
A Method of Direct Supervision for use with Group Employment Counsellors

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Abstract

This paper outlines a method of direct supervision which has been applied to group employment counselling. To utilize this method effectively it is important to emphasize the development of a positive context, to minimize the intrusiveness of the observation, and to formulate the debriefing using a strength challenge format.

Résumé

Cet article expose les grandes lignes d'une méthode de supervision directe qui a été appliquée à un groupe de counseling sur l'emploi. Pour utiliser cette méthode effectivement, il est important de mettre l'emphase sur le développement d'un contexte positif, de minimiser le nombre d'observations et de formuler un compte rendu en encourageant le développement des forces.

The Canadian Employment and Immigration Commission (CEIC) has implemented a competency-based training program for employment counsellors. Seven training modules have been prepared, one of which addresses group employment counselling (Amundson, Borgen & Westwood, 1990; Borgen, Pollard, Amundson & Westwood, 1989). The types of groups which are addressed in the training program are those which focus on a short term, structured learning approach. The provision for this type of group within regular operations of the Employment Commission has been minimal. With the implementation of the training program and the development of specially prepared group employment counselling packages (Amundson, Borgen, Westwood & Swain, 1987 a, b, c, d; Hearn & Miniely, 1989), however, the avenue for group activity using this approach has increased.

The Alberta region of CEIC has played a leading role in piloting a comprehensive group employment counselling program. As part of this initiative, the issue of supervision for counsellors running the various groups has been considered. A special two-week training program for supervisors has been initiated. This supervisory program is skill-based and introduces supervisors to group employment counselling and related supervisory issues. One of the issues which is addressed is the means of supervisory observation and it is this topic which is the focus of this article.

The Rationale for a Direct Supervision Approach

A primary aspect of the supervisory process is the perceptual vantage point from which a supervisor views the interaction between the counsel-

lor and clients (Brandt, 1982; Combs, Richards & Richards, 1976). The range of vantage points available to a supervisor can include any of a variety of activities such as retrospective case review, observation through a one-way mirror, audio or video taping and playback, and direct observation. While the availability of one-way glass or video taping facilities is possible in a training situation, in the regular office situation, supervisors are usually more restricted. When supervising a group counselling situation, an audiotape is of little use and thus the choice becomes either self-report or direct supervision, i.e. includes some aspects of self-report with direct observation.

The argument against direct supervision is that it is too intrusive and interferes with the counselling process. While this is a real concern, it is usually possible to structure the situation in such a way that there is minimal disruption. In fact, the level of disruption is often more related to the counsellor anxiety about the supervision process than to client concerns. The advantage of using direct observation to supplement self-report is that the supervisor has the opportunity to see first hand what is occurring and form his/her own impressions. This direct supervisory involvement provides a qualitatively different experience from receiving a verbal report on the progress of the group. In some respects it is like "being on the beach" as contrasted with having someone tell you about the same event. The different perceptual vantage point lends itself to quite a different kind of orientation.

Perhaps the most natural form of direct supervision is that of co-leading a group. With a positive and collaborative supervisor/counsellor relationship there is the opportunity for observation, modelling, discussion, and learning from one another. While this can be an ideal situation for constructive supervision, it is not always possible because of time and schedule restrictions. In view of this, what is discussed in the next portion of the article is a more limited form of direct supervision which can be applied in a broader range of situations.

Establishing a Context for Direct Supervision

In order for direct supervision to be effective it is essential to establish a proper context for the supervisory approach. The first step is the relationship between the supervisor and the counsellor. A level of trust must be established so that a visit from the supervisor is viewed in a positive light. Direct supervision is designed to support counsellors and this must be communicated in both word and deed. The counsellor must therefore be fully informed of what will happen and the rationale for adopting this direct supervision approach.

The impact of direct supervision also depends on the extent to which it is utilized. Magee & Pierce (1986) have suggested using a form of direct supervision in situations where a counsellor is experiencing a specific

impasse. While this may be effective in some situations, it seems that under these conditions the visit from the supervisor might become associated with problems. I would rather see a more proactive stance where direct supervision is viewed as a regular part of the supervisory process. This would help to normalize the supervisors involvement and would help reduce counsellor anxiety.

It is important when introducing direct supervision to acknowledge the authority and responsibility of the counsellor for the group counselling situation. Direct supervision is not designed to undermine the role of the counsellor. The counsellor establishes both the timing of the supervisory visit and the focus for the supervisor during the observation period. For example, a counsellor may ask the supervisor to pay particular attention to how he/she is using the skill of moderating (ensuring that everyone has the opportunity to speak) after the initial introductory activity. The supervisor would enter at the designated time and would pay particular attention to the request of the counsellor when observing the group interaction.

In summary, the utilization of a direct supervisory approach depends on three key conditions. To start there must be a supportive and trusting relationship between supervisor and counsellor. Secondly, direct supervision must be used on a regular basis, not just when there are special problems. Thirdly, the counsellor is given control in the situation in that he/she sets the focus and timing of the observation. Without any one of these conditions, the effectiveness of direct supervision will be diminished.

