



## Practice Tool

# Building a positive culture of supervision: quality assurance tool for senior leaders

## Introduction

This tool is designed to support senior practice leaders in building a positive culture of supervision. It draws on the author's extensive experience of working with human services to establish effective supervision practices.

### Part 1

The tool begins by providing a brief overview of key issues for practice leaders to consider when building a positive culture of supervision.

### Part 2

A short series of questions prompts you to evaluate the culture of supervision in your organisation over four key areas:

1. Communication—aligning organisational values, policies, and practice.
2. Setting expectations and standards.
3. Providing resources and staff development activities.
4. Proactive engagement in evaluating quality.

### Using this tool

- > You can use this tool as part of an organisational quality assurance framework. It can also be helpful in prompting debate and dialogue in senior leadership teams (and across the organisation) about the role that supervision plays within the organisation.
- > You may find it useful to revisit this tool (for example, annually) to review your progress in developing a positive culture of supervision in your organisation.

## Part 1: What are we aiming to achieve?

Building and maintaining a positive culture of supervision at a time of intense pressure on public sector services is not without challenges.

However, supervision has thrived in many organisations and, where this is the case, it is likely that there will be a whole organisation approach which moves beyond simply relying on the commitment and skills of individual supervisors.

Underpinning this tool is an assumption that a positive supervision culture will involve senior leaders supporting a style of supervision which has relationships at its heart. Relationships within the organisation, with other organisations and, crucially, between practitioners and people who use services, are all important.

### **These relationships will:**

- > Provide space to reflect and integrate feelings, thoughts and actions.
- > Enable challenging conversations and promote anti-oppressive practice.
- > Provide emotional support.
- > Ultimately contribute to the best possible outcomes for all concerned.

Fundamental to this approach are senior leaders who act in ways which demonstrate that they care about the quality of supervision and understand the part that they play in creating the conditions for effective supervision to flourish.

## Core aspects of a positive culture

Culture is sometimes referred to as 'the way we do things around here'. Schein's three levels of culture illustrates the importance of understanding cultures as a dynamic process where there are developing patterns of beliefs, values and behaviours.

### Schein's Three-Level Model of Culture (2017)<sup>1</sup> applied to supervision

- > **Artifacts** – Visible behaviours, policies, and structures (e.g. supervision policies).
- > **Shared Beliefs and Values** – How is supervision talked about and justified? (e.g. is critical reflection valued over task completion? Do the values match observed behaviour and experiences?)
- > **Deeper Shared Assumptions** – Unconscious beliefs shaped by personal and professional experiences (e.g. power dynamics within supervision. Is supervision a process which actively challenges assumptions and beliefs and makes space for honest feedback?)

### Senior leaders play a vital role here in:

- > Setting the tone and expectations about what a positive culture of supervision looks like at all levels of the organisation.
- > Attending to any contradictions and mixed messages which are inhibiting supervisors and supervision practice.

### This requires action in four key areas:

- 1. Communicating** a belief in the importance of relationships and supervision as the golden thread aligning organisational values, policies and practice. Communication involves:
  - > Modelling behaviours which align with this belief.
  - > Making sure that messages about supervision fit with other dominant messages about practice within the organisation.
- 2. Setting expectations and standards** for the day-to-day delivery of supervision – articulated within a supervision policy and aligned with other policies and practices.
- 3. Providing resources and staff development activities** to support supervisors to deliver against expectations and standards.

<sup>1</sup> Schein, E. (2017). Organizational Culture and Leadership (5th edition). Wiley.

**4. Proactive engagement in evaluating quality** including listening to people receiving supervision and valuing their perspective to inform an understanding of any barriers that might be getting in the way of delivering good supervision.

**Resource:** The open access briefing for practice leaders [Building a positive supervision](#) provides a more detailed discussion about these issues.

## Part 2: Evaluating the culture of supervision in your organisation

### 1. Communicating a belief in the value of supervision

#### Summary

This starts with thinking about **why** supervision is important. It is not helpful to simply accept that it is a 'good thing' without considering how supervision can contribute to organisational goals.

- > Unless senior leaders really believe in the power of supervision as the golden thread which aligns organisational values, policies and practice outcomes, it is unlikely that effective supervision will be sustained over time.
- > Leaders who only pay lip service to supporting supervision will lack the authenticity to take people with them and establish a culture where effective supervision can thrive.

Because of this, the first questions focus on you and ask you to reflect on your own attitudes to supervision and what you think supervision helps with. Please record your responses in the table below.

