

# Aiming for Safety: Exploring Potential Dynamics within Line Managed Supervision

Carolyn Cousins

The safety to explore practice in open and transparent ways, where a practitioner can admit uncertainty and admit their potential biases is not always easy to achieve in supervision. Creating a safe space for genuinely reflective practice can be particularly challenging where the person providing clinical supervision is also responsible for the performance management of the practitioner and organisational oversight of cases. The tension and risk created in these dual roles can result in a range of pre-emptive and unconscious dynamics from both supervisee and supervisor. This paper considers some of the dynamics with a short description of each tactic, its aims and effects, before considering ways to manage dynamics and develop safety and trust. The context of exploration is individual supervision within workplaces where individuals are in a supervisory relationship by virtue of the posts they hold. The ideas raised may still be applicable to other supervisory contexts.

**Keywords:** *Supervision; dynamics; reflective practice*

## Introduction

The act of supervision – time set aside between supervisee and supervisor to review and reflect on professional practice – is a corner stone of the profession and a key task relied upon for managing workload, regulating practitioner approaches and ensuring quality control in practice. Much has been written about the importance of supervision, and yet it is also clear a significant proportion of practitioners are not happy with the quality of the supervision they receive (see for example, Social Work Taskforce, 2009; Cortis, et al 2020). Adding to this, in many agencies in which counselling is practiced, supervisors and supervisees do not ‘choose’ each other, but rather enter this key professional relationship by virtue of the work posts they hold. This all makes for a complicated professional interaction, where complex dynamics can get in the way of a genuine, ethically mature (Carroll, 2012), reflective, and client focussed interaction. It is the intention of this paper to explore and outline some of the potential supervisory dynamics that can impact safety in this key relationship, identify the reasons and effects on practice, before considering ways to create greater genuine safety in these relationships.

This paper will draw together ideas identified by key writers such as Berne (1964), Kadushin (1968), and Hawthorn (1975), before moving to more recent considerations and approaches to understanding the operation of power in supervisory relationships. The dynamics and tactics are not in themselves always problematic. They can sometimes develop in order to create one form of safety, protecting the practitioner from risk of criticism or even performance management. However, the dynamics can prevent appropriate practice examination and collective critical analysis of practice that is for the benefit of the client. By outlining some of these dynamics, this paper aims to provide a tool for practitioners to analyse and explore their own supervisory experiences in order to then create conditions to reach new levels of self-awareness and openness.

## Definitions

*Supervision* - in this paper is taken to be the formal interaction between practitioner and team leader / manager encompassing (taken from Providing Effective Supervision, CWDC 2007):

- Line management: including accountability for practice and quality of service, workload management, and performance appraisal;
- Professional or case supervision: reviewing and reflecting on practice issues and looking at opportunities for learning;
- Continuing Professional Development: ensuring progression of skills, knowledge and understanding.

---

Corresponding Author: Carolyn Cousins  
Email: carolyntunedin@gmail.com

Australian Counselling Research Journal ISSN1832-1135

Organisationally oriented approaches (such as those proposed by Morrison and Wonnacott (2010), or Adamson (2012) add areas such as risk management, as well as practitioner resilience and sustainability.

*Supervisory relationship* – In this paper the focus is the relationship between the practitioner and their line manager. It is recognised that there are other contexts in which counsellors and practitioners choose or are provided alternative supervisors (such as peer, offline and external supervision), however this paper concentrates on the agency required supervisory relationship, with all its 'potentially conflicting roles, functions and purposes' and increasing shift toward 'managerialism' (Adamson, 2012:186).

## A background – 'game' playing

In his 1964 book, *Games People Play*, psychiatrist Dr. Eric Berne spoke of the dynamics underlying human relationships in theories that lead to the practice of transactional analysis. He described these games as a series of interactions (words, body language, facial expressions) between two or more people that follow a predictable pattern. These interactions ultimately progress to an outcome in which one individual obtains a payoff. Berne (1964:48) contended this is a form of unconscious behaviour, often with origins in past experiences and relationships which are being re-played in new contexts.

In his seminal work on the functions of social work supervision, Alfred Kadushin (1968) drew on Berne's ideas and noted that games in supervision are 'the kinds of recurrent interactional incidents between supervisor and supervisee that have a payoff for one of the parties in the transaction.' (1968:23) In 1975, Hawthorne notes that although usually initiated by one participant, these games require both parties need to engage, and that there can be a benefit for one, but usually both, participants.

