

Consultative Supervision For Human Service Professionals



With
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Introduction

Supervision has been seen for many decades as mandatory in many human service professions. It is understood and expected that human service organisations will provide it and/or that practitioners will seek it out.

In recent years, however, there have been increasing numbers of organisations working in the human service sector, who traditionally didn't prioritise supervision for their staff, that have begun to recognise its value and now require their staff to engage in it on a regular basis.

School principals, teachers, academic staff, nurses, doctors, allied health professionals, aged care professionals, local government staff, pastoral care professionals and ministers of religion are seeking a supervisory relationship that enhances their professional practice.

Some of these may have had mandated supervision of their clinical practice, but did not have the option of engaging in the type of consultative supervision I provide.

In areas where practitioners are working with traumatised clients or clients experiencing extreme stress, providing supervision becomes essential in protecting the professionals' own mental health and ensuring they are not vicariously traumatised. Some organisations have actually been substantially fined by WorkSafe for not providing supervision to their staff working in these situations



Differences between Supervision and Consultative Supervision

While all these people have sought me out for what they have called "supervision", what I am providing is not "supervision" in the traditional understanding of that word. What I see myself providing, and what I would prefer people to see themselves engaged in, is "consultative supervision". There is a difference.

- Supervision is usually carried out by line managers in an organisation who are responsible for the practice of those under them.
- There is an administrative, evaluative, even a "quality control" role for the supervisors, who need to ensure that the practitioner's work is meeting the accountability procedures and professional standards of the organisation, both towards its clients and its funding bodies.
- The process tends then to be more focused on case management, evaluation and planning. This function becomes very important in a competitive funding environment, and from another viewpoint, in an increasingly litigious climate.
- Practitioners can sometimes see supervision as imposed. A way the organisation can keep a check on them, and its administrative function becomes more prominent in their consciousness than does its professional development role.
- There can be a tendency to "reporting" and "show and tell" supervision, with little room - or time - for "reflective" supervision.
- What so often happens in organisations is that people move to the role of supervisor without training in supervision, so they can tend to fall back on their own experience of being supervised. When supervisors work this way, it is not always the most helpful or meaningful experience for the practitioner.
- Good supervision, however, has a supportive and educative function as well.

- It gives time and attention to reflection on the issues of concern to the practitioners' professional practising as they see it.
 - It is engaged in on a regular basis - weekly, fortnightly and monthly - depending on the experience and needs of the practitioner.
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The British miners in the 1920s fought for what was termed "pit head time" - the right to wash off the grime of the work in the boss's time.

Supervision is the equivalent of that for those working at the coal face of personal distress, disease and fragmentation.

- Hawkins and Shoet, 1969



Consultative Supervision : A Collegial Relationship

Consultative Supervision, as I engage with it, is a more collegial and collaborative relationship where practitioners *consult with* a colleague who they see as having the experience and/or expertise they want at that time, or whose ontological and epistemological positioning is congruent with theirs, someone with whom they therefore feel professionally and psychologically "safe".

Consultative supervision

- is initiated by the practitioner;
- is sought from outside their working environment;
- is engaged in with the support of their organisation;
- focusses on the professional development of the practitioner, not only on client issues or case management;
- emphasises pro-activity rather than reactivity;
- leaves the autonomy, control and direction of the consultation with the practitioner;
- has no administrative or evaluative function;
- can be engaged in by individuals or groups;
- can be short term, sought out for a specific purpose;
- can be a long term commitment seen as essential to practice excellence and professional development.

The consultative supervision relationship I offer people is very much shaped by my way of being and knowing and the mindset I bring to my professional life. The people who seek me out either understand that, which is why they come to me, or they discover it very early in the process. I also explain to people right at the outset how I work and talk through with

them what they want from the process and whether what I can offer is congruent with their hopes and expectations.

Working in the “swampy lowlands” of practice

The practitioners who work with me and stay are ones who work in, what Donald Schön calls, “the swampy lowlands” of practice. They invest a considerable amount of themselves in the messiness of practice, engaging with the practice environment in a wholistic way rather than splitting off parts of it in order to be able to manage and control it. They engage, for example, with both the body *and* mind of clients, the self *and* social structure, the public *and* the private, the personal *and* the political. The most rewarding way for these practitioners to work, and generally the *only* way they can work given their ontological and epistemological positioning (which may at that stage be implicit), is also the most demanding, but is what gives their practising its complexity and highlights their need for consultative supervision.

