



PSDP—Resources and Tools: Questions around the supervision cycle

Introduction

The first part of this tool introduces you to the 'integrated model of supervision' (the 4 x 4 x 4 model) before outlining how you can use the idea of a problem-solving cycle to structure your discussion about practice with children and families in supervision.

Please note that, if you have already seen the 'An audit of your supervision role' tool, available from this section of the website, you will have read the introduction to this one (see below).

The exercises that follow introduce you to an integrated model of supervision (often referred to as the 4 x 4 x 4 model). This model brings together three distinct elements of supervision, each of which has four interdependent components:

the four functions of supervision

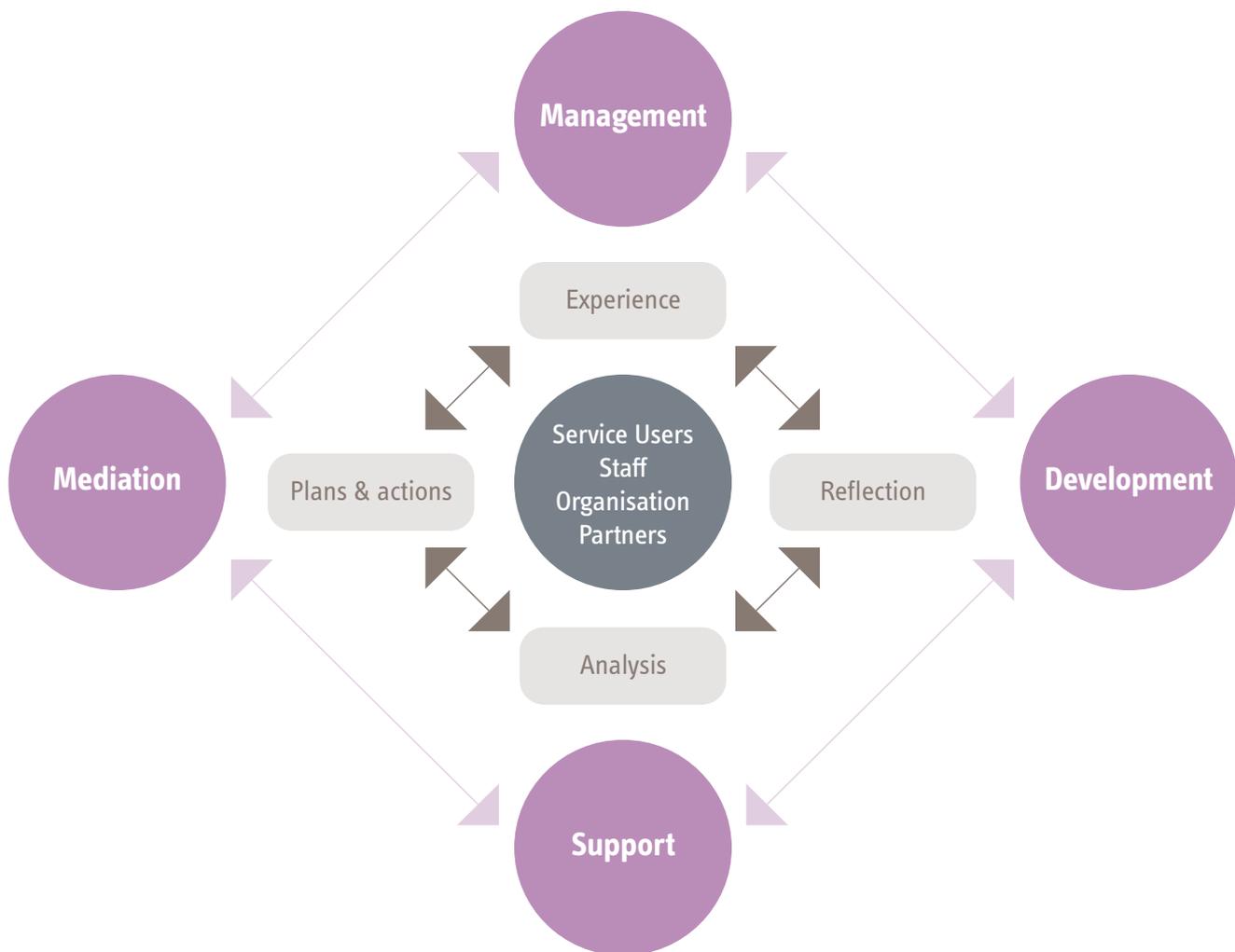
the four key stakeholders in supervision

the four elements of the supervisory cycle.

