

Chapter 4

Using Supervision

In the previous chapter you were introduced to a particular model for learning from experience. You learned that experience itself, coupled with your ability to process that experience meaningfully, is the key resource in your learning. That chapter also referred to the supervisor's role in helping you process your experiences. This chapter further develops your understanding of the supervisory relationship and how to use it effectively.

A Student's Reflections on the Supervisory Relationship

I think my supervisor is a perfect one for me. I have worked for supervisors before who told me what to do, set up work schedules, and dished out a little praise or criticism as the situation called for. This supervisor is different. She really takes time with me and wants me to learn, but she doesn't hover over me. Sometimes she has thrown me into things that I didn't know how to deal with, and I felt at loose ends. A few times I have even felt annoyed at her for that. As I look back on it, I think she has given me independence and support in about the right amounts. If she had waited until I felt 100% confident to expect me to handle things, I would never have done anything. I think it must be hard for supervisors to find the right balance between expecting enough and expecting too much.

Understanding the Supervisory Relationship

The field supervisor is key 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 most supervisory relationships, many fieldwork students have not experienced professional supervision before and therefore often have mixed feelings about it. 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 fieldwork students feel more comfortable with supervision once they have formed a relationship with their supervisor. As is the case in other types of relationships, 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 (Neukrug, 1994). 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).

◆ EXERCISE 4.1 PERSONAL REFLECTION: OBSERVATION OF SELF AND OTHERS

Interview a human services professional who has been in the field for some time. Learn what you can from her or him about how to work with a supervisor in a productive way. Potential questions for your interview are listed below, but feel free to generate your own questions based on your interests and situation. Your questions might include:

- ◆ How have you benefited from supervision?
- ◆ What challenges have you encountered in your supervisory relationship?

- ◆ Have you ever had a serious difference of opinion with your supervisor about how to handle a situation? If so, how did you manage this difference of opinion?
- ◆ As I begin my internship and my human service career, what suggestions do you have for me about working with my supervisors successfully?

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 in which to think about the supervisory relationship in that 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.

As this model suggests, 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. The exercises below will help you clarify your thoughts, feelings, and expectations as you enter this relationship.

Supervisor Characteristics

◆ EXERCISE 4.2 PERSONAL REFLECTION: OBSERVATION OF SELF AND OTHERS

What characteristics do you consider to be ideal in a field supervisor? What hopes and expectations do you have about the type of supervision that you will receive in your internship? What particular concerns or worries do you have about your supervision? What specific requests, if any, would you like to make of your supervisor?

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.

Compare the characteristics included in this discussion with those you identified in Exercise 4.2. You might have additional thoughts about what you need in a supervisor. It is useful to share your thoughts about supervision with your supervisor. Keep in mind that any requests you might make are just that, requests. Supervisors must decide how to conduct supervision according to their students' learning needs and their own supervisory styles. 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 hopes and needs.

A Student's Reflections on Supervisor Characteristics

I liked my supervisor on sight. She has a wonderful sense of humor, a quick mind, and a ready smile. She has a way of being friendly and businesslike at the same time. We went to lunch together where we discussed both of our goals for the fieldwork and how we should best go about achieving them. I appreciated her good sense in taking us away from the office as we were getting to know one another. She is a walking encyclopedia of information, but she shares it in a way that is natural and helpful, not superior. I can't help but learn if I spend much time with her.

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 the 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 to bridge in the relationship.

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.

A Student's Reflections on Supervision

My relationship with my supervisor started out a little uncomfortable. He is about 25 years old and has a master's degree and a few years of work experience. Here I am 45 years old, old enough to be his mother. In fact, I do have a son who is 21. I think my supervisor was a little intimidated by me at first. I was quite relieved when he brought up our age difference and asked me how I felt about it. It gave me a chance to tell him that I felt I could learn a lot from him regardless of his age, which seemed to help break the ice. It also made me feel good that he said that he felt he could learn from me, too. I am glad that he doesn't see me like he would a 20-year-old, and I'm glad he had the courage to bring up the subject for discussion. The comfort level between us has been much improved ever since. Now that I am approaching the end of my internship, I can honestly say that I have learned a lot from him. I think the main things that we both brought to our relationship that made it work out so well were honesty, respect, and openness.