## Supervision's complicated relationship with power dynamics

The reality is that any supervisory relationship where the supervisor has line management responsibility is a relationship of unequal power. While the supervisor may attempt to hold this power lightly, being friendly, approachable, and supportive, the issue of whether the supervisee can actually trust the supervisor and how they will use their authority is crucial to a productive and honest relationship. For many practitioners, past negative experiences of line managers are powerful motivators for protective games (see for example Gibbs, 2001, Social Work Taskforce, 2009 Egan et.al. 2018). Where this is the case trust takes time to develop, if it can at all. Where the clinical supervisor has the dual responsibility of performance management and productivity of the team (which is the case in many situations), there will always be some tension in creating a safe and confidential supervisory space, where the supervisee can explore their doubts, fears and inadequacies, contrasted with the implications of the performance management requirements of the team leader / manager. A lack of safety to 'not know' can be further compounded by complexities arising from such intersectional differences of race, culture, age, gender, sexuality, and experience levels between supervisee and supervisor.

This is, by definition, a hierarchical relationship. For those managers who like to think they have developed a collegial "open door" relationship with staff, Kahn (1979:521) made some

interesting observations, noting that old fears of inadequacy and criticism, as well as resistance to learning, come into play in all supervisory relationships. She cites research that while supervisors often see themselves as having relaxed, friendly attitudes, they were often seen by supervisees as admired teachers, but also feared and powerful judges. While Kadushin (1968:24) suggested the relationship is often unconsciously re-activating parent-child and teacher-student anxieties. He also proposes there is a heightened threat to the sense of self, for both the practitioner and supervisors, inherent in clinical supervision specifically because the work involves so much of the use of self as reflected in one's work. This can make it harder for either participant to take a stance of 'not knowing' and the vulnerability or exposure this involves. Cooper (2002) and Cortis et.al. (2020) note that pressures to meet managerial targets potentially reduce opportunities for reflection. O'Donoghue (2012) highlights how past supervisory experiences can result in future defensive tactics.

## The dynamics and their intent

First, we will consider some of the supervisee initiated dynamics, which can be divided into two categories in terms of intent. Firstly, there are those aimed at trying to manage the level of demand on the practitioner and, secondly, there are those aimed at trying to reduce and or manage the power difference by the supervisee.

### Tactics aimed at managing demand levels: Two against the agency:

Kadushin identified this tactic which he also called 'seducing for subversion' (1968:25). He stated that this is generally implemented by supervisees who are frustrated by routine agency procedures and / or see themselves as agitators against the system. They will allude to a conflict between bureaucratic requirements and professional orientation. Essentially, they are asking the supervisor to allow them not to comply with bureaucratic requirements, such as recording or forms, as these tasks rob them of valuable time with clients.

*Benefit for practitioner:* If successful, this results in a reduction of administrative work. At its most extreme, this may actually see the supervisor completing some of these requirements on behalf of the practitioner.

*Attraction for supervisor:* The supervisor may identify with the practitioner's concern, and may also be frustrated with bureaucratic demands. If they are reluctant to assert their authority or struggle with having 'sold out' to the bureaucracy, they may be induced to allow the practitioner concessions. However, this exposes them both to the risks that are inherent in operating outside of agency policy, rather than challenging inappropriate practices openly and actively.

### Treat me don't beat me

Identified by Kadushin (1968:26) and expanded by Cousins (2010) this self protective dynamic is where a practitioner finds it safer to focus on personal problems in supervision rather than their work, and invites the supervisor to assist them with their problems as a diversion. Kadushin states that, in more skilled versions, the practitioner relates these problems to difficulties related to the job. This dynamic should be separated from where the practitioner has a genuine one-off personal problem, where a short term adjustment to work is appropriate. Rather it is where

this is a distraction from examination of the work and has become a protective pattern of interaction.

*Benefit for practitioner:* This tactic invites the supervisor into the role of therapist and provider of support to the practitioner, which both deflects from examination of their cases and also makes it hard for the supervisor to then hold the worker accountable. The outcome can also be a reduction in work demand to allow the practitioner space to accommodate their personal challenges. This can have a side effect of significant resentment from other staff, who may be required to carry the additional workload.

*Attraction for supervisor:* Due to the use of 'self' in clinical work, any practitioner, when they are going through personal difficulties, is likely to need extra support, understanding, and often a temporary adjustment in workload. This is legitimate and it can be difficult for the supervisor to know when this adjustment should stop. They will not wish to be perceived as harsh or unfair, which can lead to this dynamic staying in place. This particular tactic also appeals to the therapeutic side of the team leader / manager, as they are invited into private world of the worker and sometimes back to a therapeutic or clinical role, which may be more familiar than a supervisory one. Kadushin (1968:26) feels that there is a perceived flattery of the supervisor in being chosen for the disclosure of personal information.

### **The perpetual 'new worker'**

There is a time period, post qualifying, or when a practitioner is adjusting to a new role or work area, where the practitioner assumes the role of learner. This is to be expected and appropriate, however fear of judgement or inadequacy can lead this to go on too long. It can feel safer to 'stay new', and even after some years in a role, the practitioner may say things like, 'I am not sure I should take on that (routine) task, as I'm only fairly new'.

*Benefit for the practitioner:* If accepted, there is likely to be a reduction in workload or expectations, along with extra assistance or advice from others. While there may be genuine fears and anxieties the practitioner has, they need to be explored, and progress towards full case load and responsibility made.

