



PSDP - Resources for Managers of Practice Supervisors: Leading a learning organisation

Introduction

Working with children and families is a complex task. The body of research and practice knowledge on which children's social care is based is growing and changing all the time. One of the roles of social work organisations is to support individual practitioners to keep learning and developing their practice, and to provide opportunities to draw on the knowledge and skills of others in the best interest of children and families.

Child and family social work takes place within an ever-changing social and political landscape, requiring social work organisations to re-orientate themselves to respond to new challenges (McCulloch et al, 2018). Social work organisations can therefore not stand still. These organisations need to be ever-adapting and changing to meet the needs of the communities they serve. To do this requires practitioners, teams, managers and everyone in the organisation to be committed to learning and to keep learning.

Practice supervisors and their managers sit at the interface between the complexities of practice and the complexities of running a social work organisation. They have a critical role in helping practitioners to apply new knowledge and skills in their work and in feeding learning into the wider organisation to improve the response to children and families' needs (Bourn and Hafford-Letchfield, 2011).

This knowledge briefing explores how managers of child and family social work services can support learning by individuals, teams and the organisation as a whole. There is a particular emphasis on how managers of practice supervisors can help to develop and support this important role within an organisation that is committed to learning. Throughout the briefing there is a focus on the role of supervision in supporting learning and the role of line managers of supervisors in supporting supervisors to do this well.

Drawing on examples from the sector, the briefing:

- > explores some definitions of a learning organisation used in various fields
- > examines the barriers to learning in social care and suggests how middle leaders might create a culture of learning
- > describes some activities and actions that middle leaders might take to generate and disseminate new knowledge.

After each section, there are some reflective questions to help you think through how this applies in your organisation.

What is a learning organisation?

Organisations are made up of people and of the culture, structures and processes which establish how the people in the organisation work, and what work they do. This includes the structures and processes around learning and professional development and the environments in which these take place. Usually we think of learning as something that people do, rather than organisations as a whole. But in order for individuals to put their learning into practice, often the organisation they work in needs to adapt also. This means there must be processes in place to refine and develop culture and structures in response to learning by individuals, teams and services within the organisation.

Being a learning organisation is identified as one of the five key pillars of organisational resilience for social work organisations (Research in Practice et al, 2020a).

Core features of a learning organisation

> Beliefs, goals and objectives are shared and underpinned by social work values.

> An evidence-informed approach to improving practice and managing change, with input from practitioners, is encouraged.

> Individuals, teams and the organisation itself reflect and learn from experience.

> Problems provide learning opportunities rather than individual blame or scapegoating.

(Research in Practice et al, 2020a)

There are a range of definitions of learning organisations that describe some other important features, which highlight some key points relevant to applying these ideas in organisations working with children and families:

1. Learning as an organisational value

A learning organisation values learning because it is a tool for continuous improvement that enhances outcomes and helps to achieve a shared vision, not in order to defend its current practices from criticism, or to satisfy external regulators (Menear et al 2019, Lowe and Plimmer, 2019). This requires organisational leaders to:

> Show **humility**, admitting the possibility that the current way of doing things may not be the best.

> Generate a **culture that promotes curiosity and critical reflection and provides the time and space for reflection** by everyone within the organisation.

> Encourage a **range of voices to make themselves heard** and provide support for those who are not usually listened to. An inclusive approach recognises the value of knowledge and experience held by a wide variety of people within and outside of the organisation (Lowe and Plimmer, 2019).

2. Learning as a driver for action

‘A learning organization is an organization skilled at creating, acquiring, and transferring knowledge, and at modifying its behaviour to reflect new knowledge and insights.’ (Garvin, 1993)

This definition of a learning organisation highlights that **learning is linked to action** – new insights lead to changes in behaviour and adaptation. These changes can be amending short term rules, but are more fruitful when **learning leads to changes in long-term norms** – the way that organisations understand the problem they are trying to solve, and their role in solving it (Olejarski et al, 2018). An example of this might be concerns about drift in child protection work, which could be addressed through changing the expected timescales for visits and review (short-term rules) or through a longer-term change in the emphasis put on providing ‘the right help at the right time’ as a key part of social work practice (a change in norms).

