



# PSDP—Resources and Tools: Having courageous conversations as a practice supervisor

## Introduction

Practice supervisors often have to initiate courageous conversations. These are:

‘... conversations which are associated with some form [of] emotion... [These] are features of many social workers’ daily routines. In supervision, such conversations are typically required to address issues of supervisees’ professional competence, ethical issues or the supervision relationship and / or process.’ (Davys, 2019, p78)

Having a courageous conversation with a supervisee requires practice supervisors to be transparent about their role and explicit that one of the functions of supervision is to hold practitioners to account for their work. We are mindful that this always takes place in an organisational environment that shapes the issues that arise. Courageous conversations are, therefore, challenging to get right, and a highly skilled activity.

Many practice supervisors who have attended the PSDP identify this as an area they would like to develop further. They also highlight that when they are facing challenges around high workloads, or when the issues they need to explore in a courageous conversation are complex, there can be a temptation to put them off or not have as detailed or as honest a conversation as they would like.

This learning tool presents ideas and models to guide you in:

**Introducing the concept of courageous conversations as part of a supervision agreement discussion with a supervisee.**

**Preparing what you want to achieve from a courageous conversation (reflecting on what feedback you want to give and receive and why).**

**Thinking about how you might structure a courageous conversation and support a supervisee to develop their work further.**

## Laying down the foundations for courageous conversations using supervision agreements

The first principle to remember is that, as a general rule, courageous conversations work better if they take place within a supportive, relationally-based supervisory environment that is built on trust. One of the most important ways of building trust between a supervisor and supervisee is to talk through a supervision agreement together at the start of your working relationship.

Davys (2019) highlights that supervision agreements cover important matters that lay the foundations for any subsequent courageous conversations that might need to take place in supervision. She identifies three essential areas that need to be discussed when agreeing how you will work with a supervisee:

1. The expectations of both parties. This includes clarifying what the role and expectations of both supervisee and supervisor are. Discussing this allows the supervisor to clarify that, in addition to support and guidance, there may be occasions when constructive or developmental feedback is necessary.
2. Acknowledging how difference, diversity and conflict will be addressed in any such conversations.
3. Setting out how feedback will be managed.

[You can read the full paper on courageous conversations by Davys.](#)

Engaging in discussion about these three areas provides you with an opportunity to highlight to a supervisee that you may, at some point, in your role as practice supervisor need to give them feedback which they find difficult to hear or receive. It is also an opportunity to hear about the experiences of the supervisee and receive feedback. This is a valuable discussion to have with a supervisee at any point in your working relationship, even if you were not able to develop a supervision agreement when you began working together.

You can access a tool called '[Using supervision agreements](#)' in the '[Your journey to being a practice supervisor](#)' section of the website, which provides more information about this.

## Thinking about courageous conversations using the idea of a psychological contract

Burnham (2005) uses the term ‘warming the context’ to highlight the importance of laying the foundations or setting the context for discussion when working with families. This can also be useful when thinking about practice supervisors holding courageous conversations with supervisees. Warming the context for courageous conversations in supervision can be promoted through:

Setting out the basis for such conversations, and the importance of feedback more generally, within discussions about supervision agreements (which is the focus of the last section).

Paying careful attention to how you introduce a courageous conversation with your supervisee, allowing you to set out how you would like to work together during the conversation, and explaining why giving this feedback is important and what you hope to achieve.