This approach encourages us to conceptualise supervision as a process that integrates three very different ways of understanding its purpose. It emphasises how your responsibilities as a supervisor engage you in a complex set of practical and cognitive activities by bringing together ideas drawn from management theory, learning theory and outcomes-based approaches.

This learning tool is based on the integrated model of supervision developed by Tony Morrison (2005) as well as more recent developments of the model (Wonnacott, 2012, 2013 and 2014). Their approaches have been used by numerous social care organisations both in the UK and overseas, and have been positively evaluated and found to increase job satisfaction, worker retention and worker effectiveness (Carpenter et al, 2012).

The integrated model of supervision



The 'outer' layer of this diagram represents the four distinct functions of a supervisor's role and the objectives of supervision:

- > **Management** – ensuring competent accountable practice and performance.
- > **Development** – supporting continuing professional development, promoting learning.
- > **Support** – providing a secure, restorative relationship.
- > **Mediation** – engaging the individual practitioner / team with the organisation and serving as a bridge between the world of direct practice and the world of senior management / politics.

The central box in this diagram articulates how supervision must address a range of requirements on behalf of different stakeholders. On the face of it, each encounter between supervisor and supervisee is about their relationship and communication with each other. However, the quality and outcomes of their conversation have a direct impact on the child, their parents, family and friendships, the organisation as a whole, and on the network of different professional disciplines and agencies engaged with the child.

The 'middle' layer refers to ideas drawn from learning theory about the need for supervision to engage practitioners in a cycle of thinking from different perspectives and using different cognitive skills. The essential message here is that all professional decision-making relies on supervisors and practitioners engaging in critical reflection and bringing robust analytical skills into discussions.

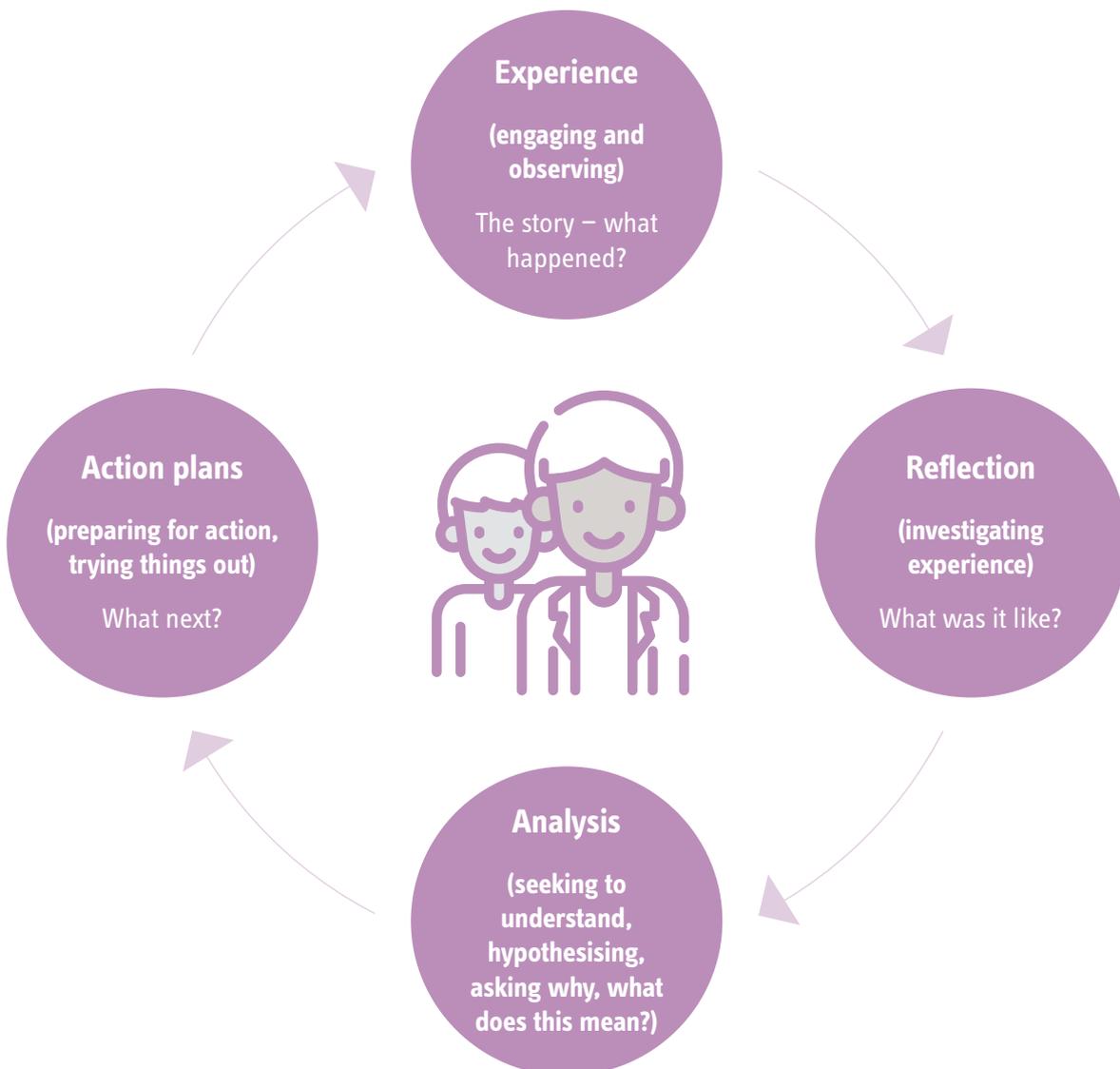
The key message is that when supervision integrates these three distinct approaches, practitioners learn to:

