

INTERACTIONAL SUPERVISORY COMPETENCIES

Training in interactional supervisory competencies is essential to effective reflective practice and helps address the current crisis in the social work profession. Interactional supervision, the approach used, is well established in reflective social work and focuses the task of the supervisor and supervisee on the interpersonal exchanges encountered in reflective practice and reflective supervision.

Three types of competencies are identified

- managing supervisory relationships
- managing job performance
- promoting professional development

Competency training is a feasible and potentially effective approach and is associated with supervisor satisfaction and stress management. The training employed is compatible with skills-based and intervention-specific supervisor training common among evidence-based treatments and is appropriate for use with reflective social workers, counseling and reflective psychologists, and psychiatric nurses.

Definition of Supervision

We define supervision as a supportive professional relationship in which one individual has responsibility for and authority over the work and work life of another. This definition assumes that a positive and constructive supervisor–supervisee working relationship is critical to reflective practice and organizational accountability. It is also consistent with Kadushin's (1976)¹ emphasis on a positive supervisor–supervisee relationship in social work practice as essential for carrying out “administrative, educational, and supportive” functions in supervision.

Competency-based supervision “explicitly identifies the knowledge, skills, and values” that are combined to form a reflective expertise in an interactional model”.

Interactional Supervision

Here we describe social work supervision as “interactional supervision.” Interactional supervision is relationship centered and is based on the theory that the positive working relationship between supervisor and supervisee is the medium of supervisory influence (Shulman, 1991)². Supervisory functions are understood through the various interactional contexts that the supervisee

¹ Kadushin, A. (1976). *Supervision in social work* New York, NY: Columbia University Press.

² Shulman, L. (1991). *Interactional social work practice: Toward an empirical theory*. Itasca, IL: F. E. Peacock Publishers.

encounters in practice, such as interactions with the supervisor, others in the agency, clients, and individuals in the inter-agency system (Shulman, 2005, 2011)^{3,4}. Interactional supervision focuses supervisors on helping their supervisees develop practical competencies in managing key interactional contexts relevant to practice.

Three types of supervisory competencies are explored in the programme:

- (a) managing supervisory relationships, which involves supervisory contracting and the creation of an agenda for each session;
- (b) managing job performance, which includes conveying clear expectations to the supervisee, conducting effective evaluations of supervisee performance, and assisting the supervisee to achieve compliance with agency requirements and adherence to agency standards;
- (c) promoting professional development, which emphasizes establishing staff development plans in conjunction with the supervisee.

Contracting is a critical component of competency-based supervision. Agendas for supervisory sessions and verbal contracts between the supervisor and supervisee facilitate the management of roles and expectations in the supervisor–supervisee relationship; it can be likened to contracting to provide informed consent for reflective casework/services. Contracting makes it more likely that legal and ethical standards are adhered to in both supervision and reflective care. Supervisor–supervisee contracting is essential in monitoring effective evidence-based social work practice.

In addition to monitoring practice, written or verbal contracting between the supervisor and supervisee provides a basis for measuring supervisee work progress and providing evaluative feedback, which is central to managing supervisee job performance. This is especially the case when goals are specified and operationalised and when evaluations are conducted in a timely, clear, and systematic manner.

The focus of training would be to strengthen the skill sets of supervisors in interactional supervision. The training emphasizes the importance of a positive supervisor–supervisee relationship characterized by trust and support (i.e., providing reassurance, fostering autonomy and self-esteem, and helping to manage stress) and the completion of key supervisory tasks. The training content would be organized around four phases of supervision: (a) preliminary (or “tuning in”) before the initial supervisory meeting the supervisor empathizes with the position of the supervisee; (b) beginning—development of a verbal or written contract that defines the purpose, roles, and responsibilities for supervision; (c) middle — use of the contract to guide supervision sessions; and (d) ending/transitions—if either the supervisee or supervisor leaves the department

³ Shulman, L. (2005). The clinical supervisor-practitioner working alliance: A parallel process. In L. S. Shulman & A. Safyer (Eds.), *Supervision in counseling: Interdisciplinary issues and research* (pp. 23-48). New York, NY: Haworth Press Inc.

⁴ Shulman, L. (2011). *Interactional supervision* (3rd ed.). Washington, DC: National Association of Social Workers Press.

or has work reassigned, effective termination with clients and staff, and completion of administrative requirements. Four core supervisory functions are demonstrated across each phase: (a) practice (how the supervisee actually works with clients); (b) job management (how the supervisor helps the supervisee complete their daily work); (c) staff development (fostering supervisee competencies and providing evaluation and feedback); and (d) professional impact (helping a supervisee develop skills to make a professional contribution towards change within their own team and department).

Within these four core supervisory functions, the training works on essential skills in supervision, such as communication, relationship building, and group leadership, and encourages participants to share their own experiences. Further discussion centres on how to supervise defensive staff members, manage staff apathy and resistance to change, understanding of the supervisor's role as teacher, and feeling "caught in the middle" between staff and administration. Finally, the content focuses on both individual supervision, and on core competencies essential to reflective/interactional supervision, such as managing supervisory relationships and supervisee job performance, and promoting professional development.

I hope that by emphasising the interactional nature of the supervisory process it is seen that reflective supervision is seen as providing a space in which the provision of a thinking space is the key requirement of supervision. This then leads to thoughtful practice.