



PSDP - Resources and Tools: Being a practice supervisor in child and family social work

Introduction

Practice supervisors are qualified social workers whose primary function is to supervise the practice and decision-making of child and family practitioners, and to develop the skills of individuals and teams within child and family social work services. Being a practice supervisor is a skilled and challenging role. Not only do practice supervisors exert influence within the wider organisation (at a management level), but they're also responsible for overseeing the work of practitioners and the quality of practice with children and families. This dual role has been likened to a bridge, 'spanning the divide between direct practice and strategic management' (Patterson, 2015, p2085).

Balancing meeting organisational requirements, supporting social workers and ensuring children and families receive an excellent service, however, is not an easy task and requires a broad range of different skills and knowledge. It is therefore concerning that a lack of training, mentoring and support for first-time social work leaders and managers, and a limited knowledge base that explores how practice supervisors can work most effectively in role, is a consistent message across the literature (PSDP, 2018).¹

This knowledge briefing draws on evidence and learning gathered during the development of the Practice Supervisor Development Programme (PSDP), in which surveys and focus groups were carried out in order to capture the range of different skills and knowledge that practice supervisors require to be effective in their role, and why these are important. These insights were complemented by a desk-based review of literature and research (Ruch and Maglajlic, 2018), and consultation with children, young people, parents and foster carers (PSDP, 2018). The briefing also draws on bespoke teaching materials developed for the PSDP curriculum and learning from practice supervisors who have attended PSDP.

1. Drawn from the Scoping Report undertaken to inform the design of PSDP. More details here www.rip.org.uk/news-and-views/blog/showing-our-workings-out-%E2%80%93-an-update-on-the-psdp-so-far/

This knowledge briefing will explore the importance of:

facilitating reflexive discussions in supervision that focus on the voices, views and experiences of children, young people and their families

modelling relationship-based practice and providing supervision which supports social workers to build effective relationships with families

helping social workers deal with challenging and complex issues in practice, and their emotional responses to these

ensuring that practice supervisors are emotionally-contained and offered reflective supervision

paying attention to developing a positive and supportive team culture as a practice supervisor

supporting practice supervisors to make the transition from practitioner to line manager and continue to develop skills and confidence in role.

Learning from developing PSDP: factors that enable excellent social work practice

During the knowledge and evidence gathering stage of developing PSDP, a number of themes were highlighted as key factors in enabling excellent social work practice. Time and time again children, young people and their families, practitioners, practice supervisors and other professionals talked – in various ways – about:

The centrality of honest, trusting relationships – at all levels of the system – characterised by high support, high expectations and respectful challenge.

The need for emotionally-literate, reflective, curious supervision which promotes critical thinking, hopeful practice and wellbeing.

The critical importance of professional leadership, and the need to develop supervisors in a way that foregrounds social work values and ethics, as well as drawing on leadership theory more widely.

The role of systemic thinking; supervisors are part of the family's system and part of the organisational system. This kind of thinking also invites us to notice how 'parallel processes' occur. For example, the way that behaviours and patterns between supervisors and supervisees can mirror the behaviours and patterns between practitioners and children / families.

The crucial role of organisational culture in enabling all of the above.

Practice supervisors who are able to provide emotionally-intelligent leadership which is calm, consistent and demonstrates availability are able to model many of the factors outlined above in their interactions with team members. Working in this way can make a real difference to the quality of practice with children and families and practice supervisors are an essential element in enabling this to happen. However, the themes outlined above also emphasise the role organisational leaders play in creating the conditions that enable practice supervisors to encourage emotionally-literate, curious and relational social work practice.

Reflective prompts:

What is your personal response to the factors outlined in this section?

Does the focus on emotionally-literate supervision resonate with your own views and experiences? What gets in the way of providing this? What can you initiate within your sphere of influence to start to focus on this more?

What influence do you feel you have within the organisation, with your team, and on the quality of practice with children and families?