- > recognise and value all four elements of supervision
- > understand how the primary goal of supervision is to achieve the best outcomes for the child
- > appreciate that it's their own responsibility to mobilise the full range of thinking skills and focus on each child's unique story before forming a plan of action.

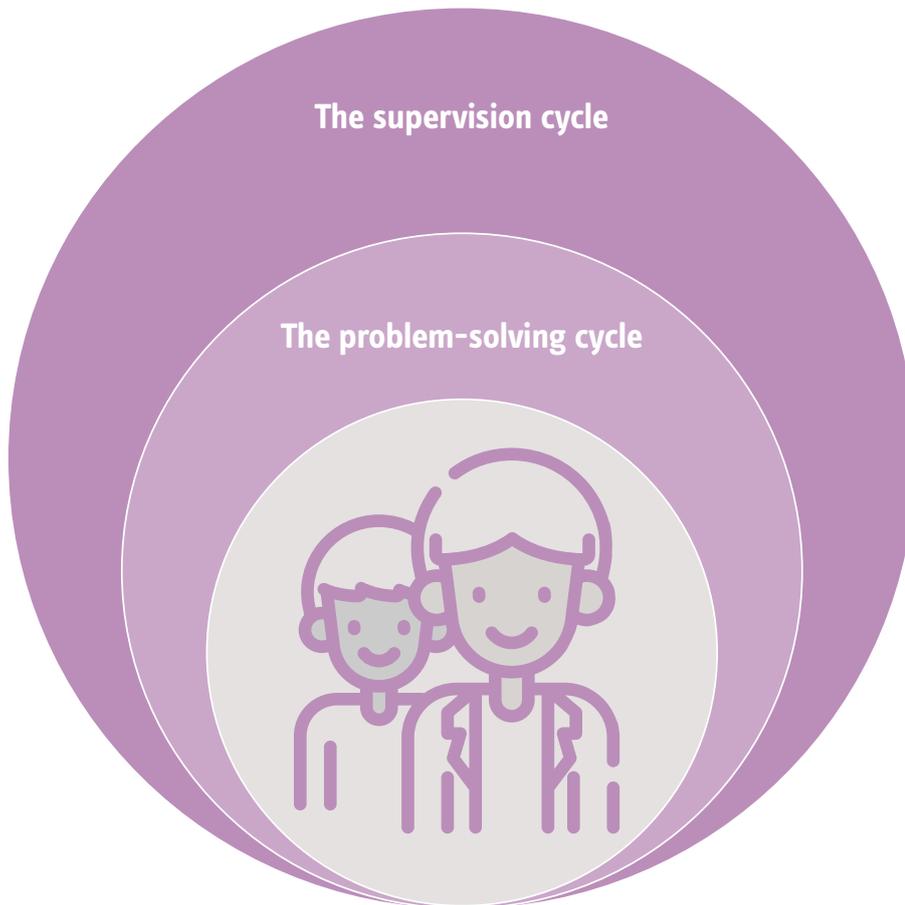
Questions around the supervision cycle

The concept underpinning this problem-solving / supervision cycle has been influential in social work for many years and arises out of a theory of adult learning expounded by Kolb (1984).