*Attraction for supervisor:* Supervisors can be flattered through ongoing deference and remaining in the educator mode of supervision provision can feel comfortable and reassuring. Giving advice can come easily, however this allows the practitioner to continue to defer what may be appropriate responsibilities, whilst also avoiding areas that need vulnerability for growth.

### **Flattery - you are so wise...**

Another related tactic Kadushin (1968:25) identified was simple flattery. The supervisee is full of praise: 'you're the best supervisor I have ever had', 'you're so perceptive', 'I always feel better after talking to you'. While this may be true, this form of flattery can be a way to avoid exploration of practice – by deferring to the expertise and wisdom of the supervisory. Some managerial roles are also under-appreciated and this tactic sometimes results in the supervisor providing additional support, guidance or preferential treatment to the supervisee who makes them feel good.

*Benefit for practitioner:* This approach effectively ensures the practitioner remains in the role of 'learner' for longer than is necessary, usually again with an accompanying reduction in expectations and workload, as the supervisor can find it hard to hold the worker to legitimate work demands.

*Attraction for supervisor:* This can be difficult for the supervisor to resist as 'it is gratifying to be regarded as

an omniscient source of wisdom' (Kadushin,1968:25), or to be selected for emulation. Reassurance that the supervisee is learning and growing from the interaction is the kind of reassurance supervisors often need. It can take a while for the supervisor to recognise the potential effects of not focussing on building the competence of the worker or closely examining their own decision making.

### **Heading them off at the pass**

This is where a practitioner is aware that they have made a mistake or let the client down in some way, and, anticipating that this will be raised by the supervisor, they 'get in first'. That is, they freely admit mistakes, confessing in advance and 'flagellating themselves to excess' (Kadushin, 1968:29). The supervisor, faced with the self-denigration, has little option than to reassure the supervisee sympathetically that all is well. Not only that - this dynamic can lead to overcompensation through praise of any (however limited) strengths the practitioner has.

*Benefit for Practitioner:* It is understandable a practitioner may have this pre-emptive reaction, however good reflective practice requires the courage to sit with and explore our errors and cautions in order for learning and redress. Where this becomes a problem is if it gets in the way of exploration of poor performance or practice. The benefit is obvious since the practitioner avoids a 'dressing down' or hearing the supervisor's concerns about their practice. They also will often avoid, though this technique, the consequences of performance standards or changes to practice the supervisor may have been planning to outline to them.

*Attraction for supervisor:* For the supervisor, this tactic relieves them of the uncomfortable task of raising a performance issue, a task few supervisors enjoy. It can allow the supervisor to (falsely) feel they have addressed the issue, when this may actually be far from the case. The test will be whether there is a change in practitioner behaviour in future or a repeat of the pattern.

### **Selective sharing**

All supervisees have to make choices about which issues, which cases, and in what level of detail, they bring to a session for examination. However some supervisees, in order to avoid scrutiny of their work or a sense of exposure, may either choose to share inconsequential and peripheral information or can distort a matter to present a more favourable picture of their work. It is often very difficult for the supervisor to know that this is occurring.

*Benefit for practitioner:* This technique reduces the threat of criticism and can also result in a slower allocation of new work. It does however leave the practitioner isolated in much of their decision-making. At its worst, this tactic can be masking situations where a worker is not fulfilling even some of their most basic responsibilities, such as failing to visit clients or complete tasks.

*Attraction for the supervisor:* Supervisors can be unsure of the degree to which it is acceptable for them to 'intrude' into the privacy of the client-worker relationship, and unless there is some form of live observation of the practitioner with clients, either directly, or via third party colleagues, it can be difficult to know if appropriate issues are not being raised when they should in supervision. However, there are considerable risks for the supervisor in not knowing the practices of the practitioners they supervise, as the line supervisor can be held responsible for casework decisions. With this selective sharing, the supervisor can be completely unaware of vital pieces of information about

cases and the worker's practice that the 'system' would expect them to know.

### Tactics aimed at reducing the power difference and avoiding exposure

Examining clinical practice in supervision, opening it up to the scrutiny of another, more powerful practitioner can be very exposing, and it is to be expected that sometimes tactics are employed to try to reduce the power differential in the supervisory relationship. This can be deliberate, based on fears and past experiences, and it can also be unconscious. Some identified ways this can occur include:

#### If you knew Dostoyevsky like I know Dostoyevsky

....

This is a situation in which during supervision, usually early on in the relationship, the supervisee makes reference to a theory or case that is raised in order to demonstrate the supervisee's superior clinical knowledge, and expose the supervisor's lack of it. Kadushin (1968:27) provides the following example script:

*'the client's behaviour is reminiscent of Raskolnikov, which is, after all, somewhat different in etiology from the pathology that plagued Prince Myshkin in 'The Idiot'. You remember, don't you?'*

It is equally clear to both the supervisee and supervisor, that the latter does not have knowledge of this, and the role of teacher-learner becomes reversed. This can be done with any number of theorists, political figures, literary figures to the same effect.