Do you see modelling relational and emotionally-literate practice as part of your role as practice supervisor?

The importance of relationships in child and family social work

Children and young people we consulted with consistently highlighted that they wanted a trusting relationship with their social worker – a theme which is reflected in the professional literature (Ruch, 2005; Winter, 2011, 2015). Without a meaningful and trusting relationship, other social work tasks such as safeguarding, supporting change and building self-efficacy are likely to be much harder to achieve. Children, parents and foster carers described how social workers ‘coming in and making decisions’ without a positive relationship was experienced as negative and disempowering.

Those consulted argued that, in order to build a trusting relationship, social workers need to:

demonstrate consistency and availability	be highly motivated to be child / young person-centred, which includes supporting families and carers	be respectful and involve children and young people and others close to them to build self-efficacy and inform better decisions
be responsive	have empathy and compassion	have sufficient and up-to-date knowledge, so they are seen as credible, but equally be able to say when they don't know.

Reflective supervision as a pre-condition for relationship building

Young people were able to draw a connection between how supported their social worker is and how they in turn are supported by their social worker. They identified that supervisors should have regular supportive supervision with social workers in order to prevent their personal or work stress impacting on the people they work with:

‘Making sure they do actually have supervisions with their manager so I don’t get the backlash of them feeling under pressure or stressed when they visit me.’

They highlighted that practice supervision should set expectations with social workers about the importance of working collaboratively and in partnership with children and families. Also that supervisors need to challenge any negative opinions or frustrations about family members to reflect on and unpick these assumptions. They expressed the view that exploring the family’s and the child’s perspectives and needs should be a regular feature of supervision discussions.

Reflective prompts:

Do you encourage social workers in your team to reflect on the nature of the relationship they have developed with children, young people and their families in supervision?

Do your supervision discussions focus on how practitioners are working with families as well as focusing on the intervention plan?

Do you highlight the importance of social workers working collaboratively and in partnership with families with your team? How do you role model this?

Can you seek to learn more about the voices, views and experiences of families in supervision discussions?