The Steps of Direct Supervision

STEP ONE: INTRODUCTION

If possible, the supervisor should be introduced to the group participants at the start of the group. This introduction usually only lasts a few minutes and is designed as an initial activity prior to the formal observation period. The counsellor uses this opportunity to introduce the idea of supervisory visits to the group participants. The supervisory visits should be viewed as part of a regular back-up support system for counsellors. Seen in this light, the supervisor is simply part of the helping team and a period of observation seems natural. It is essential at this point that the counsellor be comfortable with the supervisory procedure. If this is not the case, the anxiety will be evident and the group process will be affected.

STEP TWO: TIMING OF SUPERVISORY VISIT

The supervisor comes to the group counselling session at the time designated by the counsellor. It is not always possible to predict what will

be happening in the group, however, and thus the supervisor must be prepared to leave (at the request of the counsellor) if the timing is not right.

STEP THREE: OBSERVATION PERIOD

When the supervisor comes into the counselling room it is advisable for him/her to join the group rather than sit behind the group members or at the back of the room. The counsellor should welcome the supervisor and provide a brief summary of what has been happening and what is planned for the next little while. The role of the supervisor during the observation period is to observe the group dynamics, leader skills and member needs, paying particular attention to those areas designated by the counsellor. In most instances the supervisory observation stance is generally passive, although under some conditions a more active involvement can be helpful i.e. providing information and/or modelling. It is generally a good idea to keep note-taking to a minimum as this can be disruptive. After about 20 minutes the supervisor should choose an appropriate moment and leave the group session. When leaving, it is important that the supervisor acknowledge the leader and the progress being made by the group with a comment such as: "Thanks for letting me sit in, it looks like some real progress is being made here in terms of . . ."

STEP FOUR: DETAILED NOTE TAKING AFTER OBSERVATION PERIOD

After leaving the session it is important for the supervisor to make some detailed notes which will include specific examples of what was observed. The issues under consideration are those which were identified by the counsellor along with any additional observations. To ensure that accurate notes are made, it is advisable to schedule the note-taking as close to the observation period as possible, preferably immediately after making the visit to the counselling session.

STEP FIVE: DEBRIEFING

a. General Context

When scheduling a debriefing period it is advisable to set aside a time period (a minimum of 20 minutes) when interruptions will be kept to a minimum. To start the session the counsellor should be given the opportunity to establish an overall context by describing what occurred in the specific group counselling session and how this relates to the general counselling sequence. One of the ways of helping a counsellor develop a broad perspective is to ask him/her to describe the situation (the clients and counsellor as group facilitator) in terms of a metaphor and in some instances sketch the elements of the metaphor (Amundson, 1988). For example, the counsellor might conceptualize the situation as one in which a large river is being crossed using a very unstable bridge. Some of the members might be willing to follow the lead of the counsellor while

others will be resisting using various active or passive means. With this metaphor the progress of various members and the role of the counsellor can be explored.

b. Impact of the Observation

Following the general discussion, the focus shifts to the specific time in which the supervisor was observing in the counselling room. As a starting point it is often helpful to acknowledge any impact on clients or the counsellor as a result of the direct observation procedure. In most cases the effect of the supervisory visit will be minimal, nevertheless, it is important to explore how the visit was received.

c. Strength Challenge Feedback Procedure

The strength challenge feedback procedure has been developed and refined by Borgen, Amundson, & Westwood (1990). In following this framework, the counsellor is encouraged to engage initially in a form of self-assessment. The counsellor typically describes his/her overall reactions and then comments on the skills he/she was able to use during the observation period and the group processes. Upon completion of this self-reflection and analysis, the supervisor provides specific, behavioural comments based on what was observed. The specific strengths of the counsellor are highlighted and the counsellor is encouraged (challenged) to overcome any barriers by building on these personal strengths. For example, suppose that a counsellor had difficulty using active empathy but was able to effectively use the paraphrasing skill so that feelings as well as content would be acknowledged. To support this challenge, the supervisor might be able to give some examples of how empathy was effectively used. While the counsellor may not have used empathy as much as he/she desired, the provision of concrete illustrations suggests that the use of empathy is within the behavioural repertoire of the counsellor, the challenge is to become more effective with the usage of the skill. There are, of course, situations when few examples of a particular skill might be available. Under these conditions further modelling and practice may be necessary.

d. Future Goals

To conclude the debriefing, it is helpful to focus on the goals for the upcoming session. This process might include a revision of the metaphor that was discussed earlier. The goals should be framed in terms of specific behavioural change for both clients and counsellor.

Conclusion

The impact of using direct supervision occurs at several different levels. For supervisors, there is the opportunity to provide specific feedback to counsellors based on direct observation. As counsellors receive this type of feedback in a supportive context, the relationship with the supervisor

is enhanced and the counsellor has the opportunity to benefit from another perspective. Clients are better served as a result and perceive the help they receive in a broader context, i.e. counsellor and supervisor working together as part of a helping team.

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