The Supervisory Relationship. ERIC Digest.

All conversation about supervision contains messages, implicit if not explicit, about the supervisory relationship. Those who perform supervision are necessarily in contact with those whom they supervise; some sort of relationship exists. In its broadest sense the term "relationship" refers merely to the manner in which the supervisor and counselor are connected as they work together to meet their goals, some of which are common and some of which are idiosyncratic. Within the context of particular supervisory orientations, however, the nature and function of the relationship must be defined in specific terms.

This Digest reviews perspectives on the supervisory relationship which have been described in the recent supervision literature. For purposes of organizational clarity, three dimensions will be addressed: the relative importance of the relationship within the total supervision process; variables which influence the relationship; and how the relationship differs when working with experienced versus inexperienced counselors.

Members of the Association for Counselor Education and Supervision (ACES) rated supervisor personal traits and qualities and facilitating skills as more important than conceptual skills, intervention skills, management skills, and knowledge of program management and supervision. Respondents rejected the notion that these traits and qualities cannot be taught, that they are the products of life-long socialization (Dye, 1987). These results suggest that the ability to form and sustain relationships is more important than certain knowledge and skill factors, and that effective supervisory behaviors can be learned.

Current descriptions of counseling supervision invariably include discussion of the supervisor-counselor relationship, and the means by which the individuals communicate, manage the process of reciprocal influence, affiliate, make decisions, and accomplish their respective tasks. However, the relative importance of the relationship and the role it plays varies according to supervisory orientation. For some, the relationship is the sine qua non of supervision (Freeman, 1992) while for others it is a necessary but less-than-defining variable (Linehan, Ch. 13, and Wessler & Ellis, Ch. 14, both in Hess, 1980). Thus, while the nature and function of the relationship differ according to several variables, which are discussed below, recent supervision literature usually includes explicit attention to this vital process.

The supervisory relationship is subject to influence by personal characteristics of the participants and by a great many demographic variables. Several major sources of influence, some static and others dynamic in nature, have been identified and discussed in reviews of the supervision literature. Among static factors receiving prominent attention are gender and sex role attitudes, supervisor's style, age, race and ethnicity, and personality characteristics (Borders & Leddick, 1987; Leddick & Dye, 1987). Dynamic sources are those which may exist at only certain stages of the relationship or which are always present but in varying degrees or forms, such as process variables (stages: beginning vs. advanced; long term vs. time limited); and relationship dynamics.
(resistance, power, intimacy, parallel process, and the like) (Borders et al., 1991). Conflict, the nature and magnitude of which is likely to change across time, can have a significant influence upon the relationship. Bernard and Goodyear (1992) pointed out that conflict occurs in all relationships, and in the supervisory relationship, specifically, some common origins are the power differential between the parties, differences relative to the appropriateness of technique, the amount of direction and praise, and willingness to resolve differences. These influences can be moderated to some extent by mutual respect. Because of the greater power inherent in the role, the supervisor should take the lead in modeling this attitude if it is to be attained by both parties (Bernard & Goodyear, 1992).

Citing their own and others' research, Ronnestad and Skovholt (1993) presented an extensive description of effective supervision of the beginning and advanced graduate students. They concluded that "There is reasonable validity to the perspective that what is good supervision depends on the developmental level of the candidate" (1993, p. 396). Supervisors of beginning students should provide high levels of encouragement, support, feedback, and structure. They explained carefully that the relationship with advanced students is typically more complex because students at this stage tend to vacillate between feeling professionally insecure and professionally competent. The supervisor should take responsibility for creating, maintaining, and monitoring the relationship which serves to provide structure and a mediating role while students are in turmoil (Ronnestad & Skovholt, 1993). Thus, supervisors of inexperienced counselors serve in a well-defined role as patient teachers; there is an emphasis upon structure and instruction. As students acquire experience, the need for instruction diminishes, and it is the supervisory relationship which provides a supportive context as advanced students assess and reassess their professional competencies and personal qualifications.