3. Moving from individual to collective learning

A learning organisation is an organisation in which individuals can pursue their own **personal mastery** and professional development. Personal mastery of the knowledge and practice underpinning the work lets people take charge of their own learning by giving them the tools to find and apply new knowledge on an ongoing basis (Senge, 1990). Confident and autonomous learners can support the organisation to learn by providing feedback and suggestions from their own experiences which have wider relevance across the organisation (Scott-Ladd and Chan, 2004).

Personal mastery alone is not sufficient. Individuals learn within teams, **generating and sharing knowledge** as they work alongside each other. In doing so, individuals and teams are encouraged to take **a system perspective**, looking outwards from their team to understand connections to the wider system (Senge, 1990).

4. Generating new learning

Learning organisations do more than just train their workforce, they learn from them too. They see **‘the ability to generate knowledge within the organisation as equally important as drawing on external sources’** (Salteit, 2004, pp76). This allows for learning to take account of the local and organisational context, and roots learning in the day-to-day experiences of practitioners (Jarvie and Stewart, 2018).

Learning can be generated from mistakes, or from responding to new developments. (Wilkinson et al, 2004). The experiences and voices of children and families, and of practitioners, needs to be intertwined with knowledge derived from data, from research and from ‘tacit knowledge’ held within the organisation itself (Rashman et al, 2009; Menear et al 2019). ‘Tacit knowledge’ is the, often unspoken, set of rules and assumptions that underpin how a person makes decisions or how an organisation operates, for example expectations about how meetings are organised and run (Eraut, 2004). In a learning organisation, new knowledge is deliberately created through an **environment of innovation and permission to try new things.**

5. How learning happens

Knowing how to learn is a skill that can be developed. We need to think about **how learning happens**, as well as what we are learning (Jarvie and Stewart, 2018). Traditionally, learning has been synonymous with training, a one-way process of communicating knowledge from experts to learners, but this isn’t the most effective way of either embedding or generating new knowledge. Learning happens as a result of reflection, of conversations and of putting learning into practice in real-work situations. This might be one-to-one conversations through supervision and coaching, or through group activities (Wilkins, 2017). Not everyone learns in the same way, and some people face bigger barriers to accessing learning materials and activities than others. It is important that learning programmes and activities are designed to take into account different approaches to learning. This might include visuals, audio or video as well as written materials and practical exercises.