The problem-solving cycle articulates the idea that learning is triggered by experience (e.g. a problem that needs to be solved or a situation that is unfamiliar or challenging). By exploring each stage in the cycle, the supervisor enables the worker to learn and develop by processing their experience of 'the story'. By asking open, exploratory questions, the supervisor transforms the worker's understanding of the information they hold before reaching any judgement about their intervention plan.



When you use the supervision cycle to explore practice dilemmas with a worker, this mirrors the problem-solving cycle that practitioners engage in with families.



The four positions in the cycle are:

Experiencing

This means eliciting the story to gain a full understanding of what's happened. Often this will mean engaging with multiple stories as told by the child, different family members, different participants in the system of concern, as well as the worker's own responses and actions. Questions that support accurate and detailed recall of events ensure the richest possible discussion later in the cycle. Supervisees can be helped to recall more than they think they know when they are asked the right questions.

Reflecting

Here the emphasis is on eliciting feelings and investigating the experience, i.e. what was it like? Doing this can bring out further information that may not yet have been consciously processed by the worker. Similarly, talking about the workers' feelings can reveal underlying assumptions or attitudes that might otherwise go unvoiced. Exploring feelings about the story may also give clues to personal factors in the workers' life that contribute further complexity to their experience of the situation. Reflection helps the worker make links between the current situation and their prior experiences, skills and knowledge.

Analysing

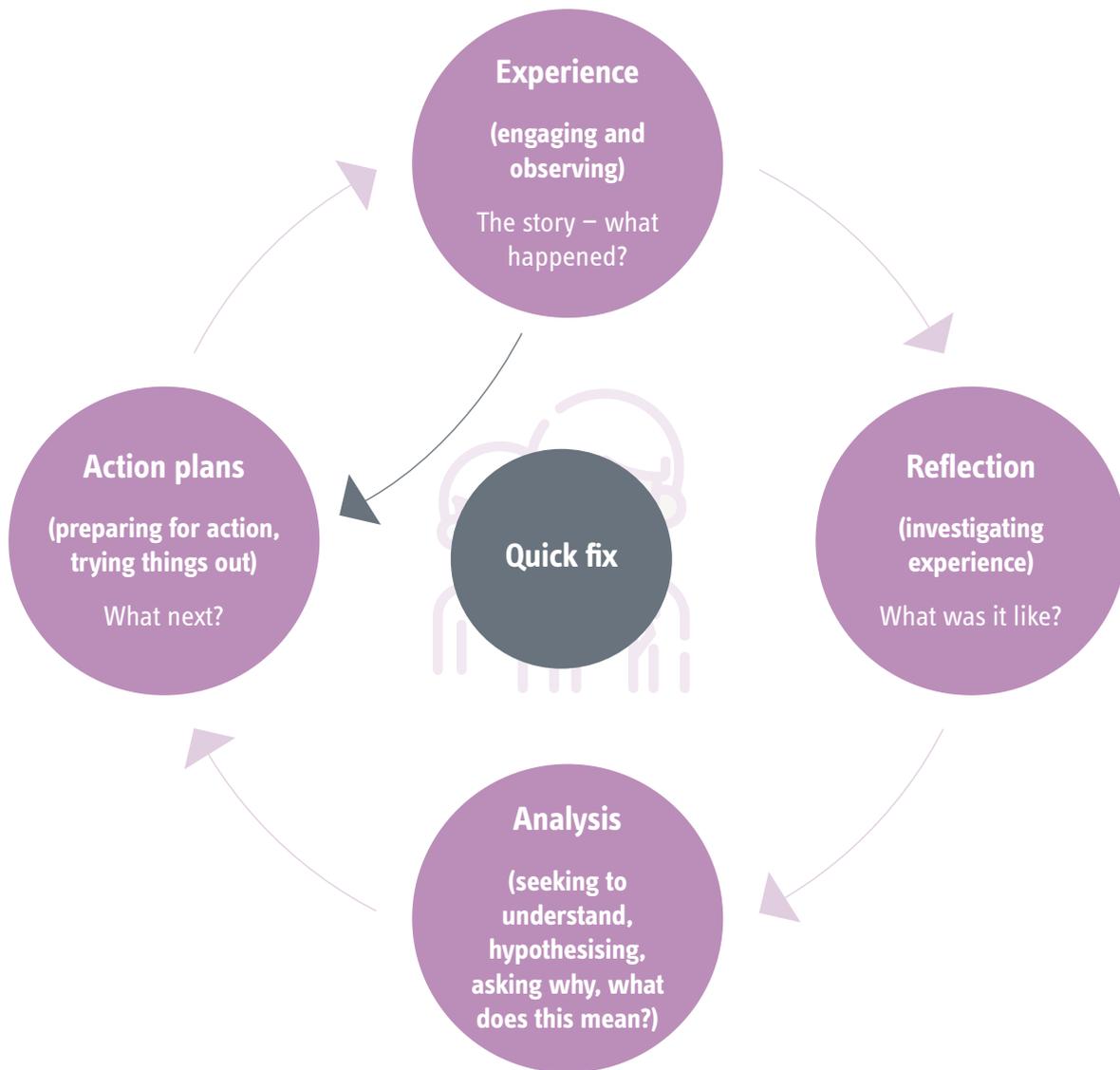
This means putting the information available 'under the microscope'. Probing the meanings that the supervisee, child and family attribute to the situation. Hypothesising and identifying what is uncertain or ambiguous, and harnessing the evidence available from practice, theoretical knowledge and research findings that might help us gain insight and understanding.