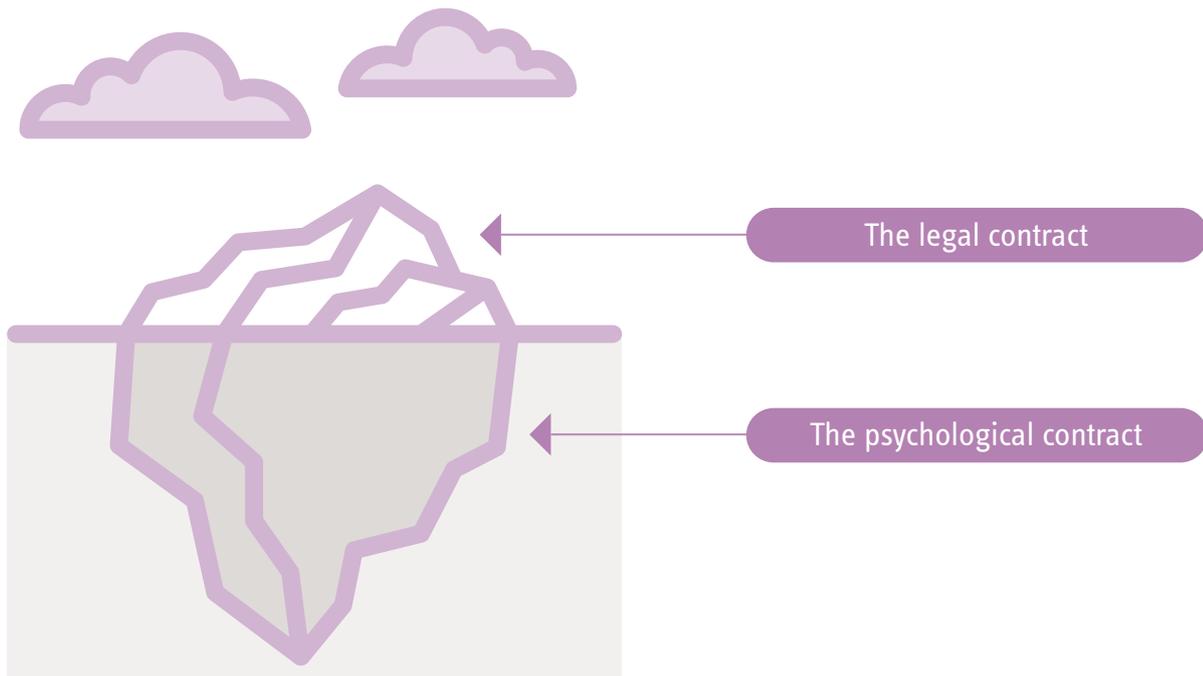
Using the idea of a *psychological contract* to help you reflect on any unspoken assumptions that you or your supervisee may have about your work together, which might get in the way of hearing each other’s views.

Rousseau (1989) proposes that in contrast to any legal contract, the psychological contract is concerned with those unwritten and often unacknowledged beliefs, perceptions, expectations and informal obligations expected by one party of the other.

The need to have a courageous conversation may be prompted by a belief that the psychological contract between a practice supervisor and supervisee has been violated. Alternatively, if expectations and roles are not clear, the act of engaging in a courageous conversation may itself prompt a supervisee to feel that their own psychological contract with the supervisor has been breached. This being so, the more expectations are surfaced and acknowledged earlier on (for example during discussions about the supervisory agreement), the better the chance of avoiding conflict arising from misconceptions or unmet expectations.

An iceberg is often used to illustrate the difference between the two contracts with what's underneath the water being the stuff of psychological contracts.

**Figure 1 – The psychological contract**



The nature of the psychological contract is person-specific and can be difficult to manage because beliefs and expectations can be fluid and fragile. Equally, psychological contracts are rarely explicitly discussed in supervision, despite the fact that they can exert enormous influence on our ideas and expectations about how each person should behave or respond to feedback.

It is, therefore, useful to spend some time reflecting on the degree to which your own expectations of a supervisee, as well as their response to you (particularly if you engage in a courageous or challenging conversation with them), might be shaped

by your psychological contract, and how that contract links to wider social and cultural beliefs, norms and practices.

Reflecting in this way can be helpful in identifying why it is important for you, in terms of your own personal or professional ethics and values, to have a courageous conversation. This can then inform your thinking and preparation about what feedback you want to give, why it is important to you, and how you might structure the conversation. You might find it useful to explore the idea of the psychological contract as part of a courageous conversation.

## Being aware of diversity, difference, conflict and power in courageous conversations

By its nature, the supervisory relationship is one of inherent power dynamics at play. As such, acknowledging diversity, conflict and power within supervision agreements is a necessary starting point (Davys 2019), as is thinking about power and difference within any courageous conversation.

For practice supervisors this includes thinking about the different bases of power located in their role and how these differ to the power held by their supervisees.

Whilst published many years ago, the classic work on the bases of social power by French and Raven (1959) and Raven (1965) remain influential and widely used. These publications note six different bases of power and whilst these may not ‘tell the whole story’ they provide a starting point for practice supervisors to think about the different sources of their power:

Reward power (a practice supervisor’s ability to reward supervisees in a variety of different ways).	Coercive power (the ability to invoke sanctions if needs arise).	Legitimate power (power vested in the practice supervisor by the organisation).
Expert power (a practice supervisor’s knowledge and skills base).	Referent power (in essence, power that comes from being liked).	Informational power (power that arises through the practice supervisor’s access to specific information that may not be available to the supervisee).

