

# 3

## Learning from Supervision

### LEARNING OUTCOMES

- Explain the purpose of administrative, educational, and supportive social work supervision.
- Explain and utilize forms of supervision available within the practicum setting.
- Utilize supervision for professional development in the use of the planned change process.
- Summarize the governmental and professional organizational standards for social work supervision.



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### CHAPTER PREVIEW

This chapter provides information on the nature, function, and approaches to supervisory activities. It shows how you can *purposefully and intentionally use supervision* when theory and practice for the first time, as well as to ensure professional growth. The stages of practicum from beginning to end and supervisory point of view are presented, accompanied by a list of supervisory forms. Additionally, the *forms and processes* commonly used by field instructors are described. Since the quality of your practicum is closely tied to the quality of the teacher-student relationship you develop with your field instructor, it is advisable that you approach the practicum from a professional point of view. Learning from

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caring supervisor can enrich a practicum experience and provide a positive model of staff interaction. Learning about the roles, responsibilities, and approaches to supervision will be of great help to you as you plan your practicum. Professional social workers routinely use supervision to ensure the quality of their work and to provide a structure for ongoing professional growth. The practicum provides this same experience for students.

## BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Making full use of professional supervision requires a good understanding of the purpose and functions of supervision within an organization. The word *supervision* has its roots in a Latin word that means “to look over” or “to watch over,” and this describes the overall purpose of supervisory practice. Supervisors definitely monitor the work of those they supervise and also go beyond that to educating, directing, and supporting their supervisees. All of this supervisory effort is expended with the ultimate goal of providing the highest quality of services possible, with the additional goal of preparing students for professional practice.

Functioning as a supervisor in a social service agency can be a very *challenging responsibility*. It is a job that requires sensitivity, skill, common sense, commitment, good humor, and intelligence. Supervisors are mediators and conduits between line-level social workers and higher-level agency administrators. They frequently represent the agency in its interactions with other agencies and the community. In addition, they are often faced with the challenging tasks of responding to the concerns and complaints of clients who are dissatisfied with the agency’s programs or with the performance of a social worker or other staff member. The responsibility of supervisors to clients, staff, funding sources, and administrative officials is a broad and demanding expectation. It is good to remember that supervising students is only one aspect of their job.

Although being a supervisor can be demanding, it can also be a satisfying job, especially for those who understand and appreciate the teaching aspect of supervision. Watching a new social worker or social work student learn and develop on the job can be a rewarding and inspiring experience. That is one reason why many busy agency supervisors choose to serve as field instructors to social work students. Hopefully your field instructor is highly motivated to teach you about social work practice because he or she wants to give back to the profession.

Kadushin and Harkness (2002) identify three functions of supervisory practice: the administrative function, the supportive function, and the educational function. The *administrative function of supervision* focuses on the assigning, monitoring, and evaluating of services. This includes such responsibilities as recruiting, selecting, and orienting new staff; assigning and coordinating work; monitoring and evaluating staff performance; facilitating communication up and down within the organization; advocating for staff; serving as a buffer between staff and administration; representing the agency to the public; and encouraging needed agency change. Additional administrative tasks include the monitoring of written documentation, coordinating work assignments, monitoring



### Ethical and Professional Behavior Demonstrate

**Behavior: Use supervision and consultation to guide professional judgment and behavior.**

**Critical Thinking Question:** How can you learn about how your supervisor deals with internal and external issues your practicum agency faces? Who else can be an example of such professionalism?

efficiency and effectiveness, and ensuring that services are evaluated and improved over time. This also necessitates that supervisors work between levels of staff and administrators and interface with the funding sources and other agencies that have influence over the way the agency works.

The *educational function of supervision* focuses on providing formal and informal training and orientation and arranging for formal in-service staff training. Basically, the supervisor is responsible for ensuring that staff members receive all of the initial training needed to perform well in their positions. In addition, the supervisor is responsible for recognizing training needs and providing ongoing in-service training. To properly educate employees, supervisors must keep abreast of the professional development of their employees, review their work and the documentation of their work, and oversee the work of employees with specific clients and interventions (Kadushin and Harkness, 2002).