A more subtle version of this, is where the experienced practitioner and less experienced supervisee fall into more of a democratic peer – peer relationship where joint sharing of the agenda can easily become led by the supervisee. This 'democratic' approach can be hard for the inexperienced supervisor to resist as they do not want to seem controlling, and yet, they do have administrative authority. It is not an equal relationship, and this will need to be made clear at some point.

*Benefit for practitioner:* Apart from the obvious readjustment of power, this usually results in a supervisor too fearful of 'exposure' to question the practitioner's clinical practice, decision making or casework and the practitioner is left to 'get on with it' with little supervision, oversight or accountability.

*Attraction for supervisor:* The supervisor is invited to take part because a refusal would require an admission of ignorance, while further power is often gained by the supervisee who 'co-operates in a conspiracy with the supervisor not to expose his ignorance openly' (Kadushin, 1968:27). Thus discussion continues under the 'mutually accepted fiction' that they both know what they are talking about, with the supervisor feeling on the back foot. This dynamic is built on an assumption that the supervisor should always know more, which is a risky proposition and stifles cooperative exploration.

#### I'll just run this past you in the corridor

This could also be called 'we both know I don't really need supervision'. This is where the practitioner implies they do not really need formal sit down supervision or support, as "we are both far too busy", and that the practitioner states they already know what they are doing. Significant periods of time can pass without formal supervision, whether due to cancellation or 'forgetting' to re book.

*Benefit for practitioner:* This dynamic results in little accountability or intrusion as the practitioner is left to their own

devices and does not risk the exposure of their practice.

*Attraction for supervisor:* The supervisor often is busy and relieved to have one less person to schedule time with. However, resistance builds and the foundations of a supervisory relationship are not established, making it difficult to begin to hold the practitioner accountable when oversight of work is needed.

#### I have a little list...

This supervisee arrives with a range of topics and questions about the work that are carefully designed to be relevant enough, but at the same time deflective from key issues the supervisor may wish to raise. The clever implementation of this tactic ensures the list is full of topics of interest to the supervisor. When the supervisor appears to be 'running out of steam', the supervisee introduces a new question and the cycle is repeated.

*Benefit for practitioner:* By ensuring the supervisor does most of the talking and stays 'busy' in the session, not only does the practitioner reduce their own level of participation, they can also control both the content and direction of the interaction, away from scrutiny. The author is conscious of having used this tactic with a supervisor who was unable to keep discussions in supervision confidential, hence this became the 'safest way' to manage up in the supervisory dynamic.

*Attraction for supervisor:* It is gratifying for the supervisor to be helpful and to display knowledge, and meeting the needs of the dependent person asking the questions. It can be easy to miss this form of 'managing up' and realise that the practitioner has avoided their practice being critically analysed.

#### Evaluation is not for friends

Identified initially by Kadushin (1968:26), this tactic sees the supervisory relationship redefined as a social one where the supervisee makes an effort to take coffee breaks, lunch or socialise with the supervisor. They make an effort to discuss common interests to build a bond that is beyond general office friendliness.

*Benefit for practitioner:* It is more difficult for a supervisor to hold a 'friend' to the required performance levels and tasks, or to question practice. The shift, if successful, to peer-peer relationship can result in preferential treatment or a failure to address concerns.

*Attraction for supervisor:* Management roles can be isolating and it can be nice to have a friendly colleague to discuss things with. The manager or team leader may also want to show they are still 'one of the gang' and it can be easy to be drawn in to this tactic.

There are further complications arising from this dynamic, where the practitioner and supervisor actually are friends either prior to, or as a result of, the working relationship, or where the supervisor has stepped up within team. Needless to say, it is a potential ethical dynamics minefield.

#### Email bombardment

This newer tactic, experienced by the author is where email allows the practitioner to copy their supervisor into everything. This can be legitimate at times, but also risks the supervisor being complicit in decisions to which they may not have enough background or context. If things go wrong, the practitioner can say, 'but you knew'. This is a more modern version of always asking for advice and then if it goes wrong, saying 'I only did what you told me.'

*Benefit for practitioner:* There is a reduction of responsibility and a perceived sense of additional safety through constant management oversight.

*Attraction for supervisor:* Although it can 'clog up the in box', this can appeal to the part of the supervisor that wishes to know more about what their practitioner is doing, hence this practice can be difficult to resist.

## Supervisor Tactics

The role of a supervisor is not easy and many of those who find themselves responsible for others have never received specific supervision training, often being promoted for being good frontline workers, with little additional training for management responsibilities. Morrison and Wonnacott (2010) say the supervisors practical and emotional intelligence are crucial for detecting performance issues in their supervisees, yet many supervisors are anxious, unconfident and conflicted about their role and the power it brings. This complex and intense supervisory relationship occurs in an organisational environment where there are often cross-purposes (Adamson, 2012:186). Professions like social work and welfare can have complicated relationships with power, not wanting to use it 'over' others, whilst also recognising the need for legitimate oversight of work. Supervisor tactics can also be divided into two broad categories, based on purpose. There are dynamics that can develop that are aimed at supervisor avoidance or abdication of work responsibility and those that are broadly about power.