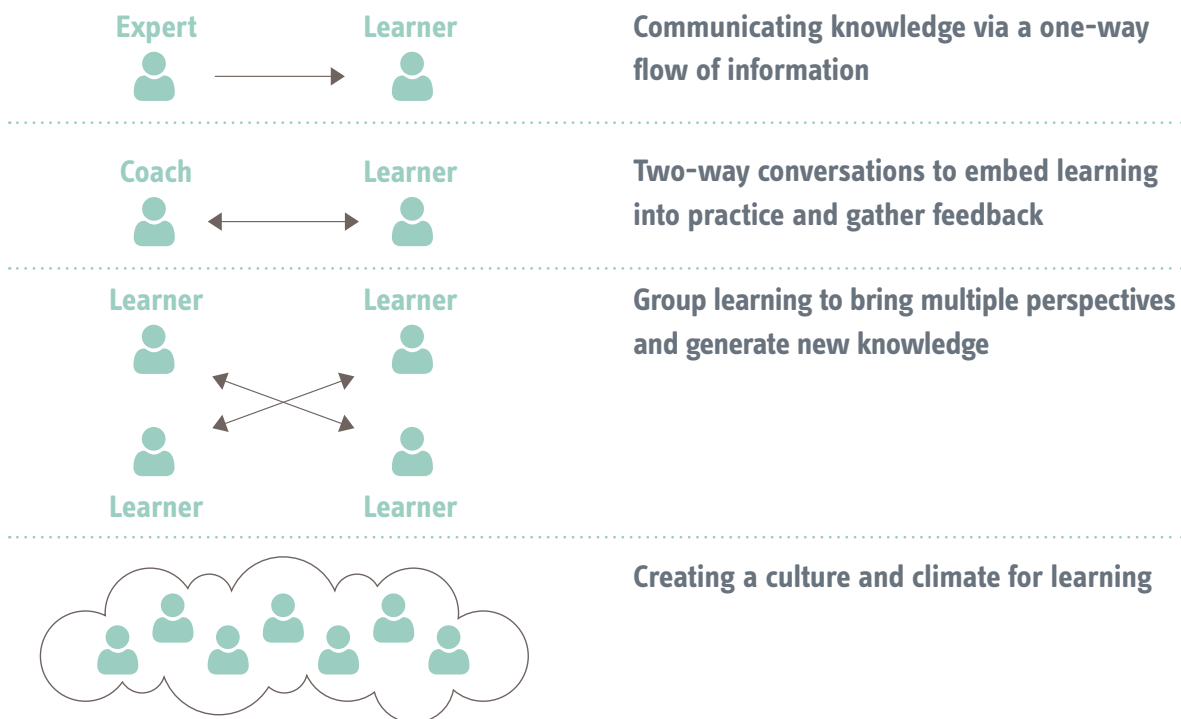


Figure 1: Communication flows and knowledge generation in different learning contexts

Reflective questions

- > What is your initial response to these themes? Does this approach to thinking about learning resonate with your own experience?
- > Is learning a core value of your organisation? How do you communicate that to your staff?
- > How can you work as a middle leader to promote these principles in your day-to-day work?
- > Can you identify examples of how learning has led to changes in your organisation?
- > Were they changes to short term rules, for example a change of process, or long-term norms, such as principles of practice?

Building a learning culture

Translating the principles of a learning organisation into practice within your workplace can be a challenge. The phrase ‘learning lessons’ has become a cliché in the wake of tragedies, yet subsequent serious case reviews observe the same patterns of mistakes and missed opportunities to help. This is not for lack of trying. Local authorities and Trusts publish briefings, hold workshops, change procedures and develop or adapt training programmes in efforts to bring about change. However, often, these attempts to embed learning are based on a flawed mental model of how people and organisations actually learn and change (Sidebotham et al, 2014).

Becoming a learning organisation takes time and deliberate effort to build the culture required to support changes in practice. This is particularly true if the publicly stated principles and values set out by the organisation are contradicted by the experiences of practitioners in their day to day work:

- > While practitioners might be offered training opportunities in principle, the emphasis on getting the work done can discourage individuals from taking up these opportunities.
- > The vision might encourage workers to innovate and try new things, but unless employees are confident that their manager will support them when things don't work out as hoped, they will not take these chances.

Leaders within organisations communicate their priorities to staff either formally, by publishing documents that set out their vision and strategy, or indirectly, through the decisions they make and the things they talk about. These decisions include how resources are allocated, what is measured for performance management and what parts of the job get the most attention in management discussions and supervision.

In social work organisations, this has often meant a focus on the completion of tasks and processes driven by statutory guidance, with management attention given to ensuring compliance with the timescales and to recording requirements (Munro, 2011). This focus establishes a relational dynamic between managers and those they manage which can be a barrier to learning. (When those being managed see their work and their priorities in a different way to management, they can feel they don't share the same values which can result in a defensive response.) (Haworth et al, 2018)

There are a number of ways that you as a middle leader can play your part in establishing an organisational culture that values learning:

Modelling learning

Seeing managers and leaders taking part in, and reflecting on, learning opportunities is an important signal that these activities are valued by the organisation. Learning from the implementation of Signs of Safety across a number of organisations highlights the importance of managers attending training and understanding the model they're asking workers to adopt (Munro et al, 2020).

Creating time and space for reflection

Making sure there are opportunities for staff to reflect on their work with peers and managers is a key leadership task in a learning organisation. It is important that this time is protected from the demands of working with families or meeting organisational requirements for recording or case management.

Uncovering barriers to learning

Each organisation will experience barriers to learning in different ways, depending on the local context and culture. Understanding the barriers to learning in your organisation is the first step towards building a more learning-friendly culture.

Supervision as part of learning culture

Supervision is a key conduit for learning from children, families and practitioners about the barriers they face and the support they need. It provides a forum for discussion and reflecting on learning to convert new knowledge into changes in practice.

