

Overlooked

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MANAGEMENT

Supervision for Leaders (copy accepted 18.2.20)

Anita Soni

There can be confusion about the meaning of the word ‘supervision’, perpetuated by different positioning in key documents used by those working in early years. Ofsted, for example, use the term in relation to both staff and children, but it goes without saying that supervision of children is, or should be, very different to that of staff.

The common purpose for supervision across all disciplines, including early years and social work, where it came from, is to provide a supportive and reflective space for workers.

Supervision is considered to have three main functions;

- Educative – developing the understanding and skills of the supervisee
- Supportive – helping the supervisee respond to the emotional demands
- Managerial – ensures the practice of the supervisee is appropriate for the organisation, and ethical

The legal framework

Supervision is actually a relatively new addition to the landscape of early years in England. It was first mentioned in Dame Tickell’s 2011 review of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS), and described as essential for effective leadership and management, a mechanism for staff support, and an opportunity to develop reflective practice. In 2012, supervision was introduced as a statutory requirement within the welfare and safeguarding requirements of the Early Years Foundation Stage framework (DfE, 2017).

As a result, providers must put appropriate arrangements in place for the supervision of staff who have contact with children and families. Rather than being an accountability measure, as supervision may be in other professions, effective supervision should provide support, coaching and training for practitioners, and foster a culture of mutual support, teamwork and continuous improvement. This, in turn, should encourage discussion of sensitive issues – in confidence, of course, as these are often concerning a child’s development or wellbeing – and identify solutions that promote the interests of children. Supervision should also provide opportunities for staff to receive coaching to improve their personal effectiveness, but this does not always happen.

The leadership gap

I conducted some research on supervision in early years settings which has recently been published in the International Journal of Early Years Education (Soni, 2019). Nearly 40 people participated in the survey, covering a range of providers including pre-schools and nurseries. All involved were clear that staff who work with children should have supervision, and the vast majority were receiving it. However it transpired that there was a small proportion of leaders and managers including senior staff such as deputies and room leaders who were not accessing it. Furthermore, safeguarding was seen as the primary purpose for supervision, closely followed by emotional support and professional development.

With these three purposes just as important for senior leaders as for other staff, I conducted some telephone interviews to find out more. The managers all indicated they thought supervision for managers was both needed and important, but highlighted complications, such as finding it difficult to identify someone suitable to do it: it needed to be someone working in a similar role – so not someone within the setting – but not so close as to be a competitor.

Being able to trust the individual and talk to them openly were key for the process to work, so while some managers had struck up friendships with other managers, this was viewed more as peer support and mentoring rather than supervision. Local authority staff were also regarded as suitable to undertake supervision, but difficult to access due to public spending cuts. Nurseries linked to a school or Children's Centre have perhaps more senior colleagues who might be suitable, but this was variable and not available to many.

I felt strongly that there was a need for the coaching aspect of supervision that wasn't being addressed and that perhaps I could do so by using the GROW model (see panel). This is an elegant but simple approach to coaching that enables the person being coached to explore and learn, within a single conversation, how to maximise their own performance. I found it also enabled me as the coach to stay attentive and attuned. However it was important to hold on to the fact that GROW is only a model. It has to be used within a framework of coaching skills and behaviours, which for me have grown out of previous work on attunement, interaction and thinking a lot about my communication skills through video reflection.

When it comes to the tricky question of who should coach managers when there is no obvious more senior candidate, managers could either invest in an external coach (as some schools now do) or team up with managers from other settings. Crucially, this must be done in a safe environment (i.e. everything must be kept confidential) and with an understanding of how to coach, with the coaches accessing their own coaching too. Training is available and managers who wish to become coaches should do so after accessing some coaching for themselves first.

BOX OUT: GROW

*The GROW model was developed by **executive coach and racing driver** Sir John Whitmore in association with **US management consultancy** McKinsey, and stands for Grow, Reality, Options and Will.*

*The first step is **Goals**. It is important to spend time identifying the goals to help understand the what the main aims and aspirations are of the person being coached, and to clarify the desired result. The next step is **Reality**: how things look now, what has been tried already, what impact these actions have had, what are the obstacles to progress? The third step is considering the **Options** available. What are the alternatives that could be tried? The final step is **Will**, which includes a summary, and a plan of action for implementation of the identified steps. This should take into account potential hurdles, and commitment to the agreed actions, taking into consideration how these can be made achievable and accountable.*

Making it work

The first manager I spoke to said that beginning to identify a question beforehand acted as a useful starting point. This had then led within the coaching session to exploring what 'good' would look like which in itself had helped her acknowledge some underlying issues. This, in turn, was key to working out a practical course of action that could be implemented, and left her with a sense of optimism that the situation could be improved. 'You pushed me to the edge of my comfort zone which was good because it was only at this point that I really was able to identify, verbalise and confront the real issues' she said. She added that her existing good relationship with me due to previous work we have done together was important in achieving this.

Her comments were echoed by the second manager I worked with. She said that the exploration and reflection on the goals identified some underlying questions she had been avoiding, but once raised, made several things clearer. Again, this came from questioning how things would look if the goal had been achieved and having an open dialogue in relation to her chosen topic and goal. She felt it gave her an opportunity to really unpick an area of her practice. This particular individual had been unsure about the value of the conversation [beforehand](#) but afterwards said it was something that she had needed without knowing that was the case, and she was keen to do it again to support her practice.

[A further example comes from working with a deputy manager. Just as the first manager noted, she had found it useful to think about the question she wanted to explore prior to the coaching session. She highlighted the key value of a coaching conversation for her were that it was focused, as it prevented her being distracted into talking about other issues and topics, time limited, ending with a clear plan with accountable steps to take forward.](#)

I found the managers who underwent supervision with me were all very positive about the sessions. As a time-efficient method, which can be done in person or over the phone, it enables reflection and problem solving and provides a practical solution to provide much-needed and often lacking support for leaders and managers.

If this is something you are interested in, please send me an email on anitasoni@blueyonder.co.uk

References

Department for Education (DfE) (2017) Statutory Framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage: Setting the Standards for Learning, Development and Care for Children from Birth to Five. London: Crown Copyright.

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