



PSDP–Resources for Managers of Practice Supervisors: How relationship-based and reflective are you as a middle leader?

Introduction

The terms relationship-based practice, reflective practitioners and reflective supervisors are widely recognised and referred to in social work circles. In comparison, references to relationship-based *management* and reflective *managers* are far less common. The recognition of the gap between relationship-based and reflective practice, and relationship-based and reflective management has acted as an important impetus for the creation of the PSDP: Supervising the Supervisor programme.

This new CPD (continuous professional development) course, funded by the Department for Education, supports managers of practice supervisors to consider how they can promote a positive culture of supervision in their organisation, and is committed to supporting the development of relational and reflective approaches in social work *management* practice.

Systemic perspectives underline how parallel processes operate in organisations, i.e. if in your leadership and management role you are committed to practitioners being relationship-based and reflective, then it is crucial that you yourself model such behaviours. Helping managers to understand the valuable contribution of parallel processes to organisational wellbeing is a central part of this learning tool and of the PSDP: Supervising the Supervisors programme.

This tool invites you to engage with key ideas to develop your understanding of relational and reflective management approaches. The reflective exercises / scenarios are designed to help you apply these ideas to your management practice and to identify the skills you require to effectively implement this approach. As part of our understanding that management practice happens within a wider system, this tool complements two others: ['How relationship-based are you as a social worker?'](#) and ['How relationship-based are you as a practice supervisor?'](#)

Each tool has been adapted to respond to the different responsibilities associated with the distinctive roles of middle managers, practice supervisors and social workers. If you would like to read more about relationship-based practice please see the ['Practising relationship-based social work'](#) knowledge briefing, which provides more detail about the concepts and ideas in this tool.

How relationship-based are you?

A core challenge for managers, whether in frontline, middle or senior positions within an organisation, is the tendency for the emotional and relational aspects of their work responsibilities to be superseded by the immediacy of the everyday, invariably pressing, demands associated with management roles. Evidence of this phenomenon can be seen in managers reporting an absence of supervision that focuses on and models a relational and reflective stance.

What we have learned through the PSDP is the crucial importance of *parallel processes*, i.e. that the extent to which social workers and practice supervisors are relational and reflective in their practice is closely aligned with the extent to which a relational and reflective stance is modelled by their line managers and senior colleagues. This is a golden thread running throughout the organisation.

We would go so far as to say that to expect you to be a relational and reflective manager and supervisor, if your context does not demonstrate and enable behaviours that are congruent with such a professional identity, is both unrealistic and unreasonable.

Reflective questions

- > What are your expectations of supervision?
- > How does your line manager / supervisor demonstrate a commitment to a relationship-based and reflective stance?
- > Do issues of equality and diversity get addressed and if so, who leads on these conversations?
- > When was the last time you had an opportunity to discuss the emotional impact of your work with your line manager / supervisor?

What makes a relational and reflective manager and supervisor?

Given our reference to parallel processes it will come as no surprise that the core elements identified in the ‘*How relationship-based are you?*’ tools for social workers and practice supervisors, referred to above, are also applicable to people in more senior management positions. Firstly, mirroring the uniqueness of the social worker / child and family or the social worker / practice supervisor relationships, the *uniqueness* of each senior manager / manager supervisory relationship must be held in mind at all times. No two supervisor-supervisee dyads, nor the dynamics they generate, are the same.

Whilst this requires supervisors to be constantly alert to the specific characteristics of a relationship, it is also what makes the work so varied, interesting and rewarding. It’s also important that an emphasis on the uniqueness of the relationships is not diminished on account of the *management* (as opposed to the practice) focus of the work under discussion. Ultimately the primary task of the organisation is to safeguard children and promote their wellbeing; awareness of the challenges of this work must be retained by personnel at all levels of the organisational hierarchy.

The challenge for social workers is to navigate in their practice their own personal and professional contexts, and those of the children and families they support. Whereas for practice supervisors and managers, the challenge is to manage the needs of practitioners alongside the demands of the organisation. Trying to reflectively respond to these competing, and not always compatible, demands from ‘above and below’ can be difficult.

Added to these complex dynamics is the pivotal place of cultural awareness and competence. It is widely recognised that managers of black and Asian people, and people of ethnic minority heritage are under-represented in leadership and management roles. Structural and societal inequalities (poverty, race, culture, religion, asylum seeker status, disability, sexuality, and so on) and personal and psychological experiences have an impact on individuals’ relational capabilities. Ensuring that issues of diversity are integral to your development of relationship-based and reflective knowledge and skills is essential.

A ‘**Developing cultural competence**’ tool originally developed for practice supervisors offers guidance on how to develop your cultural competence and complements the exercises included in this tool.