How far do you believe that supervision can help with:			
	Not at all	A little	A lot
Implementing the values of the organisation in day-to-day practice			
Observations:			
Improving staff wellbeing			
Observations:			
Supporting positive relationships with people who use our services			
Observations:			

Valuing the voice of people who use services			
Observations:			
Improving practice through exploring assumptions, biases and other factors affecting the way we work			
Observations:			
Promoting anti-oppressive practice			
Observations:			
Addressing concerns about individual practice			
Observations:			
Making defensible decisions			
Observations:			
Developing positive multi-professional relationships and improving communication across services			
Observations:			

**What do your responses tell you about:**

- > What good supervision looks like?
- > What might be the consequences of poor supervision in your organisation?

**Notes and action points**

## 2. Setting expectations and standards – leadership and supervision policies

### Summary

#### a. Modelling standards throughout the organisation

Supervision policies will be at the heart of the way that expectations are identified, but equally important is the way in which expected standards are modelled throughout the system.

Authentic leaders will demonstrate through day-to-day behaviours their commitment to the style of supervision they were aiming to achieve.

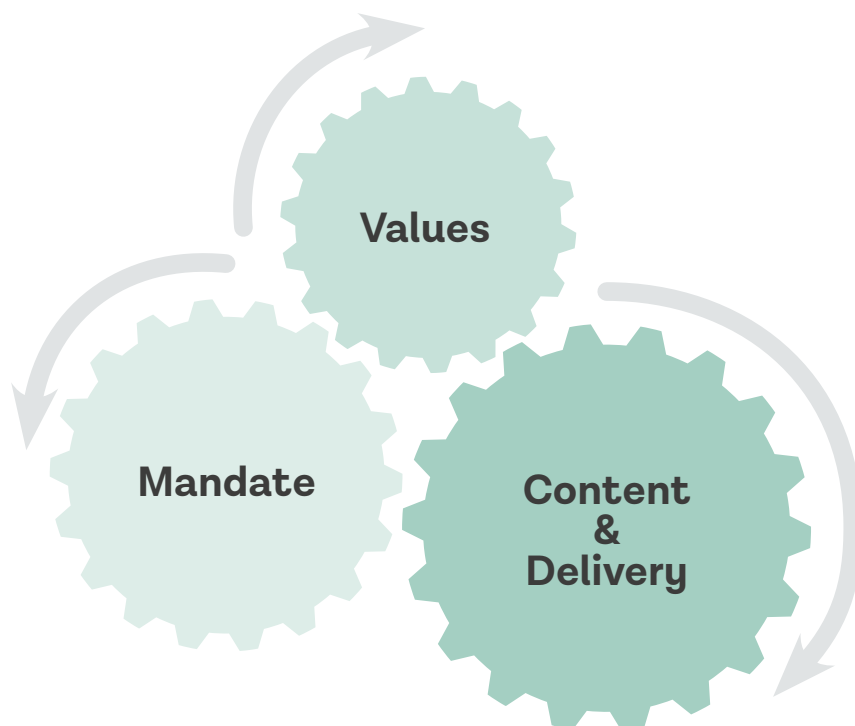
- > Therefore, the first step in setting standards must be ‘How can I model and implement this approach?’

For example, if the importance of relationships, emotional support and reflective practice are set out within a policy, but there is a lack of congruence with the behaviours of leaders, it is unlikely that expected good supervision practice will be sustained consistently across the organisation.

- > The content of supervision might change at different levels within the organisation, but the way that the fundamental values set out with the policy are implemented should not.

#### b. The importance of supervision policies

Supervision policies provide a framework to support supervisors, establishing their mandate to supervise and embedding organisational values into everyday work.



- > Clear expectations as to how supervision agreements/contracts are developed and reviewed will model respect and proper consideration of power dynamics, anti-oppressive practice and the use of authority.
- > Organisations who believe that people who use their services are equal partners will make sure that supervision and the way that it is recorded ensures that their voices are 'in the room'.
- > Curious organisations will promote challenging conversations and feedback up and down the system.

**Resource:** The open access tool [Supervision agreement template](#) supports supervisors and supervisees (at all levels within the organisation) to agree expectations of each other.

Does the policy set out...	What do we do well?	Are there aspects that need to be improved?	What do we need to do next?
The link between supervision and the values of our organisation?			
Supervision as a priority activity?			
What good supervision looks like?			
The role of supervision in promoting equity, diversity and inclusion?			
A clear message to everyone in the organisation as to what they should expect from supervision?			
How contracts or agreements should be developed and reviewed?			