Working with the paradoxes, ambiguities and uncertainties

It is not just client issues, therefore, that have induced that complexity, but the entire environment of practice. It is not just the complexity either that is the issue of concern. It is also the paradoxes, ambiguities, and uncertainties that characterise their professional space and professional selves. The impact on practitioners of grappling with this on an on-going basis can often induce disillusionment, cynicism, hopelessness, exhaustion, detachment, even depression and ultimately burn-out. In this context, it is therefore encouraging to see organisations recognising this and addressing the mental health of their workforce across the whole organisation.

Reflecting in a confidential space

I see it as enormously important to give practitioners who consult with me the opportunity to discuss these issues, because, very often, this consultative space is the only place they can be certain that confidentiality is assured. Their inner conflict needs some resolution, and while they carry it around simmering away within, their practising is further compromised and the integrity of their professional selves is further challenged. The issue of resignation or finding a new position or a new career path is frequently part of the reflection in the consultative process, because at the outset they see no other resolution.

The Small Group Consultative Supervision Process

There is also great value in the small group consultative supervision process where I can facilitate the energy and experience of the practitioners and see it shared with the group. This sharing of problems and solutions, ideas and insights is enormously supportive for individual practitioners in the group. They are empowered by knowing that what they are experiencing in their practice is also experienced by others.

Some organisations now are changing the language to describe this process as a Group Mentoring Process.



The Additional Challenges of Senior Practitioners

Senior practitioners are where they are because of their excellent professional practice skills and knowledge. What challenges them most and what they want to reflect on, understand and find creative and constructive ways of responding to, is the social context and organisational environment in which they are endeavouring to practise. This is always changing. What is happening there so often threatens their professional values and questions the integrity of their professional selves. This consultative process sees them developing and enhancing their own professional style of practising.

While theoretically, human service practitioners are autonomous, they are often challenged, even threatened, when they have to practise today in work environments underpinned by corporate and economic rationalist values and philosophies to which client needs and concerns are often seen to be secondary, if not subservient. They struggle with how to work pro-actively and make a difference in such an environment which does not fit the motivations which led them into this kind of work. They very easily can become disillusioned and bewildered and therefore unproductive and disengaged.

Working with a changing work environment

They are often overwhelmed by the rate and degree of change in work practices, and vulnerable in the face of job insecurity, especially, for example, from technological advances and changes in government policy that impacts funding. An increasingly litigious environment sees them sometimes also having to work in ways that are not congruent with *their* professional values, as they put their concern to protect themselves or their employing body before the concerns of their clients which they would not otherwise do if that legal threat was not present.

Funding cuts leading to more being required from fewer people, see increased performance demands placing impossible pressure and stress on practitioners as they attempt to stretch limited resources to meet ever-increasing client need and demand. Global, macro shifts, for example in economic policy, over which practitioners have no control, often impact enormously on their work.

Consultative Supervision With Me Creates Reflective Practitioners

It will be obvious at this stage that my approach is about being a reflective practitioner and I engage those who come to me in a reflective process. Being able to critically reflect, problem pose and problem solve are essential skills for practitioners to have in this changing and unpredictable world in which they are working. It was core to my research for my Ph.D. thesis on “Being A Reflective Practitioner In An Age Of Uncertainty”.



- I want the consultative space to be collaborative and mutually respectful where practitioners can freely share and explore their way of practising and what underpins it without fear of judgment;
- I want them to be able to explore their uncertainties as well as their heuristic moments;
- I want it to be a space where even the most time-honoured and sacrosanct professional ideas and theories can be questioned and examined in an attitude of searching for meaning and understanding;

- I want it to be a challenging, yet non-threatening, space where our shared vision and expertise can facilitate the discovery of their own ways of practising and the development of their professional selves;
- I want them to discover and enter into a process of making explicit their own ontological and epistemological positioning, that is, their ways of being and knowing;
- I want them, through the consultative process, to gain insights into themselves and their practice that are transformative and build trust in their professional selves;
- I want the process to enhance their resilience as an insurance against stress, burnout and change fatigue.



Some of the Organisations to whom I have provided Individual Consultative Supervision



Ballarat CASA
Centre Against Sexual Assault



**Mission Leaders and Pastoral Care
Department Staff.**



Catholic Diocese of Ballarat.



Some of the Organisations to whom I have provided Group Consultative Supervision



**Aged Care Assessment Service
Team**



Maternal and Child Health Nurses



Pastoral Associates in the Ballarat Region.

