



# ND Child Welfare Supervision

## WHY RELATIONSHIPS ARE IMPORTANT IN SUPERVISION

The changes that child welfare has seen over the past three years has been mind boggling, and the pace at which information is passed on, has been unprecedented. In the midst of this, the United States is experiencing a phenomenon termed "The Great Resignation" leaving almost every profession short-handed and stressed. As a supervisor, what control do you have over this? Likely, if you are like most, you are bogged down with your own work, in addition to trying to keep positions filled, and filling in for vacant workers. Child Welfare agencies can't shorten their office hours, or close the agency, because of limited workers like local businesses often do. The work continues no matter what, no matter how many.

Our work has changed and challenges are fast and relentless. Rarely are there days where the pace is slow and easy, like a slow and windy river; we are typically dealing with fast, surging rapids on a regular basis and sometimes feeling as though our boat has a hole in it. Because of this, we need to reconsider how we approach our work as supervisors, adapting in ways to partner with our employees. An effective supervisor will facilitate professional development of his/her staff by consistently modeling effective relationship and strengths-oriented behaviors that help staff grow through their most difficult and/or emotionally charged times and events. This entails paying attention to the personal and professional growth needs of their staff while also offering recognition, encouragement, and support. To do this well, supervisors have to be aware of their own vulnerabilities, while building on their personal style and strengths. Research has shown that over half of the turnover occurs within the employee's first year on the job, indicating that the first year is crucial to retention. What a staff person first experiences, especially with their supervisor, is a determining factor whether he/she will stay with the agency and ultimately build a career in child and family services. We talk about creating a partnership and having engagement with our families and what this looks like, but have we considered the benefits of doing this with our employees?

# THE PRINCIPLES OF PARTNERSHIP IN SUPERVISION

**Principle #1 Everyone Deserves Respect:** "Respect starts at home", is often a term we will hear when discussing children and how they treat others, in this case, it starts in the office. Do we consider the opinions of our employees and then really listen to what they have to say? Do we recognize and value their strengths and abilities? By asking simple questions such as "What do you think?" and then truly listen, we are seeking their opinion and communicating that their opinion is important and valued, leading to confidence and a positive sense of self worth.

**Principle #2 Everyone needs to be heard and understood:** Many times in the rush of the day, we will provide direction by telling others what to do, or quickly providing our input so that sound decisions can be made. By slowing things down and asking a worker what they think, asking for more clarification, or exploring options, we not only partner with staff but we are conveying that we think that their ideas are valuable. This is also a great way to promote growth in their critical thinking, assisting them to come to the decision through critical discussions; leading to competent and confident workers.

**Principle #3 Everyone has strengths:** It is natural to focus on the negative when things are stressful and times are difficult, this is true for new workers as well as us as supervisors. In fact, when we are overburdened we tend to focus on the 10% that isn't going well versus the 90% of things that are. Are you looking at the strengths that your workers bring to the table, or do you focus on what they don't know yet? or what they didn't do right? Focusing on strengths builds workers up even during very difficult times, it reemphasizes what they are doing right and it may be the difference between sticking it out and staying in the position, or giving up and walking out the door.

**Principle #4 Judgements can wait:** Once we make a judgement about something, we tend to stop looking for new information and interpret any new information in light of the decision we already made. This is true with not only the families with whom we work, but also with our employees. This may mean jumping to conclusions that may not have merit, robbing us of precious time and energy. Encouraging workers to share their perceptions, to share new ideas and to see the problem from their perspective, requires vulnerability from both the worker and the supervisor but the payoff can be powerful.

**Principle #5 Partners share power:** Power differentials can create obstacles in the work that we do with families, this can be the same within the workplace. Our job as supervisors is to develop new workers, for them to be more competent and confident in the work that they do. While power will continue to stem from the position you hold, over time as workers become better skilled and able to take on more, authority can be shared as trust, and confidence in their abilities, grows.

**Principle #6 Partnership is a process:** While each of these six principles has merit on their own, all six are necessary for partnership to be at the table. Each one strengthens and supports the others. It is not enough to just agree that they are important, it requires intention and attention, being open to new learning, as well as different perspectives on everyone's behalf.

Applying these principles takes time and a great deal of vulnerability on your part but the pay off can be huge. Research has linked supervisory support to staff retention, something that is rare during this day and time. Remember this is also a parallel process, as we send a clear and consistent message to workers about their worth, and approach them through partnership, we are modeling the very approach we want them to take with families. I call that a win.

References; : Anderson, Gary PhD; Jackson, Rosemary, MSW; McKenzie, Judith, MSW; McKenzie, John BSIE ( 2007) Staff Retention in Child and Family Services. Working with Difference Workbook 3. Michigan University School of Social Work. :Brown, Brene (2018) Dare to Lead. ; North Carolina Division of Social Services (2015) Children's Service Practice Notes, v. 20, n.2 Social Worker Transfer of Learning Tool. Retrieved from:<http://practicenotes.org/v20n2/TOL-tool.pdf>

Remember, Change will not happen without relationships!

# Feeling Overwhelmed?

## Start with Small things that make a big difference...

Sometimes the smallest of things can make a big difference in building a relationship with a new worker.

Start small with ideas that you can start in 2023 that won't seem overwhelming.

1. Remember support looks different to different employees, start with "What does support from me look like?" This offers the opportunity for clarity between you and the worker and it also conveys respect and identifies that we all have strengths.
2. Ask workers about their opinion on how to solve an issue versus jumping in quickly to tell them what to do. Asking for clarification or elaboration can be a great tool to engage the worker in critical thinking - exactly what we want them to be able to do on their own with confidence. Using questions like "What is here that you want to explore further?", "Can you tell me more?", "What is another possibility?" helps the worker develop critical thinking and also models questions that can be used when working with families to assist them reaching success as well.
3. Do we expect new workers to jump in and learn the work by trial and error or do we provide them with more guidance at the forefront? New workers want to be successful and tend to be overwhelmed easily by the demands and the decisions that must be made. Spend time with new workers checking in on them, reassuring them that they are not expected to know it all right now. Having regular check ins to not only ensure that they are doing the work but also using that time to do a personal check in to show the worker, that while the job and the mission of our work is critical, their well being is also critical to the mission and is a priority. The guidance and coaching that workers receive in their first year cannot be underestimated.

Want to learn more about Principles of Partnership in Supervision?  
Join us along with Dan Comer in April...

## Facilitating Partnership and Change: Supervision, Parallel Process, and Managing Change

Trainer: Dan Comer, Kempe Center for the Prevention and Treatment of Child Abuse & Neglect

Thursday, April 13, 2023  
9:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m.

Holiday Inn  
3903 State Street  
Bismarck, ND 58503

\*Block of rooms held at Holiday Inn at state rate

- Under "Child Welfare Supervisor Training"
- State ID required
- Call 701-751-8240

### At the completion of this course, the participant will:

- Understand the Six Principles of Partnership as they can be applied to the supervisor-worker role.
- Understand the power of parallel process in implementing system change.
- Know strategies to introduce and manage change that create the least amount of disruption in the organization.
- Know how to build and maintain partnerships with workers, within the agency, and with external stakeholders.

Training is  
only for Zone  
Child Welfare  
Supervisors in  
North Dakota.

[Register here](#)