### Dynamics around Abdication / avoidance 'They won't let me' or 'I wish I could, but I can't do anything'

Hawthorne identified this tactic (1975:180) in which the supervisor sympathetically expresses the desire to take or permit some action, but then advises it is not possible and does not explore the possibility further as their supervisors 'will not allow it.' This may be true or it can also be avoidance of tackling an issue or policy that needs changing or challenging. This technique allows the supervisor to preserve their image by expressing a willingness to take action, but then avoids any risk by surrendering their authority to higher powers (1975:79).

#### *Benefit for supervisor / Effect on supervisee*

The supervisor is protected from taking a risk or making a decision, whilst preserving their image of being helpful and willing to do something. They make others responsible for their indecision or unwillingness to challenge a policy or practice. For the practitioner, there are no further options for taking an issue forward, unless they decide to go above or directly challenge their supervisor, both of which bring risk.

### 'I wonder why you really said that?'

Identified by Kadushin (1968:30) this somewhat passive aggressive approach involves redefining an honest difference of opinion as hostility on the part of the supervisee. Rather than defend their stance, and present the evidence, research or policy for their position, the supervisor chooses to redefine the difference as resistance on the part of the supervisee. The supervisor therefore no longer has to justify their approach, but rather, begins to pathologise the resistance of the supervisee.

#### *Benefit for supervisor / Effect on supervisee*

The supervisor can avoid a topic, question or issue by taking the spotlight off the subject raised and turning it onto the supervisee. This dynamic not only buys the supervisor time to think, but also can result, if used often, in a practitioner who will stop bringing challenging or complex issues to supervision for fear of being deemed the problem.

## One good question deserves another

Another supervisor tactic identified by Kadushin (1968:30) is where a supervisor, concerned that they don't know the answers to potential questions, replies, acting curious with, 'what do you think?'. While the worker is trying to figure out the answer to their own question, this buys the supervisor time to think of a response, whilst looking like they knew all along. If neither come up with any useful suggestion, Kadushin says this allows the supervisor to look wise and suggest the supervisee continues to think about it and they can discuss it further next time, thus buying the supervisor time to research. While curiosity is sometimes an appropriate response, overuse of this tactic reinforces power differences, rather than taking an opportunity to learn together.

#### *Benefit for supervisor / Effect for practitioner*

The supervisor is able to avoid exposing their own uncertainties, whilst at the same time maintaining an air of wise and benevolent assistance to the practitioner. Despite being common, it can be very frustrating for the practitioner, and is likely to result in them eventually seeking the support and advice they need elsewhere. The brave practitioner can respond and say, 'no, I need to know what you think', thus refusing to engage in this approach.

## I am so busy and stressed

This approach, witnessed by the author at its extreme, is where the supervisor regularly states they are too busy with administrative or senior management requirements for other supervisory tasks. This results in a role reversal, where the worker is asked to sympathise with the very busy supervisor and not make demands of them; a kind of 'poor me' approach. Hawthorne (1975:79) identifies a similar issue with quotes such as 'I wish I had time to discuss the case with you, but I have to get this report done for the director' and states that some will use this excuse to avoid providing supervision altogether. The author came across a situation where the supervisees were so genuinely concerned for the emotional and mental health of their supervisor that they had stopped taking all key decisions to him, and were glossing over problems in the unit, in an attempt to reduce his stress levels.

#### *Benefit for supervisor / Effect for practitioner*

This results in role reversal where the supervisor is inviting the supervisee to feel sorry for them and not impose any additional demands. Yet, the supervisor gets to still present a sympathetic, hardworking role model. This leaves the practitioner alone with their decision-making. At its extreme, this tactic invites the practitioner to start treating their supervisor like a client.

## Tactics of Power

The lack of preparation for management roles can also result in supervisors who use their power over others in punitive or problematic ways, often with a belief this is required to ensure good practice and that mistrust of staff is now their responsibility. They may have had this modelled by their own supervisors, or just be anxious about their level of responsibility now.

### Remember who is the boss

In this working relationship the supervisor defines themselves as having absolute power. Hawthorne (1975:181) says this is an environment in which no contradictions, disagreements or negotiations are acceptable. She identifies two ways this is imposed. One is regular reminders of control, for example 'My workers all know that I expect them to be at their desks on time' or 'we have always done things this way'. Second,

through an implicit possessive relationship 'my workers' and 'my unit'. This is usually an approach of a veteran in the agency who has a reputation for meeting all bureaucratic requirements.