Practice supervisors are vital to the development of a learning organisation, and they need opportunities to reflect together as a group, to develop their own practice and to highlight opportunities for organisational development based on what they have learnt through their job. Organisations developing a learning culture need to pay close attention to the development of high quality supervision and to the support and development of practice supervisors.

The role of the practice supervisor in promoting a learning culture within a team is clearly crucial. The PSDP has encouraged supervisors and team managers to take a different approach to supervision, using relationship-based principles to encourage reflection and practice improvement. Supervision should be a space for reflection, and this depends on there being a culture of trust to allow people to explore their practice and to acknowledge what they find difficult. Being a part of creating and sustaining this kind of environment is a learned skill and needs to be nurtured.

Supervisors are learning too. Just as social workers need their manager's support to access training, reflect on their learning with peers and try new things, supervisors need support from their management to provide this support to practice (Wilkins, 2018). This requires a time commitment from both the supervisor and supervisee to prepare for, take part in and act on any learning points from these meetings. Ensuring supervisors have sufficient capacity to perform these tasks well helps to maximise the opportunity for learning and professional development.

Reflective questions

- | | |
|---|--|
| > Do you recognise the feeling of disconnect between your professional values and the culture of your organisation? How does it feel? | > What do you think are the barriers to learning in your organisation? |
| > How are you supporting practice supervisors to develop their skills to enable reflection in supervision? | > Do you openly discuss things you have learned with your team? |

A whole-system approach to learning

‘Developing an authentic learning culture in any organisation requires incorporating shared, structured and repeatable processes where staff can actively and regularly participate in the analysis or “slow thinking” that is required to utilise and implement the practice approach consistently and effectively.’ (Munro et al, 2020, p 41)

Without further support from the organisation to practice new skills and get feedback on progress, one-off training on a particular issue is rarely enough to change behaviour. New knowledge is translated into practice when there are clear prompts to use and reflect on how that knowledge is implemented.

Supervision is a key conduit for supporting putting knowledge into practice, and is part of the process of moving from ‘knowing what to do’ – having the facts – to ‘knowing how to do it’ – being able to apply knowledge in specific circumstances and change actions as a result (Tsui et al, 2017). Discussing the minute detail of work with individual children and families can divert supervision away from practice development and reflection towards case management, but there is a need for social workers trying out new approaches to have a source of advice that can help them to think through how to apply that practice in complex cases. If this does not happen in

supervision, it is helpful to explore other avenues for supporting staff with emotional and professional support (Wilkins, 2017).

Learning through conversations with peers adds an important dimension, providing the space for staff to learn from each other based on their own experiences. This might be through team meetings, group supervision, communities of practice or other forums where staff can meet to discuss their work.

When there is a clear fit between what practitioners have learned and what they are expected to do in their role, they have opportunities to put their learning into practice. This includes processes and practice expectations that are aligned, and having the time and tools they need to apply their learning to their work. Where there is a clear link between training content and the strategic vision of the organisation, learners can see why what they have learned is important. Here, again, supervision can be an opportunity to identify and communicate barriers to putting learning into practice and shape changes to the wider organisation (Research in Practice, 2012).

Case study

As part of a project to embed relationship-based practice, Children's Services at Brighton and Hove City Council aimed to develop a culture of learning and reflection through changes to the Continued Professional Development Framework, amendments to senior practitioner roles committed to supporting practice development, and by providing opportunities for group reflection. These were structural changes that indicated a shift in emphasis for practitioners and managers away from process and towards professional development as a core aim of their work.

Putting this into practice required Children's Services at Brighton and Hove City Council to think about how practitioners find and embed new knowledge into practice. Having identified a need to improve practice with fathers, the project brought in external experts to explore theory and research in working with men. This was consolidated into practice through:

- > specific training materials aimed at practitioners
- > access to expertise from lead practitioners
- > support for managers to develop social work practice
- > changes to the resources that practitioners could access through commissioned services
- > adapting audit processes to ensure important aspects of practice were considered (Brighton and Hove, 2017).

