Professional supervision in the helping professions: purposes and types
© Tim & Juliana Smithells, 2011

Related to the topic of regulation of the careers profession in New Zealand/Aotearoa, Tim Smithells discusses professional supervision.

What is supervision?

Professional supervision in the helping professions (including, among others, counselling, psychology, the therapies and careers work) is a mutually agreed and often contracted relationship between two or more professionals working together in a positive and supportive process. Typically, quality supervision relationships are characterized by mutual respect, trust, honesty, fairness, humour, encouragement and teamwork. Relationships may be time-limited or ongoing. They may be structured or less structured.

Supervision often involves face-to-face meetings, where workable. Other modes of supervision include telephone consultations, computer or i-Phone communicating (Skype or chat rooms) and video or tele-conferencing. Supervision typically takes place on an agreed, regular basis.

Supervision often involves in-depth face-to-face discussion. It may also involve a mix of observation, written/verbal reports, presentations, video & case analyses and/or skill learning.

Some supervisors supervise ‘live’. This is extensively used in a number of countries overseas. Live supervision, known as ‘Extravision’ in New Zealand (Smithells & Lloyd, 1989) involves the supervisor attending a session where the supervisee works with one or more of his/her clients face-to-face. The supervisor participates as much or as little as needed in the session. After the session, the supervisor provides honest and supportive verbal feedback.

Supervision is not mentoring, coaching, training or line management. However, the competencies overlap to a greater or lesser extent. Some supervisors are also mentors. All supervisors and mentors are in some ways, role models for whom they supervise. Professional mentors may provide their protégés with a mix of training, support, education and supervision.

Who can a supervisor be?

Typically, supervisors are professionals who have more experience, knowledge and/or skills in their field than the professionals they supervise. That said, some types of supervision take place between professional equals. Sometimes, supervisors come from a closely related field.

What is the role of the supervisor?

The supervisor’s key task is to structure and facilitate the process of supervision, so the other professional(s) can grow and learn in a safe, supportive, affirming environment. With supervision between professional equals, both/all contribute to the process.
What training, if any, should supervisors have?

It is vital that supervisors have some formal training in supervision, several years of effective professional experience and have participated in effective supervision with a supervisor. Most professional associations in NZ/Aotearoa and overseas require members to undertake supervision on a regular basis, and to document dates and hours. Some associations require supervisors to have completed formal training in supervision.

What are the primary purposes of supervision?

Professional supervision is about the professional growth and development of the person(s) being supervised, about helping turn potentials into actuals, into reality. The research findings indicate that both the person being supervised and the supervisor grow over time in an effective supervision process.

The supervision process often provides opportunities for the professional being supervised to:

- Review, reflect on, value and evaluate their professional practice
- Identify areas of professional strength and new areas of professional interest
- Outline successful outcomes in work with clients, and explore what led to those successes
- Discuss practice & ethical issues and complex client situations and pinpoint solutions
- Work through any workload, time management and stress-related issues
- Become more professionally self-aware, confident, competent and interdependent
- Enhance development of new skills, tactics, methods and knowledge

Why is supervision essential in the helping professions?

As professional providers, once we accept a referral of a client, we have an ongoing ‘duty of care’ to that client until our contractual agreement to work with them is concluded. Duty of care here may involve working closely to an association’s Code of Ethics and published Professional Standards of Practice.

As supervisors, once we make an agreement to supervise another professional, we have an ongoing ‘duty of care’ to that professional until the supervision agreement is concluded or superseded.

What is a duty of care and why is it important?

A duty of care is a legal obligation, a requirement to do two things:

- Maintain standards of reasonable care in avoiding acts and omissions that might result in harm to a client (physical, mental, emotional or vocational harm). Acts include providing advice and making plans. Omissions include, for example, failing to provide a client with information they needed to know about the labour market before making a choice between options for their next step.
- Take reasonable steps (or precautions) to protect a client from foreseeable risk or harm. This might include advising clients strongly interested in a new occupation of, for example, low pay, low demand, tough working conditions or lack of opportunities to progress in that field.

Exactly the same duty of care applies to the professionals any of us supervises.
So if supervision becomes a requirement, what are the benefits?

**Safety** and **protection** are the first and most major benefits. With supervision in place, the research findings are quite clear. Clients are better protected, as is the professional providing services, as are the reputations of the professional and their professional organization.

**Ongoing support, professional growth** and the **strengthening of professional and ethical standards** are three of the other identified substantial benefits.

What types of supervision can members choose?

Research identified six commonly used types of supervision:

- **Face-to-face, 1:1, with a more experienced professional who has training and/or experience as a supervisor:** This is the option many professional people in the helping fields choose. In organizations, this may be provided at no cost.

- **Face-to-face, 1:1, in peer supervision:** Two professionals, typically from the same field, serve as supervisor for each other, taking turns and dividing the time equally between them. No fees are charged. Independent professionals tend to prefer this option.

- **Live supervision (Extravision):** The supervisor sits in on a session with a supervisee and a client working face-to-face. The supervisor participates as little or as much as needed, and provides supportive verbal feedback afterwards.

- **Face-to-face group supervision:** There are many versions of this form of supervision. Often, a trained supervisor will facilitate and work with a group of two to six supervisees, analyzing tricky or complex client situations or issues, generating alternative solutions, providing supportive feedback and providing needed information or advice. Sometimes, the supervisees generate an agenda, facilitate the supervision session and utilize the supervisor as an advisor or ‘sounding board’. In organizations, this may be provided at no cost.

- **Peer group Supervision:** Three or more experienced professionals, typically working face-to-face together, share the duties of facilitating the supervision process. Typically, they will work in the same helping field(s) and have roughly similar levels of experience. This type of supervision is not recommended for inexperienced professionals or those still completing qualifications. No fees are charged.

- **Supervision by telephone, email, tele- or videoconferencing, Skype or chat room:** Where professionals operate a mobile office, work and/or live in isolated towns/villages or in remote areas or operate in areas with inadequate/patchy broadband or mobile coverage, it is wise to consider supervision arrangements using one or more of the listed arrangements together with whatever face-to-face supervision is workable.

Tim Smithells is a registered psychologist, career practitioner and a CDANZ member. Tim Smithells has been formally trained in supervision, has trained supervisors, has supervised professionals across a wide range of helping fields since 1978, and has been involved at national level in NZ and overseas with professional regulation issues and the self-regulation of several helping professions.