*Benefit for supervisor / Effect for practitioner*

The supervisor puts themselves beyond reach and never has to defend their position. Their omnipotence is almost unquestioned (Hawthorne, 1975:181). At times, to maintain this, the supervisor may have to actually go higher and 'tell on' a difficult and challenging supervisee to reinforce their position. This is a very difficult situation for the practitioner to challenge and most will get their supervisory supportive needs met elsewhere if they are to survive. This style does, however, suit some workers who want certainty and a sense of benevolent protection.

**'I'm only telling you this for your own good'.**

Hawthorne described this approach as 'Mother / Father knows best' (1975:181) and occurs where the supervisor uses not their professional competence or knowledge to validate their authority, but their external position – their status, seniority, and past experience. They assume the role of wise and guiding parent, and the subordinate nature of the supervisee is made clear.

*Benefit for supervisor / Effect for practitioner*

As a feared and powerful, yet benevolent judge, this supervisor is rarely questioned or challenged. This results in lower expectations of the practitioner who is allowed, or even encouraged, to be dependent, and complicit in maintaining the supervisor's need to be indispensable. The approach fosters and encourages helplessness or submission on the part of the supervisee and ensures they never become a threat to the supervisor's authority or role.

**Let's be friends**

In a reversal of the supervisee tactic of friends, the author has come across some supervisors who try to redefine the power dynamics with their team by taking the approach that they can all 'be friends'. This usually involves social events (where the expectation is clearly attendance), over sharing of the supervisor's life and issues, as well as a lack of boundaries around information sharing that a supervisor would usually withhold.

This approach denies the reality of the power a supervisor holds and, almost inevitably, there will come a point of conflict when a supervisor needs to exercise their authority for some reason. It is deceptively appealing to the practitioner, at first, as there is less threat of judgement or criticism, and they can also access information they would not otherwise receive. Over time, however, this situation can become increasingly unsafe.

Donovan and Jackson (1991:342) suggest that to be a good manager, a supervisor needs to 'be secure and without the need to be universally loved.' This may sound obvious, but it can be quite difficult for a supervisor to realise they are no longer 'one of the team, and that people sometimes regard them with cynicism or mistrust. Hence, there is the temptation to show that they are still a friend.

As Durrant acknowledges (2001:4) staff can have a high level of expectation that they will participate in management decisions and call the supervisor to account for their use of power. This is positive and keeps the supervisor accountable. However, it can also be disconcerting to the new supervisor, as they try to work out when a democratic approach is required and when to display leadership. A supervisor who is the line manager will have to make tough decisions sometimes and this means there will be times when they will not be popular. This requires

an awareness of appropriate boundaries.

## Addressing tactics and dynamics

The difficulty with many of these dynamics is that even the most emotionally intelligent and self-aware practitioner will engage in aspects of some of these tactics at times. There is what Hawthorne calls an, 'essential validity' in most of these approaches, which is what makes them so difficult to call out and address. One of the key indicators that an approach is becoming a problem, is when it is affecting either the job satisfaction or productivity of the practitioner or risks the outcomes for clients. Dill and Bogo (2009:142), remind the supervisor that central to their performance is to ensure organisational accountabilities are met. The goal of both the practitioner and supervisor, is ultimately as, Kadushin (1976:21) states, 'to deliver to agency clients the best possible service, both quantitatively and qualitatively, in accordance with the agency policies and procedures.'

There are, however, some risks in exposing tactics. One option is to name the dynamic and explore the effects. However, this needs to be handled with care and in a way that allows both parties to maintain dignity. It is a bit like naming defensive mechanisms clinically – some weighing up of the consequences is required. Deciding to address and confront tactics, if you are to be successful, requires some understanding of the 'defensive significance' of the approach (Kadushin, 1968:32). It requires empathy, compassion and caution, with a sense of timing and the ability to 'expose' the dynamics in a way that also offers some options for change. It is important to remember that both parties have usually engaged in the dynamic to a degree, and 'refusing to play' as Kadushin (1968:31) puts it, can mean forfeiting certain advantages. For example, the supervisor must be willing to deal with potential supervisee rejection and hostility; willing to accept criticism, deny flattery, or reject the voyeurism of acting as therapist; they may also need to be willing to openly admit ignorance of a subject or area.

With supervisor tactics, the supervisee may be in too vulnerable a position to manage the dynamic through open confrontation (Hawthorne, 1975:182). One option is to regularly point out the approach in a light-hearted way, if the supervisory relationship will tolerate this.

With the abdicating supervisor, Hawthorne (1975:182) suggests the practitioner present their needs persistently, professionally and in a non-threatening way. However, redress is more difficult with the authoritarian supervisor who likes to use their power, where the supervisee has to be careful to always operate within agency policies and procedures, which the supervisor will know well.