The supervisory relationship is also shaped by Burnham’s concept of the social GRRRAACCEEESSS (2013). The model describes different aspects of personal and social identity (as applied to both the supervisor and the supervisee) and draws attention to the need for practice supervisors to be attentive to aspects of: gender, geography, race, religion, age, ability, appearance, class, culture, education, ethnicity, employment, sexuality, sexual orientation and spirituality, in all their supervisory conversations.

It is useful to spend time mulling over the degree to which different bases of power and the social GRRRAACCEEESSS might influence both your own perception of and response to the issues presented by the supervisee, and their response to you if you raise these within a courageous conversation. These ideas might also be useful in helping you to structure some of your feedback or to think about the approach you want to take with an individual supervisee.

## Introducing three models for structuring a courageous conversation

Preparation is key when thinking about how you structure a courageous conversation. We recommend that, prior to having any courageous conversation in person, you spend time working through [this difficult conversations preparation sheet](#) developed by the Triad Consulting Group. The questions take you through a process of reflecting on a number of aspects of the challenging situation from the perspective of both you and your supervisee.

Information about this and two other models for courageous conversations is provided below to help you think further about how you might structure one.

## A. The three questions framework

The first framework is proposed by Davys (2019) who suggests that in approaching a courageous conversation it is helpful to focus on three broad questions to shape the discussion. This involves seeking clarity about:

### 1. What's the issue?

This conversation explores what the perspectives of the supervisor and supervisee are, allowing the supervisor to name the issue and highlight why it matters.

### 2. What's the desired outcome for each of the parties?

This conversation explores what the supervisee and supervisor each think would be the best way to resolve this issue. This allows the supervisor to talk explicitly about what needs to change and the supervisee to suggest their own solutions.

### 3. What's the desired outcome for the relationship?

The focus here is on how the courageous conversation impacts the supervisory relationship and seeks to identify ways in which the relevant parties can work together positively in the future.

Davys (2019) also highlights one other additional point to remember when preparing for a courageous conversation: while you may have spent a good deal of time thinking about the issue, the substance of the conversation may come as a surprise to the other person, so it may be important to give them the opportunity to reflect on what you are going to raise or what you have raised.

## B. The three conversations framework

The Triad Consulting Group (Triad 2018) suggests that preparation also involves thinking about three different levels that courageous conversations can operate at. These levels can also be useful to inform how you structure the discussion itself:

### 1. The 'what's happened' conversation

In this conversation the practice supervisor sets out to explore the different positions of both the supervisee and the supervisor, and to tease out any different contributions by the parties (and others) in the development of the issue.

Making the distinction between intention and impact can be particularly useful here.

Some key questions might be:

What is the supervisee likely to say / saying about what has happened?	How might / does this differ from my account?	What information am I relying on? What information is the supervisee relying on?
How might I have contributed to this situation? How has the other person contributed to the situation?	What is the intention underlying the supervisee's behaviour / position? What is the impact of this behaviour?	What are the intentions underlying my behaviour? What is the likely impact of this?

## 2. The 'feelings or emotions' conversation

Here, attention is focused on how the practice supervisor is feeling, how the supervisee might be feeling and what feelings might be usefully shared in order to better understand the issue from the perspective of each.

## 3. The 'identity' conversation

In this conversation, it may be useful to consider the following questions:

What impact could this conversation have on the supervisee's sense of professional and personal identity?

What might they worry about after the conversation?

How might the social GRRRAACCEESSS impact on this identity conversation for the supervisee and for me?

What does this conversation say about me and my professional and personal identity? Is there anything that worries me?

In preparing for a courageous conversation, the Triad model emphasises the importance of being clear about the purpose for having the conversation. And for - in this instance - the practice supervisor to take time to prepare an opening line (both when raising a matter and once there is some clarity around the issue or concern).



## C. Building a 'golden bridge'

Ury's (1991) work in the field of negotiation provides some useful points for holding courageous conversations. He advocates building a 'golden bridge' that potentially allows both parties to feel positive about the outcome of any negotiation. The key elements of building a golden bridge are:

<b>01</b> Be collaborative	<b>02</b> Be curious	<b>03</b> Allow people to save face	<b>04</b> Keep the process straightforward
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1. Being *collaborative* simply means making sure that at all times during any courageous conversation the practice supervisor ensures the supervisee / other person is fully involved and heard. This in essence sees practice supervisors drawing on some key practice skills by asking questions such as:

How about starting from how you see things?