Reflective questions

- > When you prepare for a supervision session what do you think will be in the mind of your supervisee? What will they be thinking about you?
- > How do you ask after your supervisee's wellbeing? How do you think they experience this? Is it experienced as an authentic interest in them, or as a necessary procedural requirement of supervision?
- > What do you think affects how supervisees interact with you? How do issues of diversity inform your response to this question?
- > How can you make use of the dynamics that shape your relationship with your supervisees to support the work you are doing?
- > How confident are you in recognising and naming what is happening in the relationship you establish with your supervisees? What would help to build your confidence and competence?

Understanding relationship-based management dynamics

Four key psychoanalytic processes offer insight into common management and supervisory dynamics experienced by individuals in all roles, from practitioner to senior manager, within an organisation:

Transference

The unconscious re-enactment in a contemporary context of behaviours associated with earlier significant, usually parental, relationships. Being aware of the emotional responses being triggered by such interactions, and reflecting on (as opposed to reacting to) them is a core professional skill that practice supervisors need to acquire.

Splitting

Arises from the infant's earliest developmental task of reconciling oppositional feelings of love and hate, good and bad towards their primary carers. If the infant has carers who help them to manage these powerful feelings they will develop their capacity to accept that everyone has elements that are good and bad. In situations where this developmental experience has not been so fully resolved a more primitive 'split' response will prevail. For example, in supervision contexts, supervisees might only see their supervisor as interfering and 'bad', unable to acknowledge that they are in some respects 'good' and endeavouring to offer support to help the supervisee develop professionally.

Projection

Involves difficult, unbearable feelings – anger, fear, depression, shame, hate – being unconsciously relocated into another person, who may not always recognise them and can find themselves unexpectedly experiencing them or acting them out.

Reflective scenario

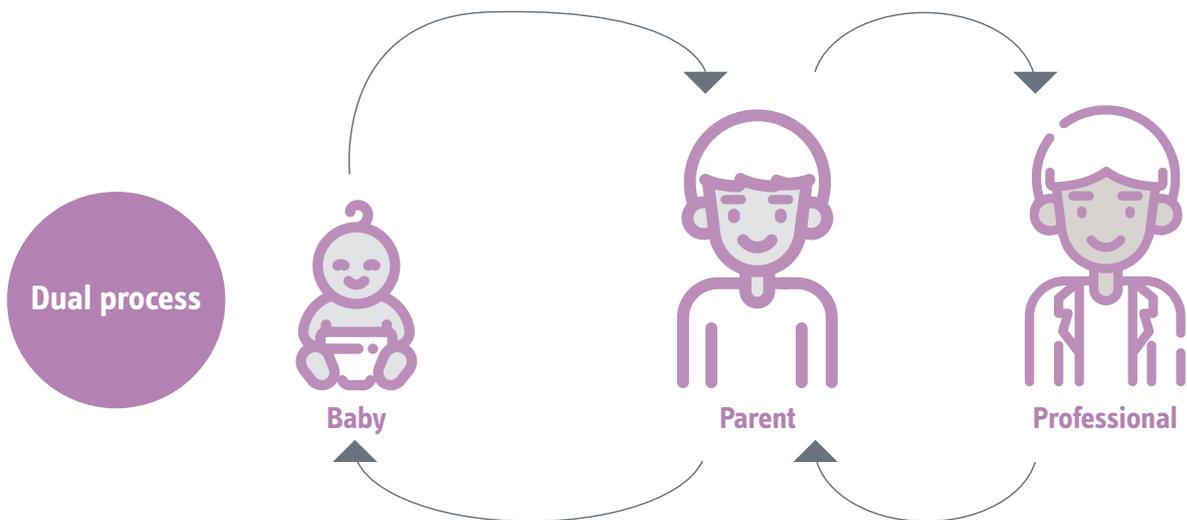
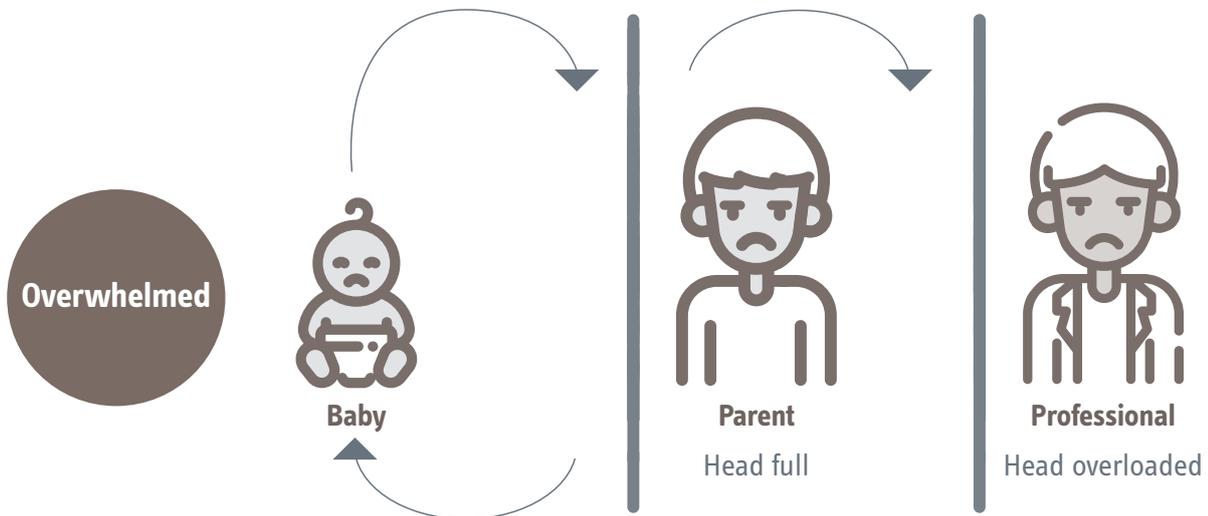
Think of a supervisee with whom you have a relationship you experience as challenging.