Two additional sources of dynamic influence on the supervisory relationship have been identified by Olk and Friedlander as role ambiguity and role conflict (1993). Role ambiguity is defined as uncertainty about supervisory expectations and methods of evaluation, while role conflict refers to expectations associated with the role of student in contrast with the role of counselor and colleague. Olk and Friedlander found that role ambiguity was more prevalent across training levels than role conflict, but that the effects diminished as the student gained counseling experience. Role conflict, however, seems to be more prevalent among those with more experience. They suggested that supervisors remain alert for signs of such conflict, and that teaching explicitly about roles and expectations may minimize threats to the supervisory relationship (Olk & Friedlander, 1993). These results relative to implications for the relationship as a consequence of learning stage are consistent with those of Ronnestad and Skovholt (1993), described above.

FINAL NOTES

1. The body of literature on the subject of counseling supervision, including the supervisory relationship, has grown rapidly during recent years.

2. Instructional materials for teaching supervision methods and processes are available.
3. Knowledge of the supervisory relationship and competencies in establishing and maintaining effective relationships can be acquired through a combination of didactic, laboratory, and practical experience.

4. The supervisory relationship is an integral component in virtually all supervision orientations, though important differences exist in quality and function.

5. The definition of an appropriate and effective supervisory relationship varies according to several identifiable fixed (static) and changeable (dynamic) variables. The relationship should be structured accordingly with the knowledge and consent of both supervisor and counselor.

REFERENCES


The Good Supervisor. ERIC Digest.

It has been my very good fortune to have been supervised by several good supervisors. These supervisors were quite different from each other in personality and their supervision style, focus, and goals. One insisted that the person of the counselor is of greatest importance, and then struggled with me to discover who that person was for me and how to use it in my relationships with clients. Another focused on more concrete behaviors and cognitions, forcing me to learn how to articulate what I was doing and why. A third introduced me to a new theoretical perspective on counseling, broadening my conceptualizations of clients and my interactions with them. With each, I felt tremendous challenge to stretch and grow, buffered by an implied belief that I could achieve their goals for me. Each seemed to have been assigned to me at just the right time in my professional development, and/or they recognized my needs at that time and were able to provide what I needed. The influence of each of these supervisors can been seen in my counseling and supervision work today. Only one of these supervisors had received any supervision training.

Like other counselors, I also have had less memorable supervision, and have heard numerous colleagues' and students' horror stories about their unpleasant experiences as supervisees. Some describe busy supervisors or those who lacked interest in their supervisees and the supervision process. Some cite supervisors who seemed most interested in putting in the minimum required time with as little work and as few hassles as possible. Others remember mismatches in theoretical orientation to counseling or critical personality traits.

All of these experiences, and my own professional work in the area, have convinced me that potentially good supervisors are born, but all benefit from training experiences in which they focus on supervision knowledge and skills, reflect on their role and responsibilities, and receive input from others about their work as supervisors. These experiences also have led me to ask questions about what distinguishes "good" supervisors from "bad" supervisors and how counselors become effective supervisors.

Thus far, there are too few answers to my questions. The supervisor by far has received the least attention of any variable in the supervision enterprise. To date, only a few researchers have focused on supervisor qualities and skills, and only three very brief models of supervisor development have been proposed. What we do know is summarized below, drawing from reviews by Worthington (1987), Carifio and Hess (1987), Dye and Borders (1990), Borders et al. (1991), and Borders (in press).

**CHARACTERISTICS OF SUPERVISORS**

Good supervisors seem to have many of the same qualities of good teachers and good counselors. They are empathic, genuine, open, and flexible. They respect their supervisees as persons and as developing professionals, and are sensitive to individual differences (e.g., gender, race, ethnicity) of supervisees. They also are comfortable with the authority and evaluative functions inherent in the supervisor role, giving clear and
frequent indications of their evaluation of the counselor's performance. Even more, good supervisors really enjoy supervision, are committed to helping the counselor grow, and evidence commitment to the supervision enterprise by their preparation for and involvement in supervision sessions. These supervisors evidence high levels of conceptual functioning, have a clear sense of their own strengths and limitations as a supervisor, and can identify how their personal traits and interpersonal style may affect the conduct of supervision. Finally, good supervisors have a sense of humor which helps both the supervisor and supervisee get through rough spots in their work together and achieve a healthy perspective on their work. Such personal traits and relationship factors are considered as significant as technical prowess in supervision.