Profile



I am the Director of People Empowered, a leadership development company which I founded in 2005, specialising in the development and enhancement of the non-technical skills, what are often called Soft Skills. They are the skills that cannot be touched or felt and which cannot be measured in the same way technical skills are

measured. They are the skills, however, that every leader needs to excel in and every employer is also now seeking in their people. They are the skills that enhance and complement professionals' well-developed technical expertise, that add shine and enormous value to their professional practice.

I have a fundamental belief that there is a leader in everyone. I am committed to helping people gain insights that empower them to take the transformative action that sees them step into being the leader they need to be in this new and ever changing economy whether they have the title or status. "Act like a leader and attract leadership to you", is a training program I offer to employees.

My background has combined to give me an intuitive insightfulness into the interpersonal challenges professionals face in this ever changing environment. I have much experience in unlocking the potential in people of which they are often unaware and then helping them put it at their disposal in moving them to becoming highly sought after professionals.

I believe that these soft skills can only be learned in relationship with others which is why my workshops are interactive and why they are complemented by my coaching, mentoring and consultative supervision. While there are differences between all three, those people

who originally come for consultative supervision and stay working with me for some years, tend to graduate to coaching and then to a mentoring relationship.

Counselling and Psychotherapy Practice

Prior to launching People Empowered in 2005, I had a counselling and psychotherapy practice which I had established in 1989. As well as individual counselling and psychotherapy, I provided an employee assistance program to staff in a number of organisations, as well as individual and group consultative supervision. I also conducted workshops and professional development training. In 1990 and 1991 I conducted the Helping Skills Course and the Group Work Course for first and second year students in the Welfare Studies Course at TAFE, then the School of Mines and Industries, Ballarat.

I have a Bachelor of Social Work from the University of Melbourne and in my final year was the top student in the mandatory subject area Working with Individuals. I also have a Ph.D. from RMIT with a thesis on Being A Reflective Practitioner In An Age Of Uncertainty which I completed in 2003. I developed the thesis that it is reflective practice and the qualities that produce the reflective practitioner that are essential to success and the development of excellence in our present age of uncertainty. My work at all levels is directed towards helping the leaders and managers of today become reflective practitioners.

I have additional training in mediation (introductory and intermediate levels), marriage and relationship counselling, and critical incident stress debriefing and post-traumatic stress syndromes (basic and advanced levels). While I don't specifically practise in these areas today, my knowledge of and experience in these areas enhances and contributes to the expertise I bring to my current work. As well I have completed the two day supervision training course offered by the Australian Association of Social Work.

Significant Change

In 1994-1995, a significant change took place in my counselling and psychotherapy practice. Jeff Kennett had become Premier of Victoria in 1992 and had proceeded to sack 55,000 public servants – teachers, nurses, welfare sector workers and then amalgamated local government resulting in the loss of many jobs there.

I found myself seeing, for “counselling”, increasing numbers of people in middle management overwhelmed with the change process they were being called to implement with little support or training to make it happen. At the same time, another change was happening in organisations here in Australia as a philosophy of economic rationalism shifted the goal posts as all business decisions became subservient almost solely to economics – even in the more people-oriented human service sector. This significantly challenged the value systems of these practitioner managers.

These people were highly competent and experienced managers. They did not need counselling. They needed coaching but back in the mid 1990s coaching was virtually unknown here in Australia and counselling was all there was for practitioners who wanted to work through challenges they were facing in their individual professional lives. Without identifying at that time what I was doing, I actually coached these people to empower themselves for the change they were being called to lead, to re-discover their strengths and to “re-model” their leadership and management skills for these new and different challenging circumstances. People came feeling failures and left feeling empowered and with new energy and enthusiasm for what they were being asked to do.

It was the increase in my work with leaders and managers in this area over the next 10 years, backed by my research for my Ph.D. which I completed in 2003 that saw me close my counselling and psychotherapy practice and establish People Empowered with its specific emphasis on professional development for leaders and managers in these changing and challenging times.

I have developed and now use that same strength based approach I developed in the mid 1990s in all my consultative supervision, coaching, mentoring and leadership development interactive workshops. I am committed to helping people find and work with the positive, to become resilient, empowered, pro-active professionals. While I am solution focussed and action oriented, I emphasise the importance of reflection and the development of self-awareness for people. I believe this is what solidly grounds their own development and produces leadership and management decisions grounded in wisdom, integrity and values, aligned with their organisations and consistent with their true selves.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading 'Maree Harris', written in a cursive style.

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