

REFLECTION: A SKILL TO ENHANCE SUPERVISORY PRACTICE IN DOMESTIC AND SEXUAL VIOLENCE PROGRAMS

“Reflective function is the uniquely human capacity to make sense of each other.” – Peter Fonagy

The survivors we serve are navigating complex situations and staff frequently feel stretched while offering safety, support, and advocacy. Consistent, collaborative, and accountable, supervisory approaches enable staff to bring their best, most empathetic selves to their work with survivors and their families. Reflective practice, which is one component of a larger supervisory skillset, offers a trustworthy and reliable space for supervisors to talk with staff to name strengths, unpack challenges, explore interactions, and notice staff members’ responses to their work. Ultimately, a consistent reflective practice can lead to finding new and collaborative ways to move forward. Incorporating reflection into supervisory relationships requires supervisors and staff to meet regularly, collaborate intentionally, actively consider challenges, and plan to proceed in new ways. Reflective practice is used across many fields and is in alignment with domestic and sexual violence (DSV) programs’ advocacy principles, as well as their efforts to become accessible, culturally responsive, and trauma-informed (ACRTI).

Why Use Reflective Practice in this Work?

- Staff benefit from support that strengthens their relationships with survivors and identifies strategies for individualizing services in ways that are truly survivor-defined.
- Staff may need assistance in supporting survivors with both emotional and physical safety-related needs.
- Staff can feel isolated, overwhelmed, or outside of their comfort zone while working with survivors and their families.
- Staff move at a fast pace and frequently respond to crises with little time to reflect.
- Staff who prefer to work independently may not recognize that a team approach is often most beneficial to survivors.
- Staff are affected by the trauma they navigate with survivors and may need support when they’re feeling overwhelmed.
- Staff may be unaware of cultural disconnections or implicit biases in their work.
- Staff may be early on in the process of developing trauma-informed approaches to their work and may be in need of guidance, coaching, or feedback.

Intentions for Being a Reflective Supervisor:

- Learn about each staff member and what is most helpful to them in their work.
- Be reflective, transparent, trustworthy, and open to others’ perspectives.
- Expand your own and staff’s perspectives.
- Approach the organization’s work as a collaborative partnership.
- Continually cultivate your own sense of self-awareness and encourage staff to do the same, while simultaneously increasing your capacity for self-assessment.
- Prioritize staff development while learning and teaching new skills for navigating challenges and the thoughts and feelings associated with them.
- Model skills, vulnerability, curiosity, and openness to the reflective process.
- Notice staff members’ strengths and resiliencies and share positive feedback.



- Offer opportunities that support individual and collective expression, calming, and grounding, particularly when overwhelming incidents and organizational trauma occur.
- Demonstrate the ability to hold strong feelings, complexities, and “not knowing” all the answers.

Qualities of Reflective Practice Include:

- Establishing a consistent supervisory time and a predictable process for considering the work
- Collaborating to pause and look at experiences with others in new ways, sharing ideas, and thinking about potential actions to take next
- Offering staff members a consistent supervisory relationship in which they can experience the trust, support, and respect that they are expected to offer to survivors and their families
- Supporting professional growth to build the skills that are important to each staff member’s work
- Encouraging honest discussion of the strong feelings that staff may experience; the depth of the challenges that staff face in their work; and the strategies for naming and addressing staff vulnerabilities as they arise
- Assisting staff members in identifying their unique strengths and supporting staff in applying their skills to the challenges of the work

Strategies that Support Reflection:

- Bringing attunement and mindfulness to interactions with staff, while also being present and focused on current conversations
- Taking time to focus your attention and slow down
- Sitting with another person’s strong feelings and the way they express them in the moment
- Sorting and selecting: noticing and pointing out significant information as staff members share their perspectives
- Offering perspective and sharing relevant experiences and insights as examples
- Using gentle inquiry: caring exploration to sustain engagement in the process
- Holding back: allowing the telling of the story and the accompanying thoughts and feelings to unfold with limited interruption
- Addressing differences of opinion, highlighting concerns, and discussing ideas

Common Supervisor and Staff Challenges that Affect the Use of Reflective Practice:

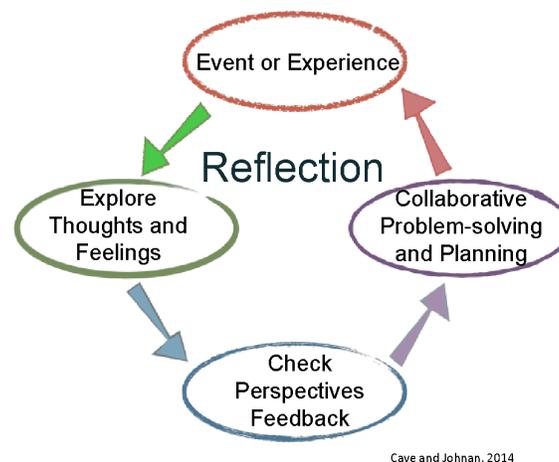
Some challenges can be named and worked through together when supervisor-staff relationships feel open and trustworthy. Navigating issues and resolving challenges together strengthens relationships and supports skill building. Other types of challenges indicate that supervisors may need coaching or to reach out to peers for support and guidance before engaging in reflective practice with staff.

