



# PSDP—Resources and Tools: How organisational culture influences supervision

## Introduction

Every organisation's culture rests on multiple influences:

- > the political identity of elected leaders
- > the professional identity and values of the senior leadership team
- > the skill and commitment of middle managers / supervisors
- > the stability / instability of the workforce
- > the characteristics of the community the organisation serves
- > demographics etc.

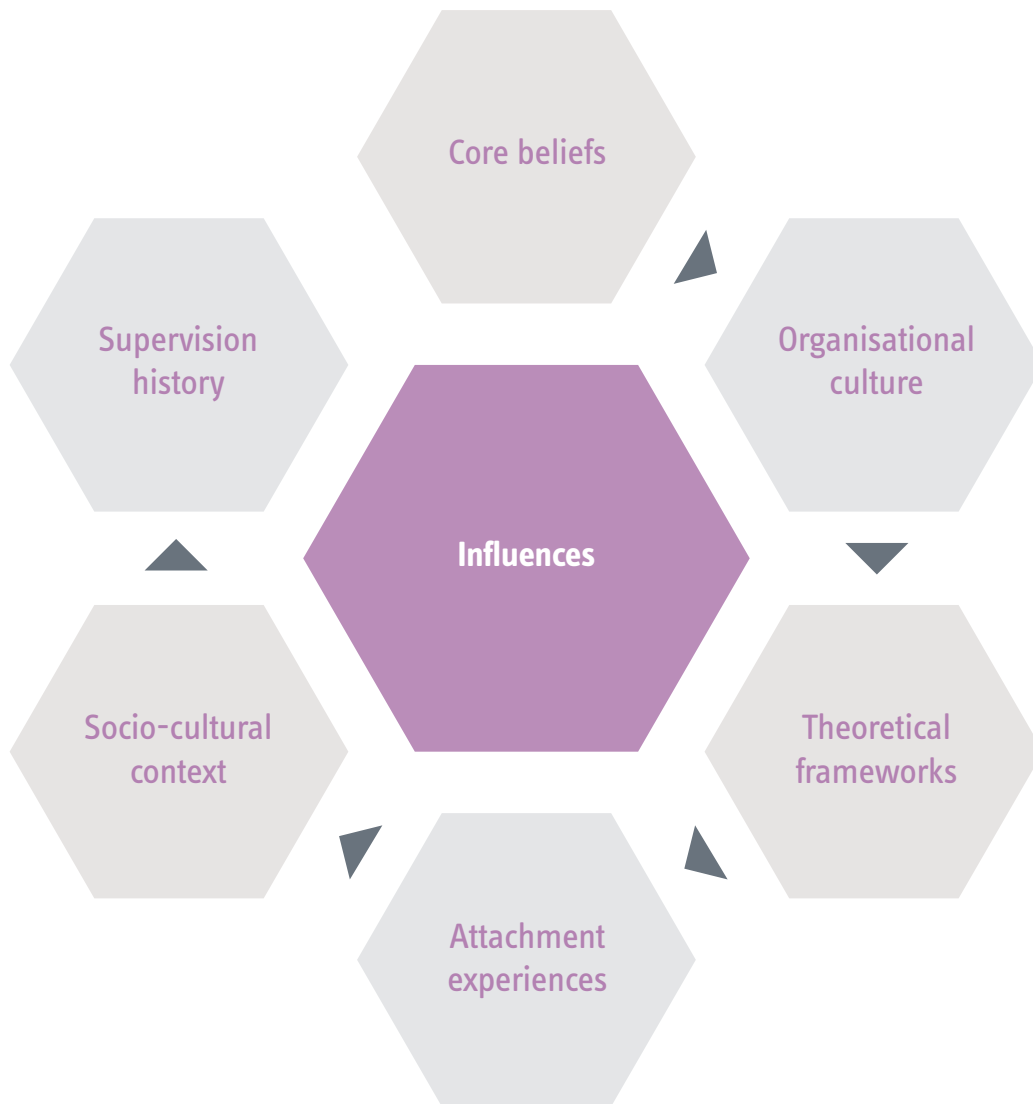
Sometimes the dynamic between these generates dissonance. Behind the shared professional values to which you and your supervisee ascribe, you each also have core beliefs that may, or may not, coincide. These differences between your personal drivers and values may, or may not, have enormous significance.

Your practice as a supervisor, and theirs as practitioner, is influenced by the professional education you each engaged in and therefore you may, or may not, come to the work from the same theoretical / political perspective.

Socio-cultural contexts and the differences between you and your supervisee may, or may not, interfere with how much you have in common and how much you trust each other.

The relationship between supervisor and supervisee is an unusual one. Clearly, it is a professional relationship and, as such, you will negotiate and maintain appropriate boundaries to ensure that the support role does not slip either into friendship or into counselling / therapy. However, as a real and hopefully enduring relationship, in which mutual trust and honesty are essential, it also demands some degree of self-disclosure and use of self.