### Engagement

**Behavior:** Apply knowledge of human behavior and the social environment, person-in-environment, and other multidisciplinary theoretical frameworks to engage with clients and constituencies.

**Critical Thinking Question:** What are the commonalities between how your supervisor engages with you and how you will engage with your clients?

The *supportive function of supervision* focuses on sustaining staff morale, cultivating a sense of teamwork, building commitment to agency goals and mission, encouraging workers by providing support, and dealing with work-related problems of conflict and frustration. It also includes the modeling of excellence, the building of trust between supervisors and supervisees so that professional growth can occur, the facilitation of the professional reflection process, and helping supervisees develop self-awareness necessary for practice. This aspect of supervision is extremely important in human services agencies in which stress and burnout can be common risks. The supervisor must strive to create a work environment that is conducive to the provision of quality services to clients, while also supporting staff who may at times feel stressed or unappreciated (Kadushin and Harkness, 2002).

Your field instructor will be concerned with these three functions as they relate to practicum students. He or she will pay attention to whether you are performing the work of the agency in an appropriate manner and in keeping with agency policy and procedure. He or she will be sensitive to your fears and insecurities and to the fact that you have personal responsibilities in addition to those related to the practicum. Your field instructor will want to do everything possible to facilitate your learning, but, in the final analysis, his or her primary obligation must be to the agency's clients or consumers and to the agency that serves those clients rather than to your learning.

There are many *types of supervision*, all of which serve an important purpose, and all of which are valuable in specific ways. Each type of supervision addresses a certain need or situation, and it is recommended that you engage yourself whenever possible in as many forms of supervision as you can, as each one teaches differently and uses different approaches. You may receive the following types of supervision and teaching, all of which provide the opportunity for professional development:

- *Individual supervision* (regular meetings between field instructor and student)
- *Group supervision* (meetings between field instructor and a group of students or employees)



Watch this video that advises new supervisors about learning their role.

How can this help you understand some of the challenges that supervisors may face?

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=6nBFS\\_A300Y](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6nBFS_A300Y)

- **Peer supervision** (meetings of a group of social workers who assume responsibility for providing guidance and suggestions to each other)
- **Formal case presentations** (meetings at which social workers describe their work on a specific case and invite advice and guidance on how it should be handled)
- **Ad hoc supervision** (brief, need-based, unscheduled meetings to discuss a specific question or issue)
- **Virtual supervision** (computer, e-mail, or live Web-based supervision)
- **Observation** (watching social workers practice and discuss with supervisor)
- **Role playing** (rehearsal of skills in which student takes on client or social work role)
- **Modeling** (demonstration of a technique during supervision or actual intervention)
- **Clinical supervision** (discussion of and reflection on interventions, ethics, techniques, and professional use of self)

Social workers who assume the role of field instructor have specific *ethical obligations* because they assume responsibility for the quality of work and outcomes of those they supervise. Ethically, they must have knowledge and skill in the areas in which they provide supervision. They are expected to evaluate the performance of those they supervise, use effective and fair methods of supervision, and help supervisees gain knowledge and skills. They must also take care to manage the supervisory relationship, while maintaining professional boundaries and avoiding dual relationships, both of which can complicate and undermine the supervisory relationship.

Your field instructor will no doubt take these obligations seriously; thus you can expect that he or she will treat the supervisory relationship in an ethical and *professional manner*. Occasionally certain behaviors by a field instructor may prompt your school's faculty supervisor or practicum coordinator to reevaluate the suitability and appropriateness of using that person as a supervisor for students. This may include lack of time to supervise and not being available to students. At times, supervisors may lack genuine interest in supervising students, resulting in minimal commitment to teaching and mentoring. Hopefully you will not encounter a supervisor who is incompetent or unethical, but it is possible. If your field instructor exhibits any of these behaviors or attitudes, consult with your faculty supervisor or practicum coordinator to determine a course of action in order to ensure the quality of supervision available to you.

