- Compared to your other staff, how was this person at handling differing viewpoints between themselves and others?
- How would you describe this person's general mood and affect? *(Do they have an optimistic outlook on life?)*
- Compared to your other staff, how able are they to be reflective about the job they are doing and how they could do it better?
- How would this person show frustration?
- Compared to your other staff, how successful was this staff at responding to frustrated or upset people? What specific skills did you see?
- On a scale of 1-5, how effective was this person in contributing to a positive staff morale?
- On a scale of 1-5, how effective was this person in supporting/encouraging professional growth of their supervisees?
- Over time, how did this person's relationships with staff change?
- Did this person seem to feel comfortable coming to you for support? If yes, can you give an example?

Note: the ideas and approaches shared in this document are focused on hiring for Reflective Capacity. There are many offered and you are free to select the ones you like, and modify them as well. Remember, each program and host agency will also have other required questions and scenarios that will need to be included in your interview protocol.

While effectiveness as a leader is often measured in outcomes, it is our ability to reflect on and optimize our relationships that makes these goals achievable. It is our skill in connecting with others, guiding and mentoring them that makes good numbers a natural outgrowth of good relationships. Our accomplishments are a reflection of what our relationships have allowed us to achieve.

--Nancy Seibel, Zero to Three