Reflective questions

- | | |
|--|---|
| > Think about the supervision you receive and that you provide to others. How far is it used to support and embed learning in your organisation? | > How could you maximise the learning opportunities in supervision? |
| > What opportunities do people in your organisation have to come together to learn and discuss their work? | > Thinking about the Brighton and Hove example, what changes could you make to the wider organisational processes and structures to support practice supervisors to embed their skills? |

Generating new learning

Actively seeking out new perspectives is a core feature of a learning organisation. This allows for ‘emergent learning’, finding out things that you didn’t know you needed to know. Listening to different voices can be challenging. It raises issues we hadn’t previously considered and offers perspectives that challenge our assumptions about our own leadership practice and organisational culture.

Not everyone will feel comfortable speaking about their experiences or learning. Black, Asian and ethnic minority children, parents, social workers and supervisors in particular are more likely to have had long standing experiences of not being heard, or of speaking up about racism and being met with negative reactions (Mbarushimana and Robbins, 2015). Understanding why some practitioners and managers might not speak up when given the opportunity is crucial to building a safe and supportive environment where difficult issues of inequality can be addressed (Wainwright, 2009).

Taking concrete actions to listen to those with experience of discrimination sends an important message that you are willing to learn, and to help others learn, about social and economic inequality and discrimination. This might mean providing private sessions where those affected can speak directly to leaders, or supportive peer groups where experiences of discrimination can be shared with others who have had similar experiences (Reid, 2020; Wainwright, 2009). Leaders also have a role in ensuring that there is a respectful culture across the organisation as a whole in which to have safe conversations about discrimination (Mbarushimana and Robbins, 2015).

Reflective questions

- > How much time do you spend listening to staff about their experience at work or of working with children and families?
- > Think about the last time you heard something that was difficult to hear about your organisation. How did it make you feel? How did you respond?
- > How could you provide the space to listen to people in your organisation, or outside of it, who may not feel able to speak up or in front of others?

Learning from children and families

Practitioners are often focused on ensuring the child and family voice is included when thinking about their particular organisational context, strategies and strengths-based practice approaches. For greater benefit, it is important that learning from children and families also prompts thinking about wider service improvements (Atkinson et al, 2015).

Reflecting on practice with children and families (in particular their experiences and feedback) with practitioners in supervision can be a useful way of thinking about how to improve practice and organisational processes. And practice supervisors themselves need opportunities to reflect on what they have learned about children and families in order to raise organisational barriers and ideas for change with senior management (Bourn and Hafford-Letchfield, 2011).

Supervision also provides an opportunity to reflect on how well the practitioner listened and what else they might have done to learn more. Often, families that have the most experience of our processes and systems are the ones we find most difficult to hear from (Atkinson et al, 2015). And unconscious biases about families involved in the child protection system can hinder our ability to really listen to what we are being told (Gallagher et al, 2011; Bernard, 2020).

In the two examples below, managers and leaders played a key role in showing how much importance was placed on feedback from children and families by committing the resources to make it happen.

Case study

Camden Council brought together parents with experience of the child protection system to make recommendations for change. This group was supported by a parent advocate, herself with experience of child protection, and its members were given time and resources to explore their experiences alongside social workers and other practitioners. The conversations themselves were transformative as families and social workers saw each other in a new light, each with knowledge and expertise to bring to their shared goal of improving services for children and families (Camden Conversations, 2019).

In Stockport, a whole-system change to ways of working was supported by embedding researchers within social work teams to observe their practice, conduct interviews with children and families, and to undertake case file analysis. The practitioner researchers were recruited based on their personal attributes of inquisitiveness, adaptability and willingness to learn, rather than formal research experience. The practitioner researchers were able to give feedback iteratively to teams and to help them reflect on their practice, as well as see patterns across cases that pointed to insights about the wider system. (Panayiotou, 2017)

Reflective questions

- > How are the voices of children and families reflected in supervision processes?
- > What might you learn from talking to practice supervisors about the experiences of children and young people?
- > How often do staff training and organisation-wide events include hearing from people with lived experiences?
- > Where in your organisation are there people with the skills to encourage participation and feedback?
- > How might you use those skills to listen more routinely to learn from children and families?

Learning from practice

Reviews of work with individual children and families focus on what went wrong and seek to attribute responsibility for failure. Looking for a person or organisation to blame rarely provides the information we need to stop a problem happening again. Undertaking reviews with this attitude of blame immediately erects a barrier to learning from these events, as people feel defensive and the need to protect themselves from criticism (Munro, 2011).