Negotiating this balance demands a high level of emotional literacy (self-awareness / awareness of others, management of self and relationship management) as well as a clear investment in shared professional values on the part of both supervisee and supervisor.



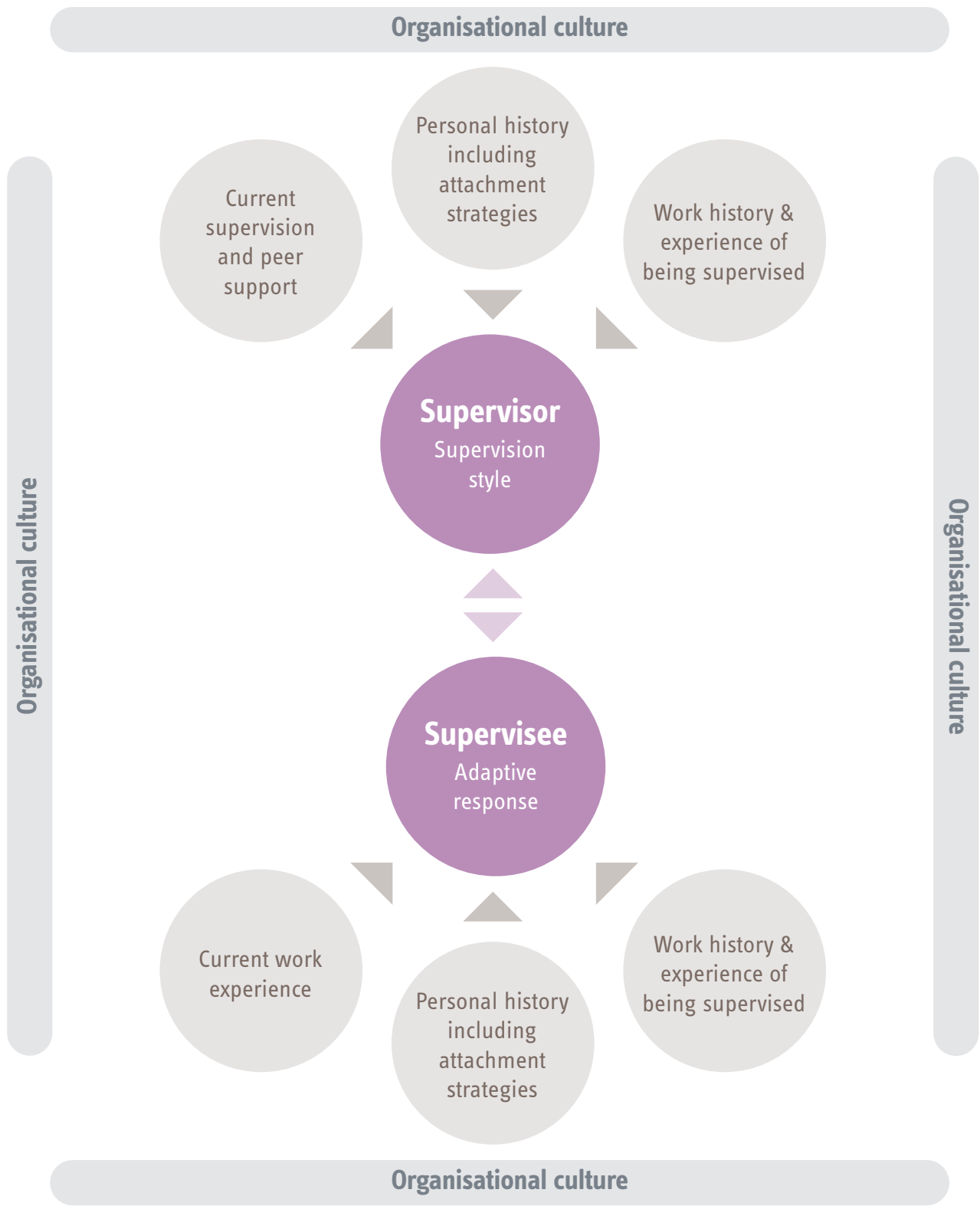
## Organisational culture and the supervisory relationship

The diagram opposite represents how the behaviour of both supervisor and supervisee, and the relationship between them, are affected by personal and professional histories, as well as by current circumstances. The supervisory dynamic will be affected by expectations about how relationships should work, and the strategies you each adopt when under pressure are derived from early attachment experiences within the family.

Since the strategies each of us adopt within our relationships are functional for the individual, it is usually helpful in adult relationships generally to reflect on how best to adjust and modify our strategies to fit with the needs of others.

Effective working relationships rely on the supervisor consciously bringing insight, adaptability and flexibility to their role with individuals and within teams. When you are supervising a group of workers, you may encounter a range of very different responses to stress.