- > How do they make you feel?
- > How do their responses to you make you want to react?
- > How might you help them to understand how they perceive you?
- > What would enable them to recognise that you represent both 'good' and 'bad', i.e. you are supportive / caring but also have to exercise your statutory / controlling responsibility?
- > What part might a supervisee's culture play in how they express their emotions and relate to you?
- > Discussions related to race, privilege and power (within a profession that prides itself on foundations of social justice) can elicit primal feelings of fear, shame, anger, despair. Which of these emotions do you find most challenging in yourself and others? Do you recognise them as emotional dynamics in supervisory relationships?

Containment

A way of being that can address the difficult behaviours and relational dynamics that arise when transference, splitting and projective dynamics are operating. Acting as a container, and offering containment, is a healthy response to the need we all have for someone to help us process and manage (i.e. contain) difficult emotions, which is vital if the dynamics referred to above, are not going to be professionally overwhelming. The notion of being 'full up' or having a 'head too full', as the graphic below illustrates, is a helpful way of expressing feeling overwhelmed and needing containment. The idea of a container refers to someone who can help an individual process these difficult experiences. The diagram below offers a visual depiction of how the containment process does, and does not, operate.

Containment and the Supervisory Process



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

Received and understood

(Earle et al, 2017)

Reflective scenario and question

Here's a common response that illustrates how projective and split mindsets can take hold in professional contexts:

Significant resource cuts are attributed solely to senior managers, 'That hopeless, out-of-touch senior management team' – who are thought of as incompetent and oblivious to the impact of resourcing decisions on the wellbeing of their workforce.

- > How can you help supervisees to understand how projection and splitting are inaccurate, defensive and unhelpful responses to a situation?

A key feature of a supervisor's role is to offer containment to the people they supervise. All too often on the PSDP, we have heard practice supervisors expressing their concern that they do not receive this kind of support. Once the importance of this responsibility is fully realised, supervisors in middle management roles are more likely to offer it and also to recognise the necessity of having a containing space for themselves. The risk, if such a space does not exist (and this is all too common), is that supervisors are either unable to take on their supervisees' concerns (they put up a wall) or they inappropriately burden (overflow) supervisees with their own anxieties. In each scenario, the supervisor-supervisee boundary has been breached. No one within an organisation should consider themselves exempt from needing a containing space and relationship.

Reflective questions

- > What do you notice you do when you become anxious?
- > What helps you to manage your anxiety? Who do you go to?
- > When you experience someone as containing your anxiety:
 - a) What are they doing?
 - b) How does it change what you feel?
- > Is containment expressed differently in different cultural contexts?
- > How does being contained impact on your work with your supervisees?
- > Conversely, how does not being contained impact on your work with your supervisees?

Conclusion

So, coming full circle, we finish by re-emphasising the centrality of parallel processes and golden threads within healthy, reflective and relationship-based organisations.

Supervision is both an entitlement and a necessity for *everyone* in an organisation whose primary task is to support vulnerable children and families. We would go so far as to say that without it the competence and capability of an organisation's workforce will be seriously impaired.

Other ways you can use this tool:

Consider inviting your practice supervisors to share with you in supervision their experience of using the 'How relationship-based are you as a practice supervisor?' tool. How might such a conversation support the development of relationship-based approaches to management and practice?

You could use this tool alongside the 'Practising relationship-based social work' knowledge briefing in collaboration with your peers to think collectively about how you can develop a relationship-based and reflective approach to leadership and management.



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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