In terms of professional characteristics (roles and skills), good supervisors are knowledgeable and competent counselors and supervisors. They have extensive training and wide experience in counseling, which have helped them achieve a broad perspective of the field. They can effectively employ a variety of supervision interventions, and deliberately choose from these interventions based on their assessment of a supervisee's learning needs, learning style, and personal characteristics. They seek ongoing growth in counseling and supervision through continuing education activities, self-evaluation, and feedback from supervisees, clients, other supervisors, and colleagues.

Good supervisors also have the professional skills of good teachers (e.g., applying learning theory, developing sequential short-term goals, evaluating interventions and supervisee learning) and good consultants (e.g., objectively assessing problem situation, providing alternative interventions and/or conceptualizations of problem or client, facilitating supervisee brainstorming of alternatives, collaboratively developing strategies for supervisee and client growth). In fact, good supervisors are able to function effectively in the roles of teacher, counselor, and consultant, making informed choices about which role to employ at any given time with a particular supervisee.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE SUPERVISOR

Existing models of supervisor development (Alonso, 1983; Hess, 1986; Stoltenberg & Delworth, 1987) give brief descriptions of supervisor stages of growth, and are quite different in their theoretical perspectives. Two assume that supervisors receive no training for their role, but change with experience and age. Only a few researchers have investigated novice supervisors; even fewer have conducted comparison studies of novice and experienced supervisors. These writings provide a fairly consistent profile of novices, but little information is available about how novices learn about supervision and develop a supervisor identity, how they think and behave at various stages of development, and what factors encourage (and discourage) their development.

In general, novices are characterized as self-doubtful, leery of being evaluative or confrontive, tending to be highly supportive and/or didactic, concrete, structured, and task-oriented. There is little flexibility in approach, with novices relying on their more familiar counseling skills and focusing more on the client and client and counseling
dynamics than on counselor development. Novice supervisors also seem to have personalized supervision styles that remain stable across supervisees.

Perhaps surprisingly, comparison studies have yielded few differences between novices and experienced supervisors. In general, more experienced supervisors seem to use more teaching and sharing behaviors, and they and their supervisees are more active. Ratings of effectiveness, however, find novices to be equally effective as experienced supervisors.

There are several plausible explanations for these results. First, novices typically supervise beginning counselors, which may be the pairing that allows novices to be and/or to be seen as most effective by their supervisees. Second, "experienced" supervisors in these studies often are relatively inexperienced and, most importantly, typically have received no training in supervision. In other words, comparisons of inexperienced and experienced are not representative of comparisons of novice and expert. In fact, the expert supervisor has yet to be described empirically, particularly in terms of their actual behaviors and conceptual skills.

**CONCLUSION**

One joy and challenge of being a supervisor is the necessity of using skills from a variety of professional roles and knowing when to use each one. I must draw on my teaching, counseling, and consultation background, but integrate them in a unique way. During one supervision hour I may be highly structured; at the next, I may deliberately avoid giving suggestions. With each I am operating on today's goals within a larger context of long-term development.

A second challenge is the necessity of attending to several different levels at the same time. I am responsible for what happens to the client and to the counselor. I must be aware of counselor-client dynamics, supervisor-supervisee dynamics, and any similarities between them. I must think about what the client needs, then determine how I can help the counselor provide that for the client. I must consider the impact of the client on the counselor, client on supervisor, counselor on client, and counselor on supervisor, in addition to the supervisor's impact on counselor and client. I must assess the counselor's readiness for my intervention, taking into account a myriad of factors (e.g., developmental level, skill level, anxiety and typical ways of handling anxiety, motivation, learning style, response to authority figures, etc.). I must be cognizant of maintaining an optimum balance of challenge and support during the supervision session and across time. I have to be aware of all of these dynamics and then, almost instantaneously, create an elegant response.

As a novice supervisor, these were the exhilarating aspects of my new professional role, and they are the aspects that my students repeatedly cite as the great fun in doing supervision. When I think back to time spent with my own good supervisors, this is, gratefully, what I received. Today, as an experienced supervisor, these are the standards I
set for myself--and sometimes achieve. And, as a supervisor educator, these are the measures I offer supervisor trainees so that they, too, can become "good supervisors."

REFERENCES