Action planning

The focus here is on translating the analysis into planning, preparation and action. This includes the identification of goals, outcomes, how success will be evaluated, how challenges or complications will be anticipated, and the creation of meaningful contingency plans.

The danger for practitioners and supervisees alike is that organisational demands require them to work quickly and efficiently. Reflection and analysis can come to feel like an unaffordable luxury. The reverse is true.

When supervision bypasses reflection and analysis, judgements and plans that are based on superficial, incomplete and unprocessed information are likely to be linear and simplistic. This 'quick fix' is far from being cost effective. In fact, it creates misguided intervention, poor outcomes, increased workloads, and unmanaged risk-taking.



Morrison 2005

Exercise one

On the next page are some examples of questions you can ask your supervisee to help them think more deeply about a family and child's situation at each stage of the cycle. The list is not exhaustive – each situation is unique, and each question will elicit answers that you can follow up in more detail.

Print off this list, find four marker pens of different colours (or use highlight colour to complete the task on screen) then:

use the first colour to mark on each list the questions you regularly ask your supervisees

use the second for questions you only ask occasionally

the third is for questions you've never asked

use the fourth for questions you find it hard to imagine asking.

Focusing on **experience** (story)

- > What was your aim? What planning did you do?
- > What happened before the incident / event / meeting / interview / visit?
- > How do you see your role?
- > What did you expect to happen?
- > What did happen?
- > Identify different perceptions of co-workers
- > What did you say and do?
- > What interventions did you try?
- > What did the child or family say, do or show?
- > What reactions did you notice to what you said or did?
- > What surprised or puzzled you?
- > Who behaved differently?
- > What struck you?
- > What were the key moments that stood out for you?
- > What did you notice about yourself / the user / your co-worker?
- > What words, non-verbal signals, interactions, smells, sounds or images struck you?
- > What do you think the child or family would have noticed about you?
- > What or who was hard to observe?
- > What observations or concerns do other agencies have?
- > What went according to plan?
- > What didn't happen?
- > What changes to your plan or choices did you make?
- > What did you say, notice or do immediately after the incident / event / interview / visit?