In some instances, the person seeking to address the tactics may wish to seek external advice and support before doing so. This may include seeking advice from Human Resources and respected peers. Where patterns are entrenched, or the defences too strong, it will not always be possible to address the tactics, and finding ways to 'stay safe' within them can be required. In these cases, it is the author's experience that it is useful to make alternative arrangements for external supervision to ensure your own professional needs are met.

## Creating Safety and Trust

The dynamics outlined in this paper are, on some

level, about trying to create safety in a complex professional relationship. For deep reflective supervision of clinical practice to occur, supervisees need to feel safe to explore uncertainty in their practice. The supervisee needs to be able to trust their supervisor to challenge them in ways that can grow their practice, yet not devastate them. There is an art to this form of challenge – to be able to assess how much true feedback and challenge a supervisee can tolerate before defensiveness arises. The author suggests Line Manager / Team Leader supervisors have two tasks in this area. They need to understand and ideally be able to define their approach to leadership – to be clear when they are acting within their line management responsibilities and in what ways. Alongside this, they need to skill themselves up in the provision of clinical supervision, and the creation of a safe clinically reflective space separate too but, while maintaining, their role as manager.

Neither of these are straightforward tasks, and rarely do organisations prioritise a team leaders professional growth amongst the busyness of tasks to be completed. Many practitioners feel unprepared when transitioning into a supervisory role (Hafford-Letchfield & Engelbrecht 2018).

Relational approaches to leadership and management (Uhl-Bien, 2006 and subsequent work) are often a good fit with counselling and welfare approaches. Goleman's leadership styles (Figure 1), based on his work around emotional intelligence, can provide a quick reference check for the various managerial hats that team leaders and managers need to get comfortable with. (appendix 1). Feminist Intersectional models of supervision would suggest self-disclosure to explore difference to work towards an egalitarian supervision relationship (Brown, 2016), however this may be difficult to achieve where there are inherent organisationally sanctioned power differences.

There is not an agreed industry standard of training to provide supervision, and many practitioners simply offer what they have experienced or would like to have experienced. Undertaking both training and supervision focused on the provision of clinical supervision can be valuable, as well as becoming aware of your own learning and conflict styles, in order to be able to examine how these play out in your supervisory provision. Supervision can be a form of clinical alignment between the supervisor and supervisee. The supervisor comes alongside and helps the supervisee examine their own practice to help that person uncover various alignments, biases and lenses they may have developed. To do this, the supervisor has to come alongside, build trust and then assess how much gentle challenge and critique a supervisee can cope with.

For both supervisees and supervisors, it is hoped this article will prompt practitioners to think about the impact and ramifications of past supervisory experiences on their sense of safety and where it may be that they can explore the down sides of engaging in pre-emptive dynamics. Supervisees are encouraged to understand and articulate their supervisory needs (See Cousins, 2020). It is also recognised that sometimes, supervisory safety will not be obtained, and the practitioner will need to look for other places to explore the more vulnerable aspects of their practice.

## Conclusion

Whilst not a comprehensive list, it is hoped that by drawing together these examples of dynamics that can occur within a supervisory relationship, this article can become a useful reflection and discussion piece for practitioners and supervisors alike to examine this complex aspect of practice, their interactions and intentions within it. As mentioned, while many of the approaches outlined have legitimate aspects, they can also hinder safe, productive and effective supervision. The author would encourage practitioners and their supervisors to examine their motives, and their processes of accountability in regard to their supervisory relationships. It takes bravery to questions one's own practice, seek feedback and go after growth. However, to pursue transparency about these dynamics can be a catalyst for real professional development and ultimately result in more insightful responses to clients and professional challenges.

## Bio

**Carolyn Cousins** holds Masters Degrees in both Social Work and Adult Education, as well as a Diploma of Management. She has published in relation to children at risk, domestic violence and also the quality of service provision and management. She is an article and book reviewer for a number of journals in the UK.

## References

- Adamson, C. (2012) Supervision is not Politically Innocent, *Australian Social Work*, Vol. 65 (2), pp. 185 – 196.
- Berne, E. 1964. *Games People Play: The Psychology of Human Relationships*, Mass Market Publishing, Penguin, London.
- Brown, L. (2016) *Supervision Essentials for the Feminist Psychotherapy Model of Supervision*, Washington DC: American Psychological Association.
- Carroll, M. & Shaw, E. *Ethical Maturity in the Helping Professions*, PsychOz Publications, Victoria.
- Children's Workforce Development Council (CWDC) and Skills for Care 2007 *Providing Effective Supervision: A workforce development tool* (accessed 2nd April 2010) available at <http://www.skillsforcare.org.uk>
- Cooper, L. (2002) *Social Work Supervision: A Social Justice Perspective*, In McMahon M. & Patton, W. (Eds) *Supervision in the helping professions: A practical approach*, NSW, Pearson Education.
- Cortis, N., Seymour, K., Natalier, K. & Wendt, S. 2020 'Which Models of Supervision Help Retain Staff? Findings From Australia's Domestic and Family Violence and Sexual Assault Workforces', *Australian Social Work*, 74:1, 68-82
- Cousins, C. (2010) 'Treat Me Don't Beat Me' ... Exploring Supervisory Games and Their Effect on Poor Performance Management, *Practice: Social Work in Action*, Vol. 22, Issue 5, 281 – 292.
- Cousins, C. (2020) Are you getting what you need from Supervision?, *Australian Counselling Research Journal*, Vol.14 (1), 10-15.
- Dill, K. & Bogo, M. 2009. Moving beyond the administrative: Supervisors' perspectives on clinical supervision in child welfare.