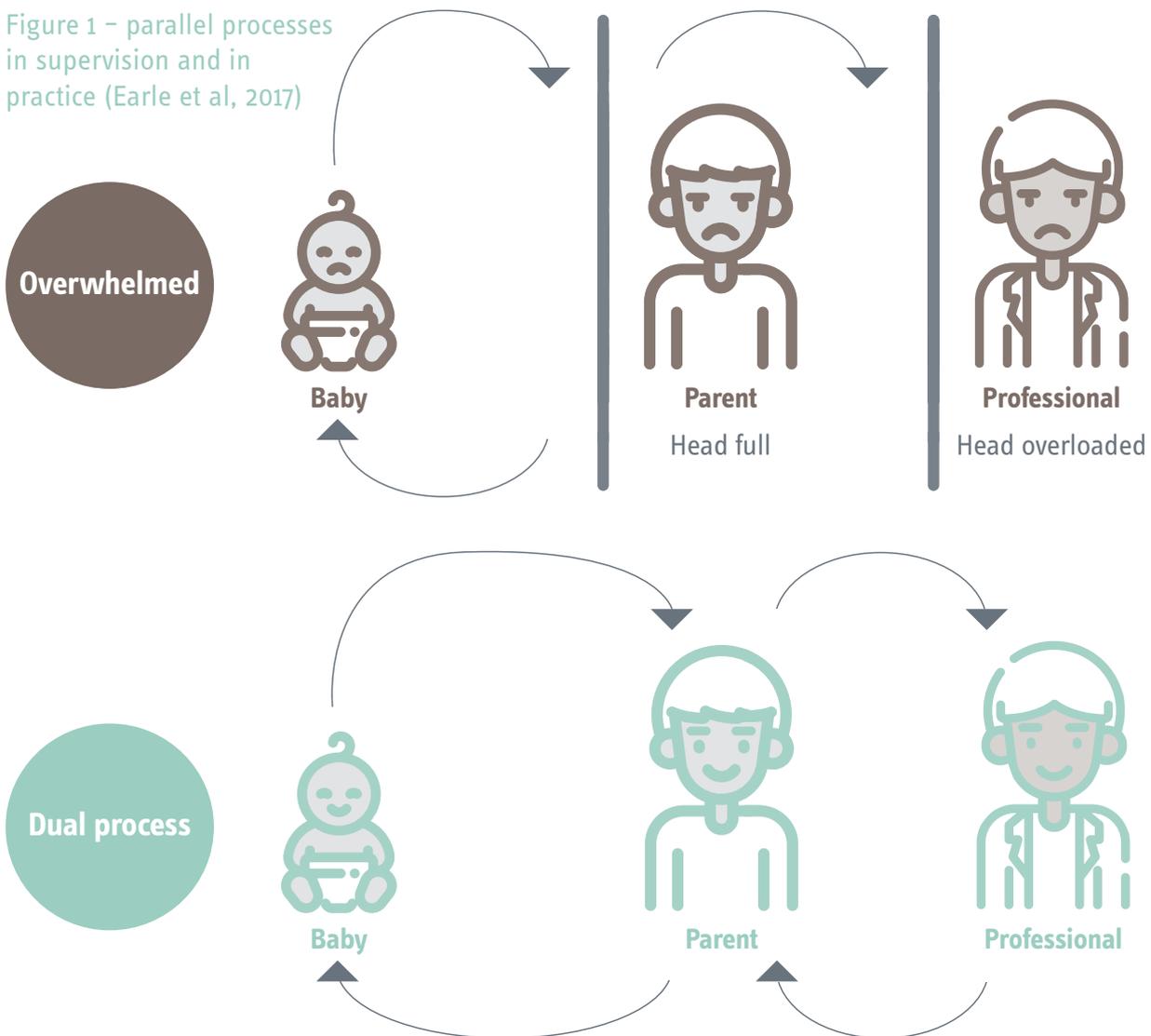
Do you encourage your supervisees to reflect on areas of similarity or difference which might impact on the ways in which they view families or communicate with them? For example, using the social GRRRAACCEEESSS to reflect on practice with families.²

2. The social GRRRAACCEEESSS is a model which describe 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). You can access learning tools which give you more information about the social GRRRAACCEEESSS on the website.

Practice supervisors are the invisible hand guiding practice

It is important not to underestimate the degree of influence you have in shaping the ways in which social workers in your team work directly with children and families, and their ability to build relationships with them. ‘Annie’ is a parent who has experience of working with a number of social workers in relation to her children. She argues that she can tell immediately if a social worker who visits her is stressed and is not getting effective support from their supervisor. ‘Annie’ makes this point on a recording shown within the PSDP course, and many practice supervisors have found it sobering.

Figure 1 – parallel processes in supervision and in practice (Earle et al, 2017)



Received, understood, held in mind: sensitive response to baby’s cues. Reflective functioning: mind-mindedness

Received and understood

Her comments usefully point out that if practitioners are not contained and supported by practice supervisors, they are more likely to feel overwhelmed and this could impact on how they communicate with children and families. Conversely, when social workers are well supported by their supervisors and the organisations they work for, they may be more able to reach out and connect with children and families and, in doing so, better able to build strong, containing relationships with them.

Parents working with social workers often experience overwhelming and difficult emotions, which can be exacerbated by the demands of parenting and heightened – or eased – by the way in which social workers engage with them. This ‘parallel process’ is illustrated simply in figure 1 below (Earle et al, 2017). The concept of ‘parallel process’ originates from psychoanalytic theories of transference and countertransference. In this example, it describes how the supervisee’s experiences of relating with a practice supervisor in supervision are mirrored in how the supervisee then interacts with the child and family.