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

◆ EXERCISE 4.3 PERSONAL REFLECTION: OBSERVATION OF SELF AND OTHERS

Imagine that you are a field instructor supervising a human service intern. What characteristics would you like to see in the student you are supervising?

How would you like the student to relate to you?

What specific traits and behaviors would you be concerned about if you saw them in your student?

In what ways do you imagine that you would be accountable to others in regard to your student's performance?

Exercise 4.3 invites you to empathize with your supervisor and to look at your internship through the eyes of your supervisor and the host organization. Recognizing your supervisor's and your agency's needs in relation to your performance can help you understand the importance placed on the quality of your performance. Taking this perspective will serve you well not only as an intern but also as an employee in the future. Your supervisor has assumed significant responsibility in accepting you as an intern in the organization and will be held accountable by the agency's management for the quality of your performance. In this context, it is understandable that your supervisor will want to have a guiding hand in your work and will count on you to seek supervision appropriately.

Although you might feel that your supervisor has all the power and control and that you have none, rest assured that you too have a powerful role to play in shaping the supervisory relationship. The qualities that you bring to the relationship and the manner in which you communicate with and relate to your supervisor are critical to the quality of your relationship and how much you learn from supervision (Halley, Kopp, & Austin, 1998). Kaiser (1997) points out that supervisees have the power to "enhance or sabotage the supervisory process" (p. 48). Although supervisors have the knowledge and expertise to provide a learning opportunity, the supervisee must be cooperative and open to what the supervisor has to offer.

Having worked alongside many internship supervisors through the years, it is my impression that certain characteristics are commonly considered to be desirable in 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

This list of characteristics, of course, is not exhaustive. Royse, Dhooper, and Rompf (1996) discuss an extensive list of characteristics that are desirable in human services interns. These characteristics include a desire to help others, an interest in the organization, maturity, promptness, a positive attitude, and good grammar, among others (pp. 16–17). Interestingly, but not surprisingly, both students and supervisors want to work with someone who is accessible and ready to invest energy in the learning process.

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 good starting point for the discussion might be sharing the thoughts you have developed in Exercises 4.2 and 4.3, asking for your supervisor's reaction and input.

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.

A Student's Reflections on Working with a Supervisor

Talking with my supervisor helps me to process things. I generally tell my supervisor what is on my mind and what is in my heart. There is a very intense part of me and I am glad that I have a supervisor who can handle that, but I recognize that this isn't therapy. My supervisor is helpful in keeping me focused on the issues at hand but is patient in helping me wade through the various quandaries and emotions that come up along the way. Some parts of supervision, of course, are very cut and dried, just passing on information. But the best part of supervision is really talking through the issues that come up. I am glad that my supervisor is not too quick to tell me what to do, although I admit that sometimes I want him to do just that. He truly uses an empowerment model. He helps me figure out for myself what to do. By the same token, though, I know he won't just sit back and let me do something stupid or just plain wrong.

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; Wilson, 1981). 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 will be discussed in Chapter 5, 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.

◆ EXERCISE 4.4 SYNTHESIS: LINKING KNOWLEDGE AND EXPERIENCE

Through this discussion, you have learned about what quality supervision should entail. Examine your own supervision, and consider each of the key points discussed above. To what extent is your supervision:

Planned and systematic:

Prepared for:

Focused on professional issues:

Focused on planning:

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, 2007; Welfel & Patterson, 2005)



◆ EXERCISE 4.5 PERSONAL REFLECTION: OBSERVATION OF SELF AND OTHERS

Think about some specific instances in which you have received positive feedback. (You may draw from experiences within your internship or from other experiences.) In what instance(s) have you been able to accept and benefit from positive feedback? Have you tended to reject feedback offered in some instances? What factors contributed to your acceptance or rejection of the feedback offered?

Think about some instances in which you have received negative feedback. (You may draw from your internship experience or from other experiences.) In what instance(s) have you been able to accept and benefit from negative feedback? Under what circumstance(s) did you reject the feedback offered? What factors contributed to your acceptance or rejection of the feedback?