When to Consider Additional Support or Guidance:

- Supervisors prefer to move at a fast pace and have difficulty slowing things down.
- Supervisors or staff are unaware of the effects of existing power dynamics and microaggressions but are able to respectfully and thoughtfully work things through.
- Staff struggle with working collaboratively, sharing information, or acknowledging mistakes.
- Supervisors struggle to identify and calm their own sense of distress and overwhelm.
- Supervisors are uncomfortable with the intentional focus on building an open and reflective relationship, as this goes against the way many people were taught to lead.
- Staff respond negatively to the increased accountability, which can lead supervisors to back away from the reflective process and from holding staff accountable for change.

Staff discomfort can be discussed as part of a reflective conversation. However, if staff or supervisors do not feel that the staff-supervisor relationship is trustworthy and emotionally safe, then reflective practice is NOT the correct skill to use. When trust is not present in the supervisor-staff relationship, use other strategies that are less relational in nature and that do not rely on expressing vulnerability, exploring feelings, or collaborating in the moment.

Using Reflection in Supervision



Prepare for the Process:

- Provide an orientation to prepare all staff for the expectations and processes involved in reflective conversations. Keep in mind that reflection is a skill to be used *with* staff, not something that is done *to* staff.
- Provide clarity about what is and isn't expected.
 - Expectations include sharing thoughts and feelings, disclosing information about work-related concerns, and engaging in collaborative problem-solving.
 - Expectations do not include engaging in therapy and the discussion of vulnerabilities in untrustworthy environments.
- Prepare yourself for staff to talk about aspects of their work in terms of either thoughts or feelings and meet them where they are comfortable.
- Create a safe space for staff to explore their strengths, interactions, experiences, and share their thoughts or feelings, including the impact on their relationships with survivors and colleagues and the effectiveness of their interactions with others.
- Offer to work with staff to consider their interactions with survivors from alternative points of view.
- Provide feedback and model flexibility and openness to change, naming mistakes and challenges, and a commitment to moving forward in new ways.

Begin the Conversation and Understand What Happened:

Ask questions and actively listen to staff responses.

- Examples of opening questions:
 - Can you tell me what happened?



- o What are you thinking or feeling about this?

Check Perspectives and Give Feedback:

Ask questions when circumstances are unclear. Check or reconsider your own views, experiences, policies, and expectations. Then, select and share your insights, experiences, and feedback.

- Examples of clarifying questions:
 - o What were you hoping for?
 - o What did others experience?
 - o Are there any unconsidered options?
 - o Are there any unconsidered resources?
- Examples of how to share perspective:
 - o I'm going to give you this feedback...
 - o Let me share my thoughts...
 - o Similar experiences others have had include...
 - o Our policy is...
 - o Resources that might help are...

Partner for Solutions:

Work together to determine what to do next, or what to do differently next time.

- Examples of how to set the stage for partnering:
 - o What do you think about this?
 - o What do you think you can you do differently next time?
 - o Is a corrective action or an apology needed?
 - o What future actions will you take?

This tip sheet was developed by NCDVTMH, Cathy Cave, Senior Training Consultant, in partnership with Rachel Cox, LCSW of the New Mexico Coalition Against Domestic Violence.

Resources

- Blumenfeld, S. with Expanded Training and Consultation Cadre, NCDVTMH (2013). "What is Reflective Supervision? What is its value within domestic violence services and programs?" adapted from the Early Head Start National Resource Center <http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/ehsnrc>
- Cave, C., & Johnan, M. Peer Supervisory Practice Orientation. July 17, 2015. Mental Health Empowerment Project.
- Gilkerson, L., Erikson Institute, and Imberger, J., Taos First Steps (2016). "Strengthening Reflective Capacity in Skilled Home Visitors". <https://www.imhaanz.org.nz/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Strengthening-Reflective-Capacity-in-Skilled-Home-Visitors-L-Gilkerso....pdf>. Washington, DC. ZERO TO THREE.
- Parlakian, R. (2016). *Three Building Blocks of Reflective Supervision. Excerpted from Parlakian, R. (2001). Look, listen, and learn: Reflective supervision and relationship-based work. Washington, DC: ZERO TO THREE.* <https://www.zerotothree.org/resources/412-three-building-blocks-of-reflective-supervision#chapter-24>



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