‘Annie’ refers to the supervisor as the ‘invisible hand’ guiding practice. Her point being that if you are able to provide reflective supervision which allows practitioners to process their emotional responses to practice, grapple with dilemmas and, crucially, work collaboratively with families, then your influence is far-reaching and has a real impact on the quality of relationships social workers are able to build with children, young people and their families.

Reflective prompts:

Do ‘Annie’s’ comments that you are an ‘invisible hand’ guiding practice help you to think about your influence in a different way?

Can you identify any ways in which you might work differently with your supervisees as a result of thinking about ‘parallel processes’, i.e. the relationship between how you work with them and how they work with families?

The importance of providing emotional containment as a practice supervisor

Munro (2005, p20) highlights the importance of recognising and attending to ‘the emotional dimension’ of social work practice. A compelling argument about the importance of doing so comes from Ferguson (2011):

‘Workers’ state of mind and the quality of attention they can give to children is directly related to the quality of support, care and attention, they themselves receive from supervision, managers and peers.’

Without opportunities to ‘decompress’ and reflect on experiences and feelings in supervision there is a risk that: ‘social workers’ responses and judgements may be skewed by their own personal defensiveness or anxiety resulting in flawed assessments or decisions.’ (Ward, 2008, p68). This means that practice supervisors need to be self-reflexive, confident in naming emotions and skilled in facilitating supervision discussions that help supervisees to reflect on difficult and challenging emotions arising from exposure to significant loss and trauma when working with children and families. Ferguson (2018, p417) describes self-reflexivity as having: ‘a high degree of self-awareness, role awareness and awareness of assumptions underlying... practice.’

Emotional containment refers to the process of being emotionally receptive to another’s troubled, perturbed, anxious, turbulent feelings and states of mind, and responding in a way that helps them to feel more settled and understand

their own emotional state. The concept of containment was developed by Bion (1994), who described the person receiving the emotional communication as the ‘container’. There is a tendency to see individual supervision as the primary vehicle for providing emotional containment. However, it’s a much broader concept than that and arguably needs to be integrated throughout all elements of the practice supervisor role.

Practice supervisors need to understand the importance of emotional containment, and be able to articulate how the different ways in which they work support it. It’s essential to move away from a tacit understanding about its importance to explicitly naming that importance, and demonstrating an expectation that all social workers will, at times, be affected by the challenging nature of the work.

The practice supervisor has a key role in articulating this to the team and creating the conditions in which practitioners feel they can talk freely about their emotions and experiences.

Fairtlough’s (2017) model of holistic containment is helpful in broadening the lens here. Figure 2 shows ‘the holistic containment wheel’, which outlines a number of ways in which practice supervisors provide emotional containment.

These are represented under three main themes:

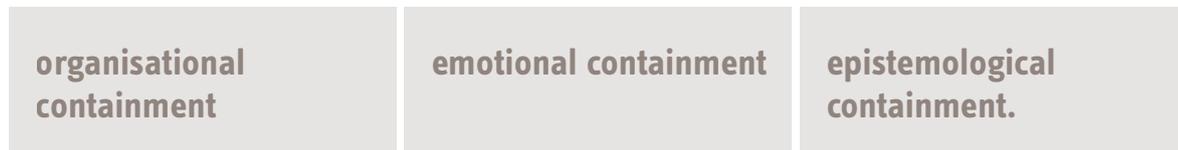


Figure 2 - holistic containment wheel (Fairtlough, 2017, p72)

You can access a learning tool about the holistic containment wheel in the ‘Your journey to being a practice supervisor’ section of the website, which allows you to think about the relevance of this model to your work in more detail.

Practice pointers

Many participants on the PSDP have highlighted that it is helpful to think more deeply about the different ways in which they provide emotional containment to their teams. Some examples of small changes they have made, which have proved to be effective, are:

Talking to their teams about emotional containment and being transparent about why it’s an important element of the role. This gives the practitioners they supervise permission to name their emotions and talk about how they’re affected by their work.

Being more available and visible to the team, encouraging staff to come and debrief if they need to, and spending time near practitioners (‘on the shop floor’) to notice when they need support.