More often than being a case of a 'bad apple', poor practice or failures to provide families with the right help at the right time are a result of poor systems and processes that get in the way of effective practice. Understanding how systems help or hinder practice, and asking *why* failures happen rather than whose fault they are, can help to improve future practice.

Appreciative inquiry seeks out good examples of practice that the organisation wants to replicate more widely and helps other teams and services to learn about how to achieve success. This is not just about celebrating the fact that a success happened, but about understanding how and why so it can be repeated in other circumstances. This approach can be used in learning from individual cases, in supervision and in training.

Case study

In Bexley, appreciative inquiry and learning from success was part of a long improvement journey from an inadequate Ofsted rating to an outstanding one. As part of that work, the authority now undertakes family practice reviews of casework that has gone well to mirror the effort and resource put into finding out what went wrong in safeguarding practice reviews (Clements et al, 2019). One output of this was a book of short stories from the field in which practitioners and managers share positive accounts from their professional lives. Bexley encouraged practitioners in other authorities to read it and use it as a tool for reflection (Tiotto and Reeves, 2017).

Reflective questions

- > What positive story would you tell about your own work and the work of your teams?
- > How might you use the Bexley example to encourage reflection on practice in your organisation?

Conclusion

The ability to learn, as individuals, teams and organisations, is crucial to being able to respond to changing circumstances and to ensure that we continue to grow in our social work or management practice. Training is not sufficient to support learning. It needs to be accompanied by changes to management practice and be the subject of conversations that let us explore what our new knowledge means to us and how it might change what we do. Middle leaders have a key role to play in encouraging this environment, by modelling and signalling the importance that the organisation puts on ongoing professional development.

Learning organisations are not just environments where individuals can learn, they must also have systems and structures in place for generating new learning by seeking out new sources of knowledge and experience, and by listening and responding to the insights that come from those conversations.

Creating a culture in which knowledge can emerge requires middle leaders to provide time and resources for practitioners, teams and practice supervisors to get together and talk about their practice, and to establish behaviours that ensure everyone's voice is heard.

Key messages

- > Learning happens all the time, not just in formal training.
- > Organisations promote a learning culture by dedicating time, space and resources to workforce development in all its forms.
- > Learning is a two-way process and organisations need to be alert for opportunities to learn from children and families and from practitioners, learning from both mistakes and examples of good practice.
- > Making an effort to listen to marginalised voices can generate new insights and knowledge, which takes skill and demands paying attention to the power dynamics within the organisation and wider society.
- > Supervision is a key conduit for learning from practice and children and families, and for communicating to practitioners the value placed on learning. Systems and processes that support practice supervisors to reflect on their role and what they are learning from practice helps to open opportunities for generating new knowledge within the organisation.
- > Managers can set the tone for how to learn by identifying and removing barriers to learning, modelling a commitment to professional development, and by listening and responding to feedback from practitioners.
- > In a complex environment, there is a need to make room for unexpected learning to emerge. Opportunities for group reflection and self-directed communities of practice can facilitate this.

Summary reflective questions:

- > How do you as a middle leader model a commitment to professional development?
- > How might you share what you have learned recently with those you manage?
- > How well do you understand the barriers to learning in your organisation?
- > How does your organisation support practitioners to learn from children and families and from each other, as well as from research and other sources of expertise?
- > When communicating with those you manage, how much time do you spend talking rather than listening?
- > How much of your management activity supports embedding key points from learning into practice?
- > Thinking about your answers to the above questions, would you say there's a culture of learning in your service? What about the wider organisation?

Further reading

If you want to think in more detail about how you can put the messages from this briefing into practice, you might find it useful to work through the activities and reflective questions in the Social Work Organisational Resilience Diagnostic tool and workbook (SWORD). This resource has been designed to support leaders in exploring the organisational culture and leadership behaviours within their own organisation. It includes a survey that can be conducted with staff and a workbook to plan interventions to improve any identified areas for development. The survey can be used as a form of Social Work Health Check and can help with identifying barriers to learning in your organisation (Research in Practice, 2020).

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