Social workers have a number of *legal obligations* when taking on the responsibility of field instructor. Those obligations are based on the principle of *vicarious liability*, which means that a supervisor may be held liable for the potentially ineffective or unethical actions of those he or she supervises. In their role as trainers, mentors, and supervisors, field instructors must do whatever they can to make sure that students avoid making decisions and taking actions that could be considered unprofessional in some way. This includes *malfeasance* (commission of an unlawful or wrongful act), *misfeasance* (commission of a proper act in a way that is injurious or wrongful), or *nonfeasance* (failure to act in accordance with one's responsibility).

Further, field instructors and students are also held to the concepts of *standards of care* (the type, level, and specific type of treatment or intervention that is indicated and appropriate for a specific client with a particular condition) and *standards of practice* (professional expectations for individual social workers that are based on what has been

## GUIDANCE AND DIRECTION

Because social work is challenging and sometimes stressful, and because your work directly affects clients' lives, you will need guidance, direction, support, and feedback from your field instructor. Both students and experienced social workers use supervision to help them deal with challenging situations, provide performance feedback, and give support. *Learning to use supervision for professional development* is an important part of your practicum that can teach you the immense value of supervision to you, the agency, and your clients.

Strive to use supervision in a purposeful, intentional, and responsible manner. Arranging a *regularly scheduled supervisory meeting* time each week will help you avoid the difficulties of struggling to arrange a different meeting time each week. Prepare for each meeting and do not expect your field instructor to do all of the talking. Bring questions, observations, and requests for input and feedback to the meeting. Use this time to examine your performance and explore new ideas.

The conscious building of professional social work skills and competencies is directly related to the *conscious use of professional supervision*. This is why social work programs and practicum agencies collaborate so closely in the design and implementation of practicum programs. Both entities understand the developmental stages of professional growth, and because of that they choose to have other experienced social workers lead students through the process of *integrating theory and practice*. It is the responsibility of both the supervisor and the student to discuss certain topics in supervisory sessions. This will assist students to engage in a *reflective process* that enhances the acquisition of professional skills and practice behaviors. Students who actively engage in the supervisory relationship will gain much knowledge about practice and about themselves.

You and your field instructor will discuss many things during your scheduled time together, and two main categories of supervision will become apparent. The first of these is *supervision about your interventions with clients*. Following is a list of questions that will arise in discussions about interventions. The second category is *supervision about professional development*, and a list of discussions questions about that area is also included below. Look forward to discussing these questions with your supervisor, as this stage of your education is a unique opportunity to integrate theory and practice.

### Supervisory Discussion of Client Interventions

- What *professional role* is expected of you in a particular practice situation?
- What determines the most *appropriate level of intervention*?
- What *theories* help to explain the development of individuals, families, groups, organizations, communities, and societies?
- What *theories* help to explain the etiology of a social problem or condition?
- What *theories and models of practice* help to guide the development of an *intervention plan*?

### Intervention

**Behavior: Develop mutually agreed-on intervention goals and objectives based on the critical assessment of strengths, needs, and challenges within clients and constituencies.**

**Critical Thinking Question:** What parallels do you see between a client and social worker setting goals for intervention and a student and supervisor setting goals for learning?

- What is the process of *matching client need with an intervention plan*?
- What is the role of *practice wisdom* in interventions?
- What is the role of *intuition* in interventions?
- What is the role of *social work research* in interventions?
- How can *diverse clients* be served in a culturally competent manner?
- What can be *learned from mistakes*?
- How can *academic information be applied and adapted* in real-life situations?

### Supervisory Discussion of Professional Development

- How can you *acquire basic and advanced skills* in practice?
- How can you maximize your *learning style* to grow professionally?
- How can you use *supervision over a professional career*?
- Why is it important to gain *generalist skills* to address social problems?
- What can *clients teach us*?
- How can *professional growth* be measured?
- What skills and practice behaviors can be *transferred between fields of practice*?
- What *level of performance* will be expected for BSW- and MSW-level practice?
- When is a social worker *ready to supervise others*?

Take these questions with you to supervisory sessions with your field instructor and engage in professional conversations about them over time. It is good to learn how to proactively utilize supervision for both consultation on interventions and for professional growth while you are a student. Continuing to use and give supervision to others is an *element of sound social work practice*. Expect your field instructor to ask some very pointed, thorough, and thoughtful questions in order to learn about and monitor your work in the agency. Supervisors ask these questions in order to be of support to you and to ensure that clients are well served. They will help you analyze your performance, understand why an intervention was successful or not, and develop your critical thinking skills. In regard to specific cases you have been assigned, the following questions may be addressed in order to help you reflect and purposefully grow professionally. They are grouped together in the phases of the helping process in Table 3.2.