Focusing on reflection

- > What feelings did you bring into the incident / event / interview / visit?
- > What is your gut feeling about this child and family?
- > Describe the range of feelings you had in the session.
- > What did the incident / event / interview / visit / your feelings / this child / this family remind you of?
- > What previous work, processes, skills, knowledge are relevant here?
- > Where have you encountered similar processes?
- > What assumptions might you be making? For example, differences and similarities between your social GRRRAACCEEESSS (aspects of personal and social identity that include gender, geography, race, religion, age, ability, appearance, class, culture, education, ethnicity, employment, sexuality, sexual orientation and spirituality - Burnham, 2013) and those of the child and family?
- > Does this situation challenge your feelings about acceptable / unacceptable behaviour?
- > Where and when did you feel most or least comfortable?
- > What feelings were you left with? Does this always happen after seeing this kind of situation?
- > What metaphor or analogy would you use to describe your experiences of working with this situation?
- > What was left unfinished?

Focusing on analysis

- > Taking account of your feelings, what does this tell us about what the child or family may be feeling in this situation?
- > How do you explain or understand what happened in the session?
- > Think about the social GRRRAACCEEESSS – are the child and family advantaged or disadvantaged by these? How? Might things be different if they had different characteristics?
- > Did power relations shift during the session. If so, how and why?
- > What went well, or not well, and why?
- > How far did this incident / event / interview / visit confirm or challenge your previous understanding or hypothesis?
- > What new information emerged?
- > What knowledge, theory, training, research, policy or values might help you make sense of what happened in this session?
- > How else might you have managed the session?
- > What are the current needs, risks, strengths in this situation?
- > What is unknown?
- > What conclusions are you drawing from this work so far?
- > How do you now define your role in this situation?
- > How would the child or family define your role?
- > What expectations does your agency have of your role?

Focusing on **action plans**

- > Considering the reflection and analysis we have done, what is your overall summary of where things are at, and what needs to be done next?
- > Can you identify what you are and what you are not responsible for in managing this work with the child and family?
- > What training, supervisory, co-work and support needs have been raised for you?
- > What information needs to be obtained from others before proceeding?
- > What are your aims in the next phase of work?
- > What is urgent and essential?
- > What would be desirable?
- > What is negotiable and non-negotiable in this situation?
- > How can we ensure that our work with the child and the family does not unfairly discriminate on the grounds of social GRRRAACCEEESSS?
- > What would be a culturally-sensitive response to this child and their family?
- > What would be a successful outcome from the perspective of the child / family / other key agencies?
- > What might your strategy be for the next contact with the child and family, and other professionals?
- > What are the possible best or worst responses from the child and the family?
- > What contingency plans do you need? What is the bottom line?
- > Where do you feel confident?
- > How can you prepare for the next steps (mental rehearsal, flip chart map, reading, co-worker discussion)?
- > What can I do that would be helpful at this stage?
- > When does feedback and debriefing need to take place?
- > Are there any safety issues for you / others?
- > What can be done to minimise any dangers?

Now review how you highlighted these questions

Can you see a pattern that drives the questions you ask your supervisees?

Do you recognise any connection between these and your own personality or learning preferences?

Does the pattern relate to your experience / education / professional experience?

Is the pattern associated with the formal / procedural expectations you work within?

What new insights emerge from having reviewed the kind of questions you routinely use / do not use?

Exercise two

Having considered your habits and preferences, this next stage is an experiment in changing your own behaviour.

Review all four lists of questions again then:

identify three questions you've never asked and one you find it hard to imagine asking (these may give you clues about your 'comfort zones')

ask each one at least once during the next four weeks

notice what your supervisee does / says in response

notice what your supervisee does / says in subsequent conversations.

