Exploring possibilities

Law, Criminology

At best the supervisory task is like undertaking a balancing act managing the tension between the need for space to think and the need to act, between proliferating tasks and limited time, checking through every case and detailed discussion of one or two, between exploring possibilities and making decisions, between ensuring agency policies are followed and attending to workers emotional responses to the work' (Hughes ; Pengelly, 2002: 31). They describe the overall purpose of supervision as 'the service to users within the limits of agency task, professional knowledge and financial resources' (Hughes ; Pengelly, 2002: 40).

Most managers including myself would agree that the practicalities of supervision concern the regularity of supervision, its priority, the need for privacy and uninterrupted space and time and a supervisory contract. Whilst I have used contracts in supervision in the past I have not used them so far in Nightstop. However, they would be a particularly useful tool in allowing both myself and the supervisee time to discuss in detail the purpose of supervision especially as at present I have several fairly new members of staff who are not familiar with this aspect of professional development. One such member of staff repeatedly says she does not need supervision and it is okay if it is only monthly, but she then rings me on a regular basis every week to check things out. It would probably be a much more beneficial use of our time if we met formally on a weekly basis until she was more established in post.

Coulshed and Mullender's views on supervision echo those of Hughes and Pengelly since they describe supervision as combining elements of management, educationand support. They argue that 'the organisation as a

whole needs frameworks which encompass these same three elements, which - become performance appraisal, staff development and staff care' (Coulshed & Mullender, 2001: 162). Achieving the most appropriate balance between these three potentially conflicting responsibilities is undoubtedly difficult but extremely important if supervision is to have any value. For example,

'if support is treated as an end of supervision, there is a danger of a collusive focus on the workers needs for their own sake rather that a focus on the worker in order to promote a better service' (Hughes & Pengelly, 2002: 48). In a recent supervision session, I had to combine informing an employee that her performance was not up to standard with support in enabling her to improve. Thus there were elements of both support and discipline within the same session and although this at first seems far from ideal, sensitively done it enabled me to go as far as possible in enabling her to leave the sessions feeling positive. In this way Hughes and Pengelly believe that supervision

'can assist staff to acceptaccountabilitywithout resentment because it demonstrates the link between verbal aspirations and practical reality' (Hughes & Pengelly, 2002: 46). The actual content of supervisory sessions depends to a large extent on which of the three factors mentioned above are given priority. However, since supervision is about people working with people, it is not surprising to find that there are different psychological theories concerning ways of implementing these. For example, Gerard Blair argues the case for 'behavioural modification' as a way of working with staff and uses a system of reward and punishment to elicit the desired behaviour.

He suggests that although 'many people balk at the connotations of management directed mind control - we are simply recognising that staff behaviour is modified by the workenvironment' (Blair, 1993 : 24) He is in fact, actually going much further by proposing use be made of that environment in order to manipulate people in to producing results. As such Blair's approach is more concerned with the accomplishment of task and he advocates the use of power in getting it done. In this case it is 'coercive power' or 'reward power' as defined by Brown and Bourne as 'power to require the supervisee to do something and power to offer or withhold rewards' (Brown ; Bourne, 2002: 34).

Whether this use of power is ethically sound could form the basis of an interesting debate, since at first it seems to represent an abuse of the power dynamic and a lack ofrespectfor others, whilst at the same time being inherent in a system where pay or salary is in fact a reward that can be withdrawn if performance is not up to standard. It might not sit comfortably but it is inherent in the power of management.

Hawkins and Shohet on the other hand approach supervision from a predominantly psychoanalytical view point and much of their understanding of best practice with clients involves workers knowing themselves, their needs and desires, including an understanding of the psychological impetus for being in the 'helping professions'. They say for example, 'no one can act out of exclusively pure motives. The greater the contamination by dark motives, the more the case worker clings to his alleged objectivity. Focusing on our shadow we will be less prone to omnipotent fantasies of changing

others or the world, when we cannot change ourselves.' (Hawkins ; Shohet, 2002: 8/9).

In this way they argue we are 'more likely to be of real help. In that way we do not use others unawarely for our own ends or make them carry bits of ourselves we cannot face' (Hawkins ; Shohet, 2002: 15). This is a particularly useful viewpoint when working anti-oppressively since it allows us to acknowledge those prejudices that we inevitably hold as a result of the dominant hegemony within which we were raised and acknowledges that we as workers get something out of helping others. What it also particularly useful about the work of Hawkins and Shohet is that they make the link between treating staff with the same consideration as clients and as such they propose that all of the above applies as much to supervisors work with supervisees as it does to workers work with clients.

Thus principles of informal education can and are applied to staff in the same way as they are to the community. Hawkins and Shohet argue that 'to be a supervisor is both a complex and enriching task. It is deceptively similar to and uses the same sort of skills as, one's work with clients, but the supervisor must be clear about how supervision is different in content, focus and boundaries and entails a more complex ethical sensitivity' (Hawkins & Shohet, 2002: 48). Ethical sensitivity and anti-oppressive practice should lead to a reflective approach to management and supervision that takes into account issues of power. Brown and Bourne say that 'issues to do with power, and how it is managed, lie at the heart of supervision and the supervisory relationship. When one person is in a position of formal authority

over another a dynamic is created that derives from that inequality of power' (Brown & Bourne, 2002: 32).

For my own practice this means bearing in mind thecultureof the organisation and the effect this has in strengthening my power as a manager. This coupled with the expertise power that comes from my qualifications and experience combine to significantly affect the supervisory relationships with which I am involved. As a manager and supervisor, I need to aware that in one person I combine role power, cultural power and personal power and as Hawkins and Shohet point out 'when all three different sources of power are brought together in the same person, the effect may be quite overwhelming - the power dynamics may be simpler but could well be insensitively misused or even overlooked as they are taken for granted.' (Hawkins & Shohet, 2002: 95).

Simpler power dynamics do have their positive side and provides a considerable advantage when working in partnership with other organisations, since I am able to make decisions, commit resources and participate in joint working initiatives without having to consult Nightstop's Directors. Partnership working has grown considerably in recent years, not least because of the Labour government's ideological commitment to the benefits they bring. Sullivan and Skelcher sum this up, 'the collaborative agenda has developed in the context of the changing institutional structure of the public sector and the emergence of new philosophies of public management and governance' (Sullivan & Skelcher, 2002: 14).

They also point out that partnership working is not based on nor informed by theoretical, empirical research on the benefits of multi-agency work and that the 'ideological environment is uncritically pro-collaboration' (Sullivan & Skelcher, 2002: 8). Which leaves the question of why we get involved. Three views on this, optimist, pessimist and realist, are proposed. For optimists, partnership working is about achieving a shared vision. For pessimists it is about holding on to power and personal and/or organisational gain.

For realists

'it is the wider environment - that (is) critical in determining the incidence of collaboration. In this environment both altruism and individual gain can co-exist. What is important is how either or both can be achieved through collaborative activity that is appropriate to the changing context' (Sullivan & Skelcher, 2002: 41). Other theories talk about regime theory, exchange theory and resource dependency theory. Regime theory is similar to that of the optimists in that it suggests that 'effective long term coalitions emerge in order to accomplish public purpose' (Sullivan & Skelcher, 2002: 39).

Resource dependency theory is explained in terms of one agency having resource that another needs which leads to situations where agencies therefore try to control and influence each other whilst exchange theory highlights the fact that 'service users with multiple problems needed to engage with a highly fragmented and specialised array ofhealthand social welfare providers. The difficulty users faced in negotiating the system prompted the drive to collaboration' (Sullivan & Skelcher, 2002: 37).