So what do you think would be a useful way forward?

Building on what you said earlier...

2. In order to remain *curious*, use your skills in hypothesising to reflect on not only what has been said, but also to think about those factors that are often associated with workplace conflict: emotions, history, status, communication, and values.

3. Allowing people to *save face* includes acknowledging your personal responsibilities, being open to different positions, and appreciating and incorporating valid points raised by the supervisee.

4. *Keeping it simple* has three key components. Firstly, make sure your intended process is logical and easy to follow. Secondly, take each point in turn – resist the temptation to lump everything together. Thirdly, don't rush. Taking things slowly can often lead to a much better outcome.

## The importance of working collaboratively in a courageous conversation

Ury's ideas certainly have some resonance with the key skills routinely used by practice supervisors. In this section, we develop the point about working collaboratively as this can help build supervisees' motivation to change. In particular we highlight OARS (open questions, affirmations, reflective statements, and summaries – Miller and Rollnick 2013) from Motivational Interviewing.

Careful use of OARS in courageous conversations potentially enable practice supervisors to move the discussion from an interrogation to a conversation:

Open questions help to explore and clarify the supervisee's position.

Affirmations acknowledge the supervisee's strengths and assets at a time when other behaviours are being challenged.

Reflective statements introduce 'pauses' into the conversation so that the tone of the discussion moves away from a series of questions.

Summaries provide an opportunity to check whether or not both the practice supervisor and the supervisee agree the content of the conversation so far.

**Open  
questions**

**Affirmations**

**Reflective  
statements**

**Summaries**

Taking the AND rather than the BUT stance into the conversation (*So your position is xxxx AND mine is xxxx* sets a different tone to: *So your position is xxxx BUT mine is xxxx* – Stone et al 1999).

## Using the skills / will matrix in a courageous conversation

The skills / will matrix may be helpful in supporting a supervisee to suggest their own solutions to the issues you have raised in the courageous conversation, and to share your own ideas as practice supervisor (Landsberg 1996).

This tool requires the practice supervisor to think about the relationship between a practitioner's capabilities and skills in performing a task or role, alongside their 'will' or attitude, motivation, confidence and also maybe their personal feelings about completing the task.