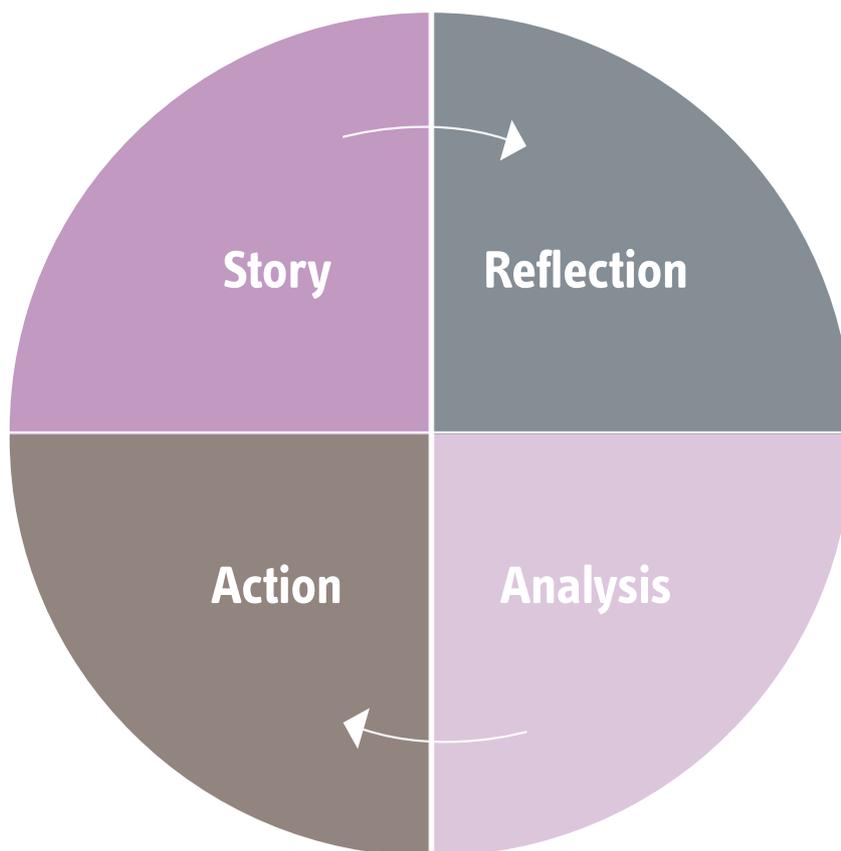
Exercise three

As you become more consciously aware of your own preferences and 'comfort zone', you may also begin to notice how your supervisees happily offer up some aspects of their own thinking about children, families and their situation, but are reluctant to engage in one particular part of the cycle.

You may observe in some that their thinking has become blocked. Others may have

become so accustomed to workload pressures and the 'quick fix' approach that their capacity for reflection and analysis has atrophied.

In supervision, consciously decide to ensure that your questions are equally weighted in all four parts of the cycle. Aim to design at least five questions for all four parts of the supervisory cycle, too.



Notice the impact this shift in your focus has on the supervisee's approach. As you embed this practice, and your supervisees begin to bring an expectation that supervision will engage in all four parts of the cycle, investigate what happens when you design and introduce questions that demand creative / exploratory / innovative responses.

Exercise four

The previous exercise invited you to design and use questions to encourage your supervisees to think differently. When you notice that a worker finds it challenging to use any one stage of the problem-solving / supervisory cycle, you may find it useful to support them to engage more explicitly in specific tasks that take them out of their 'comfort zone'. Some examples of suitable tasks include:

Experience

- > video or audio recording (with appropriate informed consent / permission)
- > observation by a co-worker (with appropriate informed consent / permission)
- > live supervision (with appropriate informed consent / permission)
- > learning diaries
- > incident logs
- > process recordings
- > genograms.

Reflection

- > role-play
- > sculpting
- > artwork to draw out feelings and perceptions
- > further reflection on genograms
- > eco-maps to draw out contexts, roles and patterns.

Analysis

- > sharing research evidence and professional literature
- > presentations about a child and family
- > external speakers
- > attending training as a team
- > group supervision
- > action learning sets.

Action

- > role-play
- > co-working
- > planning in core group / strategy meetings
- > collaborative safety planning with families and partner organisations.

Other ways you can use this tool

You may find it useful to talk with your team about whether or not / how these approaches can be embedded in local practice. Experiment with using the integrated model of supervision to:

Create a culture that supports the supervision cycle e.g. give each supervisee a laminated hard copy of the cycle diagram and (if possible) have a large printed copy on the wall in the space you use for supervision.

Raise your supervisee's awareness of their responsibility to set out the 'story' as clearly as possible, be prepared to answer challenging questions that encourage reflection and analysis, and share the responsibility for decision-making.

Secure feedback from your supervisees about their perception of how the supervision cycle challenges their assumptions.

Secure feedback from your supervisees about the extent to which your questions open up new perspectives and insights.

Generate team discussion about how other activities based on the design of challenging questions could contribute to practitioners' development.

Explore how you and your team generate and embed a culture of critical reflection.

Explore where and how the reflective and analytical elements of supervision are recorded.



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 (2012) *Cultural Reflexivity*. London: Karnac.

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