Each supervisee will have expectations about how you will manage and meet their needs. When the whole organisation is under pressure (e.g. during an Ofsted inspection or in the wake of a Serious Case Review) the impact of individual stress may be magnified. In these circumstances, your emotional literacy, reflective capacity and ability to respond constructively to the strategies individual supervisees might adopt when they feel distressed, will make a real difference to their wellbeing.



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## Section one

This exercise builds on content in the learning tool ‘Your supervision history’ in the ‘Your journey to being a practice supervisor’ section of this website. It invites you to reflect further on how your relationships with your own supervisors have influenced the journey that brought you into your role as a supervisor, to consider how these past relationships may have fitted, mirrored or clashed with organisational context, and to examine your relationship style and habitual strategies. This is an opportunity to take a different perspective on how your professional persona has formed and developed.

Review your own supervision history and timeline. Reflect on how you have behaved in each of your supervisory relationships. Have any of your relationships with supervisors mirrored your experiences in your own family of origin, in your current family, or in your friendship groups?

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Have any recurrent themes or patterns played out in the relationships between you and your supervisors?

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How do you conceptualise your relationships with the people you supervise? For example, do you think of yourself as a parent and the team as your kids?

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How does this play out for you in the supervisory role within your current organisation?

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How does the way you are perceived in the organisation (your relationship with the leadership team and your connections with your peers) impact on your relationships with supervisees?

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How have socio-cultural factors (experience of privilege and / or discrimination related to the social GRRRAACCEEESSS) affected your relationships with supervisors? The GRRRAACCEEESSS are a model which describe aspects of personal and social identity which include gender, geography, race, religion, age, ability, appearance, class, culture, education, ethnicity, employment, sexuality, sexual orientation and spirituality (Burnham, 2013).

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## Section two

Most organisations have a supervision policy, and these usually include an expectation that there will be a written contract or agreement between the supervisor and the supervisee.

The templates provided for these often emphasise the technical-procedural aspects, as if the agreement relates to a bureaucratic relationship. In practice, it is the discussions that supervisees and supervisors have about their relationship before they sign and when the agreement is reviewed that is the most important part of the contract.

Discussions to inform a useful supervision agreement will allow the supervisor to build an understanding of the supervisee's supervision history, their professional and personal development, and the supervisee's preferred learning styles (Gibbs et al, 2014).

Review the formal written, and the unvoiced contracts that are in place between you and your supervisees.

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How explicitly have you both addressed your expectations of how the relationship is conducted?

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Do you have a realistic understanding of the supervisee's needs regarding personal support and professional development?

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## Section three

This exercise focuses on the dynamic between your own experience, your supervisee's experience and the organisational culture within which you both work.

The tasks draw your attention to how you and your supervisee understand and experience attachment, and how the strategies each of you adopt in your professional relationship impact on its effectiveness.

Given that the work you supervise is uncertain and ambiguous, it is inevitable that both you and your supervisee will sometimes experience anxiety and distress. This task supports you to think through how, when and where it might be helpful to share your vulnerabilities, and how to join with your supervisee's uncertainty in constructive and helpful ways.

Reflect on how stress and distress manifest in your behaviour. Are you aware of the way you react under pressure?

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Discuss with your supervisees how they experience your own response to pressure.

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Reflect with your supervisees about how they know and what you might notice when they are feeling overwhelmed.

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Ask your supervisees how they would like you to respond and support them when they are under pressure.

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Are there any socio-cultural factors (related to social GRRRAACCEESS) that impact on how you experience stress / pressure?

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## Section four

The social GRRRAACCEEESSS model encourages you to consider how your own identity experiences and those of your supervisees affect the power dynamic between you. It helps you to consider your supervisory relationships in relation to the privileges and disadvantages you and your supervisees experience.

Think about how the following three different aspects of your persona might interfere with your ability to win and sustain your supervisee's trust:

Personal factors

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Professional factors

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Socio-cultural factors

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Have you already addressed any socio-cultural, personal or professional aspects of your lives that could affect the degree of trust and honesty you would like to establish?

## Other ways you can use this tool

You may wish to meet with other practice supervisors or supportive colleagues to work through these questions as a group. This will enable you to hear the different perspectives of peers and engage in a learning discussion.



**We want to hear more about your experiences of using PSDP resources and tools. Connect via Twitter using #PSDP to share your ideas and hear how other practice supervisors use the resources.**


## References

Burnham J (2013) 'Developments in Social GRRRAACCEEESSS: visible-invisible, voiced-unvoiced' in Krause I (ed) *Cultural Reflexivity*. London: Karnac.

Divac A and Heaphy G (2005) 'Space for GRRRAACCEESS: training for cultural competence in supervision'. *Journal of Family Therapy* 27 (3) 280-284.

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