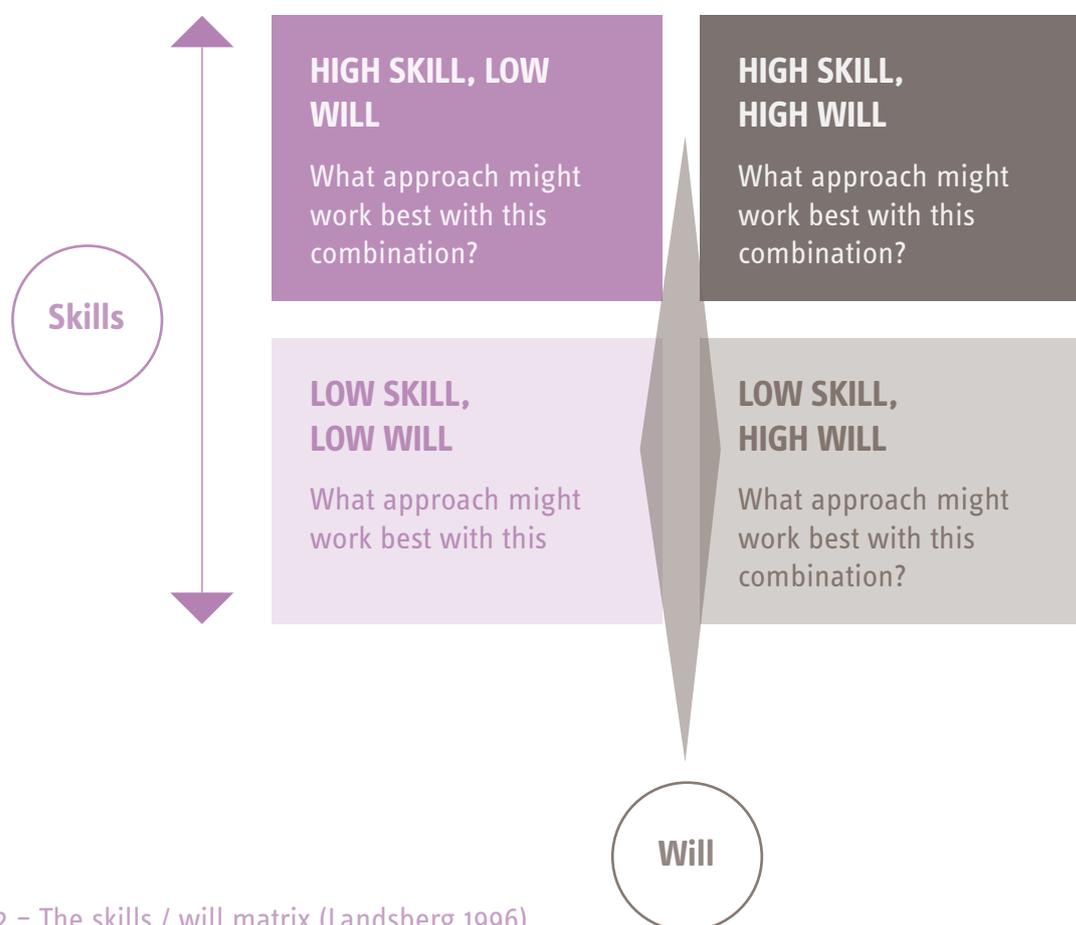


Figure 2 – The skills / will matrix (Landsberg 1996)

Different combinations may suggest different strategies to addressing a work-based challenge. For example, where a practitioner is low in both skill and will, some clear guidance, and clarity about expectations and direction may be necessary alongside some skills development work. And where a practitioner is low in skill but higher in will, targeted mentoring, rehearsal and other focused opportunities to build up the supervisee's skills base may be a useful way forward. Using this tool to prepare for a courageous conversation is helpful in allowing you to have considered the kind of support you are able to offer the supervisee in helping them address the issues you have raised.

The skills / will matrix might also be used to map a team or a service's readiness for a proposed change in (for example) workplace practices.

## Seeking support yourself before and after a courageous conversation

It is important to acknowledge that some courageous conversations can make practice supervisors feel uncomfortable. Positions may quickly become polarised. Humiliation, hostility or blame may feature, and the practice supervisor may be left questioning their actions. Advice and support should therefore be factored into any courageous conversation, particularly if it focuses on capability and performance concerns. Similarly, it is helpful to spend time in your own line management supervision or with a supportive peer reflecting on the issues you would like to raise in a courageous conversation, and rehearsing how you might want to give feedback. It is also helpful to ensure there is a space for you to check in or debrief with a line manager or peer afterwards, to allow you to decompress.

In summary, the key points for practice supervisors to consider when having courageous conversations are:

Good preparation for courageous conversations is important.

Remain curious about the other person's position and be mindful of both the power dynamics and the various social GRRRAACCEEESSSS.

Think about how positions differ with regard to:

- > what's happened
- > the feelings associated with the issue
- > what part self-identity may play in the conversation.

Draw on your practice skills.

Seek advice and support.

**Questions for practice supervisors to reflect on when preparing to have a courageous conversation:**

What can I do to remain curious during this courageous conversation?

What power dynamics - and which of the social GRRRAACCEESSS - do I need to be mindful of in this courageous conversation?

How might this conversation challenge the other person's identity as a practitioner / colleague / manager?

How might this conversation challenge my identity as a practice supervisor and as a person?

## Other ways you can use this tool

You could use the ideas presented in this tool to help you prepare for a courageous conversation with a supervisee in your own line management supervision.

You might also work collaboratively with peers to discuss the ideas contained within this tool in order to reflect on the dilemmas and challenges in having courageous conversations, and how you might further develop your skills in this area.

Practice supervisors also hold numerous other courageous conversations with both colleagues in other disciplines and agencies as well as in their own agency.

These might include: addressing different positions about how to proceed with a family situation, resourcing or threshold disagreements, worries about the introduction of a new organisational processes, or instances where a process of avoidance of an issue followed by accommodation within the team and / or the organisation has effectively condoned poor practice or some other concern.

You might also want to consider the relevance of this tool in helping you think about how to have courageous conversations in a range of other contexts.



**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.**

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