

# Understanding *External Supervision*<sup>1</sup>

This handout was originally developed because of the frequency with which the author experienced agencies asking for *external supervision* for staff, without a clear idea of what specific functions this would cover. This led to problems such as an assumption that the external supervisor would deal with disciplinary issues or judge the person's work performance, without any direct involvement with their day-to-day work. Another assumption appeared to be that staff should wait 1 or 2 months before being able to *debrief* situations which affected them personally and was impacting on their work.

At a training workshop on *Supervision Skills* for managers of community agencies, we did a word association exercise on *supervision* ... and found that participants had a myriad of different assumptions about what was included and excluded. This handout groups functions typically associated with *supervision* into 4 separate categories. It considers the viability of appointing an external supervisor to address each function.

Most internal supervisors appear to provide a mix of 2 or more of these functions. It is up to individual agencies to determine whether, and how, these functions are offered to their staff. Often, organisations do not ensure that all 4 areas are available to staff. This can have significant personal, professional and organisational consequences - particularly in the case of service delivery staff. There is a strong argument that all 4 types of supervision should be available to all workers in the community services and health industries.

## 1. Debriefing/Emotional Support

**This function is primarily concerned with immediate emotional offload.** Often workers in the community services (as distinct from most other industries) are obliged to deal with issues that intersect with their personal life/issues (albeit indirectly). It is important to distinguish here between an emotional reaction (the role of *debriefing*) and more proactive/developmental functions. Debriefing is **not** concerned with learning from experience ... only with *clearing* the worker's immediate reaction to it!

Arguably, debriefing is not a part of supervision. Debriefing is generally required fairly spontaneously. Most people associate supervision with a planned activity. It is included here, because of the need for agencies to make conscious arrangements for (particularly service delivery) workers to be able to debrief when necessary. The consequences of not establishing a legitimate means for debriefing can be substantial, and include everything from unrestrained gossip (where workers *debrief* indiscriminately and widely) to individual worker stress/burnout (where the worker does not have an outlet for offloading their emotional reactions to their work).

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There is no particular reason why debriefing needs to be with a more senior staff member. Provided that the ethical boundaries are clear, many agencies have successfully established arrangements where workers can debrief with whomever they wish. Maybe a barter arrangement would be a useful mechanism for spreading the load across agency staff?

Routine debriefing is not generally suited to external supervision. External supervisors can rarely provide immediate services whenever required - and, to pay for this service would be very expensive! However, **it can be useful to involve an external supervisor to debrief occasional, high-impact, critical incidents.** This form of external support is particularly relevant where a worker is sufficiently affected by an incident in the workplace (often, a crisis situation) that their work performance is suffering, or likely to suffer. In this situation, the organisation is responsible for enabling the staff member to process the issue to the point that they can function effectively in the workplace.

## 2. Line Management/Accountability

Line management is a routine organisational function. It typically includes determining viable/appropriate (short or long term) workload, making decisions about leave arrangements and developing work/agency plans. **Line management is concerned with balancing worker interests/needs and organisational needs/priorities.**

Line management rarely suits external supervision. If an external supervisor is appointed to undertake this task (for example, in an agency that employs a single staff member) it is critical that they are involved with the management structure and planning processes of the organisation on an ongoing basis. In a single worker agency, it is generally most cost effective and efficient to appoint someone already closely involved with the organisation (eg. a Management Committee member) to undertake the supervision role. Use of an external supervisor to undertake line management is generally very expensive, due to the level of agency engagement required to fulfill the role successfully.

## 3. Performance Accountability

**Performance supervision focuses on assessment of work standards.** It is particularly focused on the quality and quantity of an employee's work (and, therefore, outcomes for service users). It commonly involves undertaking regular performance appraisal, to ensure that the worker is achieving agreed outcomes to an acceptable standard. It may also include *bottom line* issues such as disciplinary procedures, dealing with grievances or hiring/firing.

Like line management, performance accountability is concerned with the worker in the context of the organisation. Generally, this form of supervision is located with either the staff member's line manager, or a more senior staff member.

It is generally not viable to locate performance accountability with an external supervisor. Where this is the preferred option of the agency, it is essential that the external supervisor is an active participant in agency management settings and has opportunities to observe the worker's performance. (Again, this is a very expensive way to go!)

