

The Role of Social Work Supervisors in Supporting Safe Reduction Efforts

(This draft prepared as a handout for Supervisor's Critical Thinking TA session- May13th, 2009)

For those of us promoting the development of enhanced family support strategies and timely reunifications, our guidance on child safety must be impeccable if we are to ensure long-term sustainability of the 2020 initiative. Many of our partners have asked for technical assistance and consultation on the quality and reliability of their assessment processes and tools. Our record of response on these requests, as well as our contribution to the state of the art is unparalleled. However, we should also encourage our partners to be equally attentive to the role of social work supervision as a way of enhancing the quality of assessment, and as a means of promoting the goals of 2020.

In an attempt to enhance the decision-making capacity of child protection case managers, many public child welfare agencies have embraced standardized risk and safety assessment tools. Praised by some as the remedy for years of poor casework, and castigated by others as "risk assessment for dummies", these tools have drawn significant attention. A number of our state partners have adopted these tools, or are considering a plan to do so.

Evaluators have studied the question of whether or not these tools serve any value extensively. There is ample research evidence demonstrating the effectiveness of these instruments, thereby opening the door for continued, perhaps even expanded use among front line case managers. Anecdotally, caseworkers have indicated a preference for the actuarially based tools, noting that they improve consistency, reduce guesswork and help to justify their front-line decisions to their supervisors. Still, taking a more systemic perspective, others are concerned that the field is reducing the art and the foundation of social work to its lowest common denominator, and that these tools are necessary because the professional social work role has been largely diluted by the public child welfare agencies. The parallel, some critics say, would be to create a checklist for performing complex surgery or filing a class action suit. Few other professions will allow such slippage of standards and practice.

It could very well be that both positions are valid, but we might still be missing an essential component of the equation for safety and permanency. For decades, professional social workers have depended on supervision as a means of providing mentoring, guidance, and oversight, together with emotional and social support, to caseworkers, content information, highlighting an agency's goals, professional development, task assistance, reinforcement of the profession's ethics and principles and compliance management. Decision-making as it relates to child protection, is a process requiring a supervisor to do all of the above directly, and indirectly, to serve families through other

professionals. Competent, comprehensive and goal oriented supervision will thus be an essential element for safely reducing the numbers of children in out of home care.

It can be argued that when striving to enhance the quality of risk and safety assessment, agencies should look beyond tools and pop-up style questions, On the other hand, the agencies cannot ignore the evidence-based resources and guidance that prove so valuable in these highly nuanced situations. In reality, if the agency is to pass stress test for placement prevention and timely reunifications, it must demonstrate a superior level of quality among its supervisors. In many jurisdictions, supervisory job descriptions are now weighted heavily in favor of the compliance responsibilities. This reflects the context and environment in which child protective service agencies function.

Looking beyond the current circumstances however, supervisors are in a unique position to help caseworkers to make the distinction between **facts** and **values**. Patrick Grim, Ph.D., a philosophy professor at NYU Stony Brook, uses this paradigm as a way to examine the questions of **values**. Dr. Grim says that it would be possible to have a complete factual picture of the universe without knowing the first thing about value- without even knowing which facts are important. **Facts** provide the reality of a situation, and a general context but without values, they are like a room painted in one color- nothing is distinguished. Distinguishing **values** implies that we ask questions such as, which facts are important, why are they important, and in what priority order. **Facts** cannot predict the future but can help to forecast what could happen. **Values** guide us towards a decision that reflects our *desired* outcomes. The questions of what we should do are questions of **value**, which should help us in making an ethical decision.

There is a parallel situation for the public child welfare agencies that are charged with assessing risk and safety for children, and whose goals include the safe reduction of out of home placements. Staff that are using a formulaic tool for assessing risk and safety in the field, are gathering consistently a significant amount of facts regarding the situation of a child and his or her family. In and of themselves however, the facts are limited in their usefulness. Someone, or a team, must be responsible for the transfer and application of **values** related to those **facts**. This is where the supervisor's role is so critical- as the keeper of the agency's principles, goals and action plan.

Prior to the heavy emphasis on compliance, the traditional role of supervisors was informed by academics such as Alfred Kadushin who highlighted three functions of social work supervisors; administrative, educational and support of the caseworker. This evolved as the field looked to balance these functions with a more strengths-based approach. Van Kessel and Haan ("The Intended Way of Learning In Supervision Seen As A Model" The Clinical Supervisor- Vol. II (1) 1993- pgs. 29-43) highlight three ways that supervisors transfer information to staff:

- The Way of Knowing
- The Way of Choosing
- The Way of Acting

Far more historical and contemporary references regarding supervision are available, but for purposes of brevity, it seems obvious that any approach to supervision should build on caseworker strengths. The emphasis should be on how supervisors can support staff as they apply the **facts** to the higher good- i.e., looking for every way possible to keep children safe in their own homes and their own communities.

The Connecticut Department of Children and Families issued a bulletin in August of 2006, describing the many roles of supervisors. The description of tasks, designed to promote the agency's goals, could be transferable to many sites looking to safely reduce its out of home population.