A supervisor is expected to give both instruction and feedback, and you will increase your chances of success if you seek and are open to input about yourself and your work. You may be anxious because your field instructor will be evaluating your performance in an ongoing way and at the end of your practicum. This reaction is certainly understandable, and in many ways is parallel to what clients feel when they

are being monitored by social workers. However, in order for you to develop your knowledge and skills over time, your field instructor should evaluate your performance in an ongoing and continuous manner and you should accept this monitoring and evaluation in an open and nondefensive manner.

You will receive feedback, suggestions, and constructive criticism during all phases of your practicum so that you can continue to grow professionally. If this is not happening, discuss the matter with your field instructor and ask for an ongoing critique of your *performance in the use of the planned*

## Human Rights and Justice

**Behavior: Engage in practices that advance social, economic, and environmental justice.**

**Critical Thinking Question:** As you set specific learning goals, how can you use supervision to help you understand how your agency advances human rights?

**change process.** Your supervisor may use questions similar to those in Table 3.2. These questions, as well as your answers to them, will help your supervisor understand your level of knowledge, reflection, skill, and ethics. In addition, you can expect that this evaluation will be based on direct observation of your work by your field instructor or other social workers, your verbal or written descriptions of your work and learning, feedback from clients, and observations and input from social workers in the community who have worked with you.

As you begin your practicum and take on new responsibilities, you may be afraid of making a serious mistake or in some way hurting your clients. Such worries are to be expected. In fact, your field instructor will become concerned if you do not have these concerns, because that could mean that you are overconfident or that you do not understand the seriousness of your situation. Do not hesitate to express your fears. Your field instructor can help you with these fears and help prepare you for any tasks assigned to you. Take heart in the knowledge that most beginning student errors tend to be those related to being tentative and not doing enough rather than actually doing harm to clients. Over time, social



After watching this social worker's use of supervision regarding her concerns about a client, what did you learn about how you could bring concerns about your clients to your field instructor?



**Evaluation**

**Behavior: Apply evaluation findings to improve practice effectiveness at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels.**

**Critical Thinking Question:** How can you use your supervisor's questions about the effectiveness of the planned change process used with your clients to gain practice skills?

**Table 3.2 Supervisory Questions Regarding the Planned Change Process**

Phase of the Planned Change Process	Supervisory Questions Related to the Phase
<b>Engagement</b>	Was the client voluntary or involuntary? What skills did you use to engage the client in the planned change process? What problem(s) were identified? What was the client's level of motivation?
<b>Assessment</b>	Was the client voluntary or involuntary? What skills did you use to engage the client? What problems were identified? What strengths were identified? What was the client's level of motivation?
<b>Intervention</b>	What responsibilities did the client assume? What responsibilities did you assume? What theories guided your intervention? What evidence or research guided you?
<b>Evaluation</b>	How did you monitor and measure progress on achieving the goals and objectives? To what degree was the intervention a success? What did you use to measure outcomes? Did the client/client system view the intervention as successful? How was termination handled?

workers' growing competence will allow them to practice confidently and, at necessary points in time, with boldness.

Your field instructor will likely view any *errors or omissions* that you make not as mistakes only, but also as ways to learn and grow in your work with future clients and in more challenging future situations. Hopefully you will learn to observe, critique, evaluate, instruct, and affirm your own practice based on the constructive feedback given by your field instructor. This will teach you the value of ongoing self-monitoring of the effectiveness of your work in addition to the value of supervision.

Supervision is an *interactional process* that in many ways parallels the social worker-client relationship and the helping process (Shulman, 1992). In order to help you improve your performance, your field instructor will employ many of the techniques that you and other social workers use in working with clients such as offering guidance and support, providing feedback, recognizing strengths, and confronting when necessary. If you have the opportunity, watch your supervisor model the techniques with you that are also effective with clients, focusing on how they help you grow by being open to teaching and feedback. However, since supervision is not counseling or therapy, if you need counseling for personal issues or those related to your practicum, seek counseling from a professional other than your field instructor.