Initiating ‘huddles’ in which they (and any other available colleagues) briefly talk through a challenging visit prior to the social worker heading out, then following up with a quick debrief when the worker returns, and encouraging team members to do this without them if they’re ever unable to take part.

Doing an ‘emotional check in’ with team members at the start of each team meeting or supervision session.

Reflective prompts:

What factors enable or prevent you from offering emotionally-literate, reflective, curious supervision? How could you start to move towards this with your team?

Do you feel confident to name emotions and introduce discussion of emotional responses to practice within supervision, as well as seeking to learn more about the emotional wellbeing of a supervisee more generally?

Are you able to provide feedback and observations to supervisees about emotional responses they may not yet be fully conscious of during supervision?

When you look at the holistic containment wheel, do you notice ways in which you already emotionally contain your team that you may not have previously considered?

How can you explicitly address issues of emotional containment with your team? Is there anything you can start to do differently?

Who contains the container?

One of the key challenges in providing emotionally-containing and reflective supervision is that it can be deprioritised when there are so many other requirements about what is discussed during sessions. Wilkins et al (2017) make the point that:

‘In the UK... supervision has now become less available and when it does take place the major purpose is a managerial monitoring of whether procedures have been properly followed rather than a professional review of the case work process and the judgements and decisions made... This undervaluing of the emotional dimension may have significant adverse effects on both the families and the workers themselves.’

This is an important point for practice supervisors to reflect on in relation to their *own* supervision, as well as thinking about the quality of supervision they provide. If practice supervisors are working to provide emotional containment for their staff, they must engage with the same difficult emotions that social workers experience. In listening and responding to these emotions, as well as hearing about other issues that may be affecting their supervisees (for example, difficulties in their personal life or the impact of workload or working conditions), practice supervisors may become overloaded. This begs the question: who contains the container? In other words, who is supporting practice supervisors?

Social workers, practice supervisors, heads of service and senior leaders – i.e. everyone in this kind of working environment – benefit from the positive impact of containment. But some researchers have observed that social workers are often less good at looking after themselves than trying to look after others.

Practice supervisors need containing support and spaces for themselves, so they can be in the right state of mind to attend to the emotional support of practitioners. This means that practice supervisors need to be able to access reflective supervision in which the emotional dimension of their work is both valued and explored.

Learning from PSDP suggests that regular, reflective supervision with a line manager is not always available to practice supervisors or that supervision may, at times, as Wilkins et al highlight in the above quote, focus on process and procedure rather than providing a safe, exploratory space in which to reflect on challenges and dilemmas.

It is also important to acknowledge that power dynamics between practice supervisors and their own line managers may act as a barrier to feeling able to request a different kind of supervisory relationship.

For example, a newly appointed practice supervisor who is taking on line management responsibilities for the first time might feel they do not have the authority to ask a more senior manager for more emotionally-containing supervision.

Reflective prompts:

Who provides you with support as a practice supervisor? What kind of supervision space would you like to have?

If you are not experiencing supervision in a way that would be most helpful, how might you start to introduce feedback and suggestions about ways in which you can make supervision discussions more fruitful?

Who do you need to talk to or seek support from in your organisation to ensure the emotional dimension of supervision and the practice supervisor role is valued and understood?

The transition from social worker to practice supervisor

The impact of making the transition from being a social worker to a practice supervisor should not be underestimated. Practice supervisors are often promoted because of their excellence in practice with children and families, but the role of supervisor brings with it other demands.

Moving from being responsible for working directly with children and families to a leadership role in which you are responsible for supporting the practice of others without doing the work yourself can be disorientating. Consequently, many practice supervisors report that this seemingly 'ordinary transition' is challenging, and a process that needs to be worked through over a period of time (Patterson 2015, p2085).

This transition is best supported in organisations with a clear developmental pathway and support plan for practice supervisors. This is necessary because getting to grips with a new management role involves learning new procedures, developing your understanding of yourself, taking on new responsibilities, as well as navigating changes in your professional relationships.