1. Aligning Performance for Success

The supervisor is able to focus and guide staff in accomplishing work objectives. This includes recognizing and rewarding excellent performance, setting high performance standards, providing effective feedback, holding staff accountable for performance, locating resources to support staff efforts, and providing opportunities for ongoing staff development and guidance for career development.

2. Building Trust

The supervisor interacts with staff in a way that gives them confidence in one's intentions, as well as those of the organization.

3. Coaching

The supervisor provides timely guidance, feedback, and assistance to help staff strengthen specific knowledge and skill areas that are needed to accomplish a task or solve a problem.

4. Collaboration

The supervisor works effectively as a team member with staff, administration, clients, and other professionals. This includes understanding, appreciating, and incorporating different views of clients, other individuals, and systems; advocating for clients in creative ways; identifying a range of available resources; effectively participating in work groups; involving others in decision making; and relating effectively with administration.

5. Communication

The supervisor clearly and effectively receives and conveys information and ideas through a variety of media to individuals and groups in a manner that engages

the audience, helps them understand and retain the message, and permits feedback and response from the listener.

6. Customer Focus

The supervisor makes customers and their needs a primary focus of attention and develops and sustains productive customer relationships. The term “customer” is broadly interpreted, but in this context it has a particular focus on clients and staff supervisees.

7. Decision Making

The supervisor makes decisions that are consistent with available facts, constraints, and probable consequences. This includes skills in gathering needed information; integrating data from different sources; understanding issues, problems, and opportunities; drawing appropriate conclusions; discovering appropriate solutions; and taking effective action.

8. Facilitating Change

The supervisor facilitates the implementation and acceptance of change within the workplace. This also includes encouraging others to discover innovative approaches to addressing problems and opportunities.

9. Organizational Ability

The supervisor effectively plans, schedules, and directs their own work, as well as the work of others. This includes balancing task requirements and individual abilities, organizing materials and resources to accomplish tasks, setting challenging but achievable goals, and setting workload schedules and standards.

10. Stress Tolerance

The supervisor is able to maintain stable performance that is acceptable to others and the organization under the pressures of high workload, conflict, and ambiguity. This includes the ability to assist others in dealing with their stress as well.

11. Team Leadership

The supervisor is able to effectively communicate the organization’s vision and mission, and is able to motivate and inspire others. This includes engaging others in a team process to accomplish goals and solve problems, modifying leadership style

to meet situational requirements, staying focused on primary goals within a context of competing priorities, finding win/win resolution of problems and conflicts, and enhancing worker productivity and professional development.

12. Technical/Professional Knowledge and Skills

The supervisor possesses, acquires, and maintains the technical/professional expertise required to do the job effectively. This includes the professional knowledge necessary to help workers plan effective services for clients, knowledge of the other systems that impact client services, and knowledge of the internal workings of the organization that enable workers to be more efficient and effective.

13. Cultural Competence

The supervisor understands the cultural norms, values, traditions, and child-rearing practices of the ethnic and cultural groups served by the agency; is aware of his/her own cultural background and understands how it may influence interactions with clients and workers; is able to establish effective working relationships with clients and workers from diverse backgrounds; and can assist workers in identifying and dealing with cultural issues in their practice.

(Several other states have similar descriptions)

As we respond to requests from our partners on the appropriate value of their assessment processes and tools, we should encourage them to lift up an equally important set of questions. Is the agency's top leadership committed to the notion that quality supervision means more than compliance? Do their supervisors fully understand the agency's principles, values and strategies related to safe reduction? What is the communication strategy to reach them with this information? Are supervisors emphasizing quality, evidence-based and goal oriented practice? Do supervisors have the most current data about client families that will inform caseworkers? Is there a reasonable supervisor-caseworker ratio so that meetings are occurring at least every month? Are the supervisors the functional intermediaries between the agency administration and front line practice? Do the supervisors have the capacity to align the relevant **facts** and guide the caseworker towards a decision based on the agency's **values**? Can the supervisors in the agency be characterized as *advocates* (for safe reduction and family engagement), *ambassadors* (carrying the message to the staff, to the community, to families and to the administration) and *advisors* (transferring knowledge and skills to caseworkers based on the responsibility to be a "keeper of the **values** and as mentors to line staff)?

The 2020 strategy provides public and private agencies with an opportunity to change the conversation, and the results, in child welfare. However, we must ensure that the **values**

of safe reduction are embedded at the national, state and local levels. There is a danger that we will confuse slogans about change in child welfare, with real systemic improvement in the same way that charisma can be mistaken for depth of character. The 2020 strategy should not be seen as a numbers game where we encourage a “race to the finish”. The endurance of our 2020 strategy is based in large part on a unique type of practice and concurrently, on the building of a belief system that recognizes children, families and their communities as an extension of each other, dependent upon each other for safety, permanency and well-being. High quality, assertive supervision of front line service delivery, using the facts of a family’s situation, together with the emphasis on transmission of values as outlined above, will drive us towards our goals.

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