*Journal of Public Child Welfare*, Vol. 3, Issue 1, 87-105.

Donovan, F. and Jackson, A. (1991) 'Human resource (personnel) management', *Managing Human Service Organisations*, Prentice Hall, New York, pp.305 - 319, 322 - 345.

Durrant, M. (2001) 'Solution focussed and strength based approaches to Supervision', unpublished paper, Brief Therapy Institute of Sydney.

Egan, R., Maidment, J., & Connolly, M. (2018), 'Supporting quality supervision: Insights for organisational practice', in *International Social Work*, vol. 61 no.3, pp. 353–367

Gibbs, J. (2001) Maintaining frontline workers in child protection: a case for refocusing supervision, *Child Abuse Review*, 10,5, 323 – 335.

Goleman, Daniel. "LEADERSHIP THAT GETS RESULTS." *Harvard Business Review*, vol. 78, no. 2, 2000, p. 78.

Hafford-Letchfield, T & Engelbrecht, L 2018, 'Contemporary practices in social work supervision: time for new paradigms?', in *European Journal of Social Work*, vol. 21, no. 3, pp. 329-332

Hawthorn, C. (1975), Games Supervisees Play, *Social Work*, May, pp.179 - 183.

Kadushin, A. (1968) Games People Play in Supervision, *Social Work*, July.

Kahn, E. (1979) 'The Parallel Process in Social Work Treatment and Supervision', *Social Casework: The Journal of Contemporary Social Work*, Family Service Association of America, pp. 520 - 528.

Morrison, T. & Wonnacott, J. (2010) Supervision: Now or Never. Reclaiming reflective supervision in social work, [http://www.local.gov.uk/c/document\\_library/get\\_file?uuid=d4830a8e-5e1d-466b-a48b-572b210b5ff8&groupId=10171](http://www.local.gov.uk/c/document_library/get_file?uuid=d4830a8e-5e1d-466b-a48b-572b210b5ff8&groupId=10171)

O'Donoghue, K. (2012) Windows on the Supervisee experience: An exploration of supervisee's supervision histories, *Australian Social Work*, 65 (2), pp.214 – 231.

Social Work Taskforce, 2009, *Building a safe, confident future*, <http://publications.dcsf.gov.uk/eOrderingDownload/01114-2009DOM-EN.pdf>

Uhl-Bien, M. "Relational Leadership Theory: Exploring the social processes of leadership and organizing" (2006). Leadership Institute Faculty Publications. 19.

will require a leader to be able to shift between all of these styles at some point.

**The affiliative leader: creating emotional bonds and harmony:** The hallmark of the affiliative leader is a "People come first" attitude. This style is particularly useful for building team harmony or increasing morale. But its exclusive focus on praise and motivation can allow poor performance to go uncorrected. Also, affiliative leaders rarely offer advice, which often leaves employees in a quandary.

**The democratic leader: builds consensus through participation:** By giving workers a voice in decisions, democratic leaders build organisational flexibility and responsibility and help generate fresh ideas. But sometimes the price is endless meetings and confused employees who feel leaderless.

**The commanding leader: demands immediate compliance:** This "Do what I say" approach can be very effective in a turnaround situation, a natural disaster, or when working with problem employees. But in most situations, coercive leadership inhibits the organization's flexibility and dampens employees' motivation.

**The pacesetter leader: Expects excellence and self-direction:** A leader who sets high performance standards and exemplifies them herself has a very positive impact on employees who are self-motivated and highly competent. But other employees tend to feel overwhelmed by such a leader's demands for excellence and to resent his tendency to take over a situation. This can create a negative climate.

**The visionary leader: Mobilises people towards a vision:** Continually concerned with positively energizing the team to reach objectives that contribute to achieving organisational goals. This leadership style is very effective for motivating team members. Works best when a clear direction or change is needed. The trade may be that this style of leadership lives too much in the future/clouds and is not concerned enough with the day-to-day.

**The coaching leader: Develops people for the future:** Concerned with the development of team members. The coaching leader attempts to identify the strengths and weaknesses of employees and encourage them to improve their skills and capabilities. The focus is on building long-term strengths.

**Appendix 1 – Adapted from (Goleman, 2000)**



According to Daniel Goleman there are six basic styles of leadership, each making use of key components of emotional intelligence. The best leaders will be skilled at several styles and have the flexibility to switch based on situational need. Most roles