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Senior
Managers'
Briefing



PSDP - Resources and Tools: Developing a culture of excellent social work practice



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This short briefing is written specifically for senior managers and strategic leads and provides summary information about:

- > the need to have a clear vision of excellence and practice model integrated throughout the entire organisation
- > building an organisational culture which supports practice supervisors to develop leadership skills.

1. The importance of having a clear vision of excellence and practice model integrated throughout the entire organisation

In order to provide an excellent standard of support to children and families, organisations must have a clearly articulated practice framework which is adopted by all staff within the service. It is important to ensure that other agencies and professionals working with the family in the wider system share the same approach to excellence. An ongoing focus on relationship-based practice, alongside a well thought through and evidence-informed practice model, is an important means of achieving this, led from the front by senior managers and practice supervisors. Most current models are based on relational work, underpinned by evidence-informed methods such as Motivational Interviewing, systemic family therapy and attachment theory. It does not matter what the model is, but all parts of the organisation must have the same understanding and approach in working with families, from the top of the organisation to the frontline practitioner (Stanley, 2019). There needs to be an expectation in the organisation that practitioners are not just co-ordinators of services but agents of change themselves. Whichever practice framework is adopted this should be underpinned by respect for diversity and equality, promotion of social justice and economic wellbeing and the profession's ethical principles.

Senior leaders must retain a focus on the quality of practice with children and families rather than on frequent service reconfigurations. Senior leaders need to constantly check whether practice supervisors and managers know what excellent practice looks like. In order to do so they must triangulate information from audits, observations, compliments, complaints and feedback from children, young people and families to ensure there is clear line of vision on what the quality of practice is like across the service. If standards of practice or coherence with the practice model is diminishing senior leaders need to recognise and acknowledge this, and address it promptly.

Effective practice needs to be celebrated at an individual level with direct work being acknowledged e.g. staff awards, in staff bulletins or in personal communication from senior leaders. Sharing positive practice is an important aspect of learning and development for the organisation and the concept of holding [Serious Success Reviews](#) to celebrate and learn from excellent social work practice is becoming increasingly popular. There is a growing interest in Appreciative Inquiry nationally which in addition to celebrating positive practice in teams can also be used as part of auditing process or whole service celebration events.

There must also be a sustained focus throughout the organisation in supporting core practice skills and tools in:

- > assessment (including genograms, timelines, chronologies and eco-maps)
- > analysis (with a clear focus on analysing strengths and risk)
- > outcome focused planning.

Consequently, the professional development pathway needs to support the development of skills in practice methodology, alongside training on how to do the core skills of social work (and refreshers). The need to develop high-quality genograms, chronologies, assessments, analysis and plans should be an expectation throughout the service. Any request for resources or information supplied to decision-making forums should include genograms and chronologies as the norm. Similarly, any request for placement to senior managers should be accompanied by an updated assessment and outcome-focused plan.

Senior leaders must also ensure that the organisation:

- > Has a development pathway highlighting the range of training and development opportunities from the Assessed and Supported Year in Employment to Director of Children's Services. This should make explicit what good practice looks like at each stage of social worker's and practice supervisor careers, set against relevant Knowledge and Skills Statements.
- > Requires all senior managers and leaders to access training on the practice model so that they are able to lead the practice framework from the front. Alternatively, the organisation should build some form of management briefings built into the development pathway so that throughout organisation everyone talks about practice with children and families in same way.
- > Has a focus on innovations which are robustly evaluated to ensure practitioners spend less time in front of their computers and more time with families. For example, some organisations have streamlined recording and planning processes to create more time for direct work.

2. Building an organisational culture which supports practice supervisors to develop leadership skills

Senior leaders should encourage and support practice supervisors to be ‘leaders of practice’ who are passionate about social work and believe that the social work makes a difference to vulnerable children and families. They should have the skills to convey the meaningfulness of the work to others and in doing so, motivate and sustain practitioners in times of challenge and austerity. Senior leaders need to build an organisational culture that allows these elements of leadership to flourish from front line management to the most senior managers. This requires:

- > Robust recruitment of practice supervisors and managers who can lead as well as manage, who are emotionally intelligent and self-aware and are mindful of their impact on others. Monitoring and taking action to counter any disparities relating to which groups of people gain promotion in line with equality legislation. Recruitment strategies such as value based interviewing approaches can be helpful here.
- > A clear leadership pathway with high quality learning opportunities and a focus on succession planning for practice supervisors’ professional development. These development opportunities should balance strengthening practice knowledge alongside leadership and supervisory skills.
- > High quality reflective supervision for practice supervisors as well as opportunities for peer support and learning and a focus on wellbeing.

Senior managers have a responsibility to model leadership behaviours by:

- > Communicating a clear vision which chimes with social work values and the meaning practitioners and managers get from their work (constantly linking this improving the lives of our vulnerable families).
- > Providing a containing and motivating environment in which senior managers' behaviour and communication strategies reflect the principles of relationship-based practice, social justice and respect for diversity.
- > Being highly visible – senior leaders need to be seen to be listening and taking on board what frontline and other managers are saying (by meeting staff through forums, webchats, joint visits, and team meetings) and using this to develop their thinking about service changes.
- > Are involved in complex decision making about work with children and families, having close contact with the front line and providing the impression that 'we are all in it together'.
- > Are involved in providing direct feedback about excellent practice giving specific and targeted reasons for the praise.
- > Creating a culture in which feelings are not dismissed, for example making clear that practitioners and managers can feel sad or angry about their families and these emotions should be discussed.

It is important that senior leaders recognise the contribution which Principal Social Workers can play as practice leaders and champions of social work within the organisation. *Working Together* (2018, p11) highlights that Principal Social Workers: 'have a key role in developing the practice and the practice methodology that underpins direct work with children and families'. Principal Social Workers are, therefore, well placed to support senior leaders in ensuring that the leadership behaviours identified above flourish within the organisation.

References

Stanley Y (2019) *Social Care Commentary: using models of practice successfully*. Ofsted blog article. Available online: www.gov.uk/government/speeches/social-care-commentary-using-models-of-practice-successfully

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