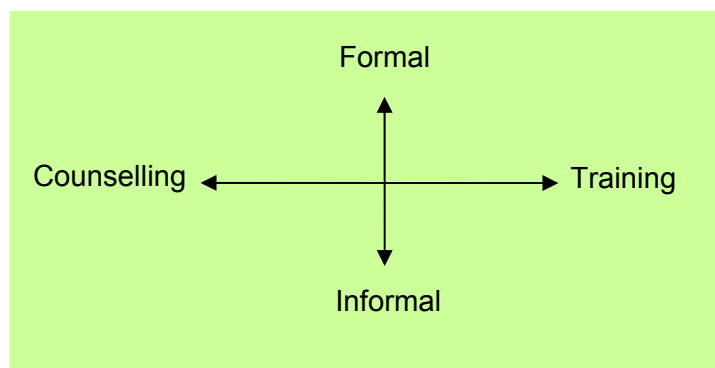
#### 4. Professional/Developmental Supervision

**Professional supervision is concerned with enabling workers to learn from their experiences.** This function is the easiest area of supervision to treat as a discrete activity. Professional development needs can be met in a variety of ways:

- It can follow on from debriefing in situations where the person doing the debriefing has the competencies to offer learning/development.
- It can be built into organisational planning (eg. where development of Training/Learning Plans is part of the person's employment package.)
- It can be offered through peer support, mentoring, time allowed for reading or participation in a training program.

This type of developmental activity can be located with a discrete person or group, and is therefore particularly well suited to external supervision.

**Professional Supervision generally focuses on the context of a staff member's work, rather than their day-to-day functioning.** It is a proactive tool for intervening early when a problem is emerging and/or enabling development of competencies and skills to protect against problems emerging. Regular sessions are generally focused on **the worker's own perception of their workplace needs.** Professional supervision can fall anywhere on the following diagram:



Professional supervision can be highly informal or highly formal:

- **A counselling focus** might be most appropriate where a worker's private circumstances or past history directly impinges on their capacity to undertake their work. Any counselling undertaken should focus on issues with a direct impact on

their work. This is not an appropriate forum for processing exclusively personal issues or doing personal therapy.

- **A training focus** might be useful in a situation where a worker wants (or is required) to move into a new area of work, or do some concerted development in a particular competency area. Formal or informal training should focus on developing work-related competencies or problem solving workplace dilemmas.

The focus of each session may be identified at the commencement of the session, or, a single area can be focused on over several sessions. It is not unusual for elements of both counselling and training to occur during professional supervision - either on a formally agreed, or situational, basis. Most commonly, the staff member and professional supervisor make the decision about how best to meet the worker's needs.

Professional supervision can focus on immediate situations, or the longer term topics. Problem solving and strategy development are features of supervision which looks at the worker's current situation. Strategic thinking and planning are more likely to be core where the focus is longer term (even beyond this particular job).

When considering the best means to offer professional supervision to staff, it is important for agencies to consider the consequences of co-locating it with the authoritative supervision functions (outlined above). In particular, workers may well feel disinclined to share their weaknesses with the person who judges their performance!

It generally works best if all interactions between the worker and professional supervisor are confidential - regardless of whether the supervisor is internal or external. Again, a staff member is less likely to be willing to discuss their concerns or weaknesses, if these are likely to be reported to the person who judges their performance. However, some organisations prefer to define the broad parameters/focus/direction of professional supervision. Where agencies require particular outcomes, these can be documented in advance. Where reporting is required, this should be exclusively outcome-based, and in response to very clear, specific criteria. This allows the supervisor and staff member to interact confidentially, in relation to the details of discussions. For example:

- A *Learning Contract* may articulate learning outcomes required. This is particularly relevant where the organisation requires that a worker develop, revise or upgrade particular skills in order to be able to do their job adequately.
- Following a critical incident, an organisation may ask a professional supervisor to assess the progress of the worker in dealing with the incident in terms of specific criteria (eg. their readiness to return to face-to-face work, or any recommendations for modified work or additional support).

Any reporting role can be expected to make the staff member a little less open with the professional supervisor than they might have been in a fully confidential setting.