For example, practice supervisors sometimes experience tension within their teams after being promoted internally. As a result, the shift from being a team member to being a team leader can be isolating, and practice supervisors can feel overwhelmed.

Furthermore, supervisors have to answer many questions from practitioners, and support team members to work with significant levels of potential risk. This can lead to a pressure to make instant decisions, or always know what to do in order to be considered effective by their team members.

What does it mean to be a ‘good leader’?

One of the new skills practice supervisors may need to learn when they first undertake the role is how to analyse and report on data about performance and work with children and families undertaken by the team.

This is in addition to learning about recruiting and interviewing new staff, as well as dealing with capability and employment issues in relation to team members, all of which may be new to practice supervisors.

These new aspects of the role are then undertaken alongside other routine and, at times, challenging activities, such as:

leading on decision-making	managing crises
liaising with other professionals	supervising staff in busy and complex work contexts.

In these circumstances, it’s easy for practice supervisors to overlook the equally-important aspects of the leadership role that focus on developing a positive team culture and identity.

Reflecting on what the different qualities of a ‘good leader’ are can be a helpful way to effectively lead a team of people.

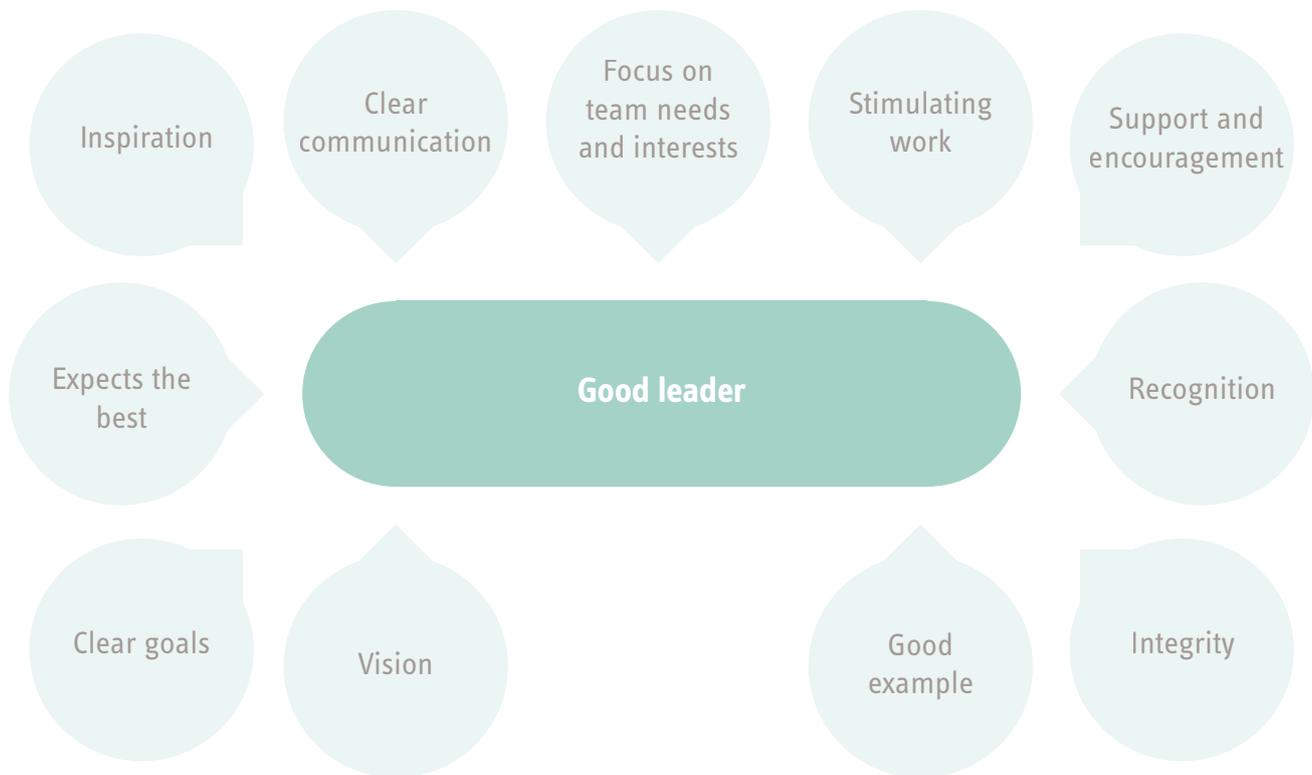


Figure 3 – the different qualities of a good leader (developed by Carole Brooks)

Figure 3 outlines a number of different factors associated with effective leadership. The diagram illustrates that many aspects of being a ‘good leader’ can be achieved by knowing your team members well, building strong and supportive relationships with them and, in doing so, modelling the kind of behaviours identified above.