What practical arrangements need to be place – including consideration of advantages and disadvantages of on- line supervision?			
<p>How supervision should be recorded to:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Contribute to defensible decision-making (moving beyond a list of tasks to be completed to an analysis of why decisions are made)?</li> <li>2. Provide an account of staff support and development?</li> </ol>			
How we will all know if supervision is working well?			
The mechanisms to respond to situations where supervision is not working well for anyone involved?			
<b>Notes and action points</b>			

### 3. Providing resources and staff development activities

#### Summary

The organisational context will have an impact on quality and effectiveness of supervision. As well as clarity of purpose and expectations, anyone who supervises another person at whatever level within an organisation will need:

- > Space – physical and emotional.
- > Knowledge and skills to do the job.
- > Support – including their own supervision.

How would we rate our approach to building a positive context for supervision?		What do we do well?	Areas for improvement.
Is the role of supervisor an 'add-on' to other activities? If so, what message do we give about supervision as a priority?	Do supervisors have protected time? Does our policy make it clear that supervision is a priority activity? Do we know that our staff all have regular supervision?		
Do we provide a private space for supervision?	Do our supervisors have physical space to provide in-person supervision where this is needed? Have we thought through the advantages and disadvantages of supervision as a virtual activity? Do we set out our expectations regarding online supervision?		

<p>Do learning and development opportunities provide supervisors with space to develop and reflect on their supervisory skills?</p>	<p>Are we confident that all our supervisors have learning opportunities of sufficient depth and quality to prepare them for the task?</p> <p>Are there opportunities for all supervisors to continue to develop their skills beyond initial training?</p>		
<p>How do we provide supervision and support for supervisors?</p>	<p>Do all supervisors at whatever level in the organisation have access to their own supervision and support?</p> <p>Are practice supervisors able to meet as peers for support and to share learning?</p> <p>Is support available for practice supervisors from minoritised groups?</p>		

How do we demonstrate as senior leaders that we are interested in supervision as a core activity?	Do we have mechanisms in place to hear the views of supervisors and supervisees about their experience of supervision?		
<b>Notes and action points</b>			

## 4. Proactive engagement in evaluating quality

Too often, supervision policies are set and supervisors are trained, but there is little activity focused on understanding what is working well, where the barriers might be to implementing the policy and how supervision can be improved.

Feedback on the way that supervision is happening on a day-to-day basis, and the experiences of those delivering and receiving supervision, must be an integral aspect of making supervision work. This will involve:

- > Honest open dialogue.
- > Regular observations of supervision.
- > A focus on demystifying what happens behind closed doors.

How this is achieved will be different in each organisation – from informal regular discussion in smaller settings to more formal methods in larger organisations. However it happens, it will involve listening to everyone involved and taking action to address barriers.

### Observation

Supervision can be one activity which remains behind closed doors and is rarely observed. Observation is an important developmental tool as well as closing the feedback loop between policy and practice.

### Resource

The open access tool provides helpful guidance about [Observing supervision](#) in organisations.

The following questions aim to help the quality assurance process and address some of the overarching questions that will need to be asked to inform any evaluation of supervision.

You may find it useful to repeat this exercise to explore the experiences of people working at different levels in the organisation. For example:

- > first line practitioners
- > practice supervisors
- > middle leaders.

## The experience of supervisees

If you were to ask these questions of people receiving supervision (at any level) in your organisation, what would they say?	Yes /No/ Maybe	If you do not know how they would respond, how might you find out?	Are you already aware of barriers that might be getting in the way of this happening? If so, is there any immediate action that can be taken?
Supervision is an integral aspect of practice within my workplace.			
My supervision takes place within a consistent professional relationship.			
Supervision is in line with policy and expected practice – including regularity and recording.			
Supervision addresses issues of power (in supervision and practice).			
Supervision promotes anti- oppressive practice.			
The views of people who use our services is an integral aspect of supervision.			
Supervision provides emotional support to help me do my job.			
Supervision helps me with curiosity, challenge and analytical thinking.			

## References

Forrester, D., Westlake, D., Killian, M., Antonopoulou, V., McCann, M., Thurnham, A., Thomas, R., Waits, C., Whittaker, C. and Hutchison, D. (2019). What is the Relationship between Worker Skills and outcomes for Families in Child and Family Social Work? *British Journal of Social Work*. 49(8), 2148-2167

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