Think about the feedback that you have received during your internship, particularly from your supervisor. In what ways has the feedback that you received generally conformed to and/or contradicted the guidelines previously suggested?

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. In many cases, interns will express 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.



◆ EXERCISE 4.6 PERSONAL REFLECTION: OBSERVATION OF SELF AND OTHERS

Using the preceding guidelines regarding giving feedback, write some helpful feedback that you might share with your field supervisor at this point in your relationship, if he or she seems open to such a conversation.

What are the particular strengths that your supervisor brings to your relationship?

How might your supervisor help you to get more out of supervision or more out of your fieldwork in general?

How comfortable are you with the idea of discussing this feedback with your supervisor?

How open do you perceive your supervisor to be to receiving your feedback?

Evaluate your own role as a supervisee. What strengths have you brought to the supervisory relationship?

What have you done to make the most of your supervisory time?

What might you do to get more out of supervision?

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.



◆ FOR YOUR E-PORTFOLIO

From your internship, what have you learned about what you want and need in your supervisory relationship? How have you handled your responsibilities within this role in terms of being an active and open participant in the process? What particular challenges have you encountered in your supervision, and how have you handled them? How would you like to grow in your skills to use supervision effectively? Based on your internship supervisory experience, what do you anticipate that you will need in a supervisor when you enter your first professional job?

Excerpt from a Student Portfolio on Using Supervision

I've had a number of different kinds of jobs and in each one I had a supervisor of sorts. Also, while I've been in college, I've done different kinds of service experiences and each of those also had a "go-to-person" who provided key information and kept things organized and moving forward. For the purposes of thinking about my future employment, I've tried to look back over all of these supervisory experiences to identify what I think I need in a supervisor and to identify the qualities that I bring to the supervisory relationship. I will start first with the last part of the equation because everything else kind of flows out of that.

Although it is a hard thing to admit, I have to say that I have come to recognize my own difficulties with supervision. I always try to put my best foot forward and bring a positive, optimistic attitude to whatever I'm asked to do. So what's the problem? The problem is that this can make me slow to admit what I don't know or even to admit to myself my own questions and reservations about a situation. So at times I can be guilty of getting too far into a situation before realizing that I really should have asked for more information, guidance, or instruction. Simply put, in trying to avoid looking stupid, I don't ask questions sometimes when I ought to be asking questions.

On a related note, I also struggle a bit with feeling nosy or intrusive when I'm asking questions. So even in a situation when I've just observed a process at work that interested me, I often don't follow up with all the questions I might have asked to learn as much as possible from those observations. I don't want to be a pest and I don't want to appear to be too needy. In all of these ways, I can get in my own way when it comes to learning from the people around me and using supervision well.

As I reflect on this I can see that these behaviors in me might give them impression that I'm not interested in learning or that I feel that I already know everything.

continued

Excerpt from a Student Portfolio on Using Supervision *continued*

neither of which would be an accurate or particularly positive impression to create. Just keeping this in mind can help me correct for my natural tendency to go it alone. But it is also true that there are certain things I might ask for in a supervisor that might help me. Here is a short list:

- ◆ Actively invite questions at every opportunity.
- ◆ When assigning a new task or project, allow me some time to think about it and then come back with questions. This will allow me time to think through the situation carefully and acknowledge where there are gaps in my information or preparedness.
- ◆ Have a scheduled regular meeting time weekly even if you're not aware of anything we need to discuss. If I know I have a certain amount of time allotted to me, I'll feel more permission to take that time for questions and such.
- ◆ Let me know when you think I'm doing a good job. If I know that a supervisor is generally satisfied with my work, then I feel more comfortable letting down my guard and admitting what I don't know. If I'm staying stuck in the model of trying to prove myself, this is harder to do.

Although these may be my suggestions for supervisors who work with me, I realize that I can't determine what a supervisor does or doesn't buy into about their roles, and it is generally up to me and other employees to adapt to the supervisor's approach for the most part. But just thinking some of this through can help me communicate better with my supervisor about what I need, and it clarifies for me what I need to work on in my own behavior as a supervisee.

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