Reflective prompts:

What was your experience of moving from being a social worker to a practice supervisor like? Did you learn anything useful that now supports you in your role?

Are there any areas of your work as a practice supervisor you have not yet had the chance to reflect on that would be useful to pause and take stock of now?

Have you had sufficient opportunity to think about what it means for you to model being a 'good leader' as a practice supervisor?

Do you find certain elements of being a 'good leader' come to you more easily than others? Are there any aspects of leadership where your skills are not as developed and where you might need more support?

Might your response to leadership or ability to work in this area be influenced by any of the social GRRRAACCEEESSS? Similarly might any of the social GRRRAACCEEESSS influence how staff you supervise respond to you as a leader?

The importance of building a team culture as a practice supervisor

Being a ‘good leader’ also requires practice supervisors to consider team dynamics as a whole and what kind of team identity or culture they want to develop. As well as focusing on developing individual practitioners, practice supervisors need to consider how they build and maintain team identity.

A positive and responsive team culture is one in which peers support each other, can promote shared knowledge and skill development, joint ownership of goals and vision, and emotional resilience.

In order to facilitate this, it’s important for practice supervisors to clearly articulate what kind of team culture they want to build and why this matters. This means they need to work collaboratively with team members in order to seek their perspectives.

A simple and effective way in which practice supervisors can initiate this process is by using a public narrative approach, as seen in figure 4.