Students tend to move through several stages during their practicum experience, including *orientation, exploration and skill building, and beginning competency*. Your field instructor will provide specific types of help at each stage, helping you move forward as a professional. As you become more knowledgeable and competent, your field instructor will use different strategies of supervision with you. As you move through the practicum, be conscious of the shifts in your experiences outlined in Table 3.3.

**Table 3.3 Stages of Practicum: Student and Supervisor Experiences**

Stage of Practicum	Student Experiences	Supervisor Experiences
<b>Orientation stage</b>	<p><b>Approach to Supervision</b> Enthusiastic, excited, anxious, unsure, overwhelmed, confused, ready, motivated, confident, worried about making mistakes, hesitant to be observed</p> <p><b>Responsibilities</b> Participate in orientation and training, become familiar with agency staff and programs, attend agency meetings, visit other agencies, develop learning plan</p>	<p><b>Approach to Supervision</b> Motivated to teach, hopeful that student will be competent, challenged to find time to supervise student</p> <p><b>Responsibilities</b> Provide orientation and training, offer guidance and direction, provide encouragement, assist in selection of learning activities, support initial attempts at practice behaviors, identify student competencies and limitations</p>
<b>Exploration and skill-building stage</b>	<p><b>Approach to Supervision</b> Less anxious, more realistic, motivated, growing in confidence, willing to be observed, motivated by successes, learning from mistakes</p>	<p><b>Approach to Supervision</b> Confident in allowing more student autonomy, aware of student strengths and limitations and need for supervision</p>

Table 3.3 *continued*

Stage of Practicum	Student Experiences	Supervisor Experiences
	<p><b>Responsibilities</b></p> <p>Take on responsibilities, implement learning plan, develop professional skills and knowledge, integrate theory and practice, gain exposure to all facets of agency practice, gain experience in all levels of practice, play variety of social work roles, identify strengths and address limitations</p>	<p><b>Responsibilities</b></p> <p>Monitor completion of learning activities, provide instructive and corrective feedback, help build on experiences, assist student in integrating theory and practice, help student assume more challenging tasks</p>
<b>Beginning competency stage</b>	<p><b>Approach to Supervision</b></p> <p>More confident in skills, increased insight, self-aware, motivated for professional position</p> <p><b>Responsibilities</b></p> <p>Identify own professional growth needs, experienced in most aspects of practicum experience, need less supervision and direction, identify tasks independently, integrate theory and practice, and refine skills</p>	<p><b>Approach to Supervision</b></p> <p>Confident in student as entry-level practitioner, affirming of student competence</p> <p><b>Responsibilities</b></p> <p>Help student refine skills, assign broad range of tasks at all levels of practice, expect autonomous performance, help student generalize learning to other settings and populations</p>

It is possible that tensions and conflicts may arise in your *supervisory relationship*. For example, you may feel that your field instructor does not devote enough time to you and your learning needs. You may believe that your field instructor is too controlling or not structured enough. The two of you may have very different personalities. Perhaps you and your field instructor differ in terms of gender, race, ethnic background, or age, and at times these differences affect your relationship and work. If you have a conflict or difficulty with your supervisor, talk about it. Do not avoid the problem or circumvent your field instructor. You will be expected to find ways to deal with these issues, both now and in any future work environment. If the problem cannot be worked out with your field instructor, consult with your faculty supervisor.

Exercise caution on developing a *dual relationship* with your field instructor. He or she is to be a supervisor, not a friend or a counselor. Although there can be an element of friendship between students and supervisors, this can also be problematic when supervisors need to provide feedback and students need to be able to accept it. If personal problems arise during your practicum, do not ask or expect your field instructor to provide counseling. If you need such services, arrange to receive them in another way.



Assess your understanding of guidance and direction by taking this brief quiz.



Recall what you learned in this chapter by completing the Chapter Review.

### Professional Standards for Supervision: A Workbook Activity

There are a number of governmental and professional standards for supervision in social work practice. Review the standards for supervision in the following two areas and discuss with your field instructor and faculty supervisor.