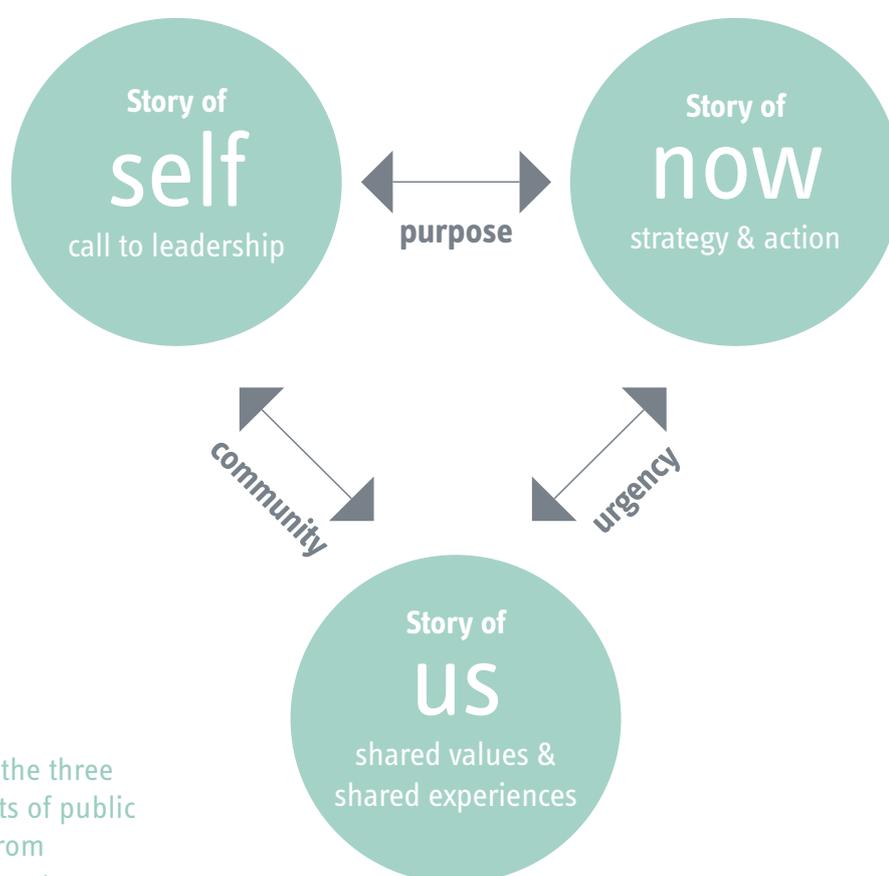


Figure 4 – the three components of public narrative from www.khub.net

Public narrative is described as: ‘a leadership practice of using personal values to galvanise others into action through story-telling’ (NHS, 2006; 2017).

Story of self

Sharing the story of self involves telling your team what you want to achieve (e.g. excellent social work practice), how this connects with your values, and why this is important to you. The story of self helps your team to see: ‘the values that define who you are – not as abstract principles, but as lived experience’ (Ganz, 2011, p283). For example, you might want to share a story about the kind of social worker you are, and how this connects with the kind of practice you want the team to deliver to children and families.

Story of now

The story of now looks at a current issue or situation and identifies what needs to develop or change. Ganz argues that: ‘stories of now articulate the challenges we face now, the choices we are called upon to make, and the meaning of making the right choice’ (p286).

For example, you might ask your team for their views on, and commitment to, practising in trauma-attuned ways with children and families, and what the children, families and team need to be able to do this.

Story of us

The story of us outlines the collective vision the team wants to build. Developing a story of us is important because, in the words of Ganz: ‘Organizations that lack a “story” lack an identity, a culture, core values that can be articulated and drawn on to motivate’ (p285). For example you might ask: what kind of team do we want to be? How will we work towards what we want to achieve? What is our shared vision and how will we know if we are living up to it?

Reflective prompts:

Can you see any ways in which you might use public narrative to shape and influence the kind of team culture you want to build?

What kind of team culture would it be helpful to build in your team, and what aspects of the current team dynamics you would like to change?

How would it feel to communicate this transparently to your team and enlist their support and views?

Supporting practice supervisors to be effective in role

In the busy and challenging contexts of child and family social work practice, everyone needs support to thrive. Learning from practice supervisors who have participated in the PSDP suggests that it's important for organisations to develop a number of strategies that support them to be effective in role, and equally important that they feel able to ask for such strategies to be put in place if they don't already exist.

These may include:

testing out new ideas and sharing learning within the organisation	providing regular, reflective supervision sessions to discuss challenges, test out ideas and receive developmental feedback
meeting regularly with other practice supervisors to share challenges and build a network of support that can contribute to consistent practice and shared ownership	modelling reflection, self-care and emotional literacy throughout the organisation.

Conclusion

Throughout this knowledge briefing we have emphasised the importance of practice supervisors providing emotional containment and emotionally-literate, curious and reflective supervision.

In conclusion, it is useful to re-emphasise their importance as a bridge between children and families, social workers and the wider organisation.

If practice supervisors are supported to successfully make the transition from social worker, to prioritise and develop skills in emotionally-literate, curious and reflective supervision, and to consider how emotional containment can be built into all aspects of their role to achieve a positive team culture, they are likely to be able to further extend their reach and better champion excellent social work practice.

In so doing, they can arguably take their place as: 'leaders who are visionaries, who act as role models and who inspire practitioners in contexts of turbulence and uncertainty' (Tafvelin et al, 2014, in Ruch and Maglajlic, 2018, p4).

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