

# Facing the challenges of supervision

**Sally Despenser** considers how workplace supervision has been affected by the economic climate, and the implications for maintaining professional standards

*'Doing supervision at the best of times can place a heavy burden on supervisors who are often isolated, nomadic outliers; all the more reason for supervisors to ensure that they have access to the support (in confidence) of a consultant and a network of colleagues'*





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In recent years, counsellors have been affected by changes to their working conditions, restructuring, redundancies, outsourcing, and loss of contracts<sup>1</sup>. Many workplace counsellors are finding it difficult to fight for and uphold therapeutic values in the face of organisational pressures<sup>2</sup>. How are these changes affecting workplace supervisors? Little has been written about (or by) supervisors caught up in these pressures.

This article explores some of the challenges facing workplace supervisors, both the employed and the self-employed. I start by recapping the purpose, tasks and boundaries of supervision, and then explore how the setting impacts on supervision. I present three vignettes to bring to life some of the issues which arise in various workplace settings (including placements). The examples I provide are fictional, but are representative of dilemmas brought to supervision, and to my workshops over the last five years. I will end by discussing supervisor training.

### What is the purpose of supervision?<sup>3</sup>

Supervision is compulsory (BACP's *Ethical Framework for Good Practice in Counselling and Psychotherapy*, clause 33). It exists to develop and maintain therapist effectiveness, to safeguard the client and to monitor ethical standards. In most workplace settings, supervision has additional functions eg monitoring boundaries and the three-cornered contract (see below). The vignettes which follow illustrate how the setting affects the fulfilment of all these objectives.

### What are the supervisor's tasks?

Brigid Proctor and Francesca Inskipp, who have written extensively about supervision theory and practice, offer a useful map<sup>4</sup> delineating the supervisor's three tasks in individual and group supervision as:

- normative (policing, exercising supervisor authority)
- formative (educative, developing the practitioner)
- restorative (supporting).

In practice, the tasks overlap. Inskipp and Proctor encourage supervisors to attend to all three tasks flexibly, avoiding getting stuck in one mode (or allowing the individual or group to get stuck in one mode).

### Have the objectives and tasks changed in recent times?

It has been suggested<sup>5</sup> that cutbacks in workplace counselling schemes (including EAPs) and the issue of cost<sup>6</sup> will make return to work the principal objective of counselling. Counsellor, Emma Cruse, reporting in *Counselling at Work*<sup>5</sup> on the BACP Workplace conference, also argues that there is a risk of 'undermining the integrity of the therapeutic profession as a whole'. What are the ethical issues faced by supervisors working in these environments?

Secondly, what are the implications for the supervisory task? In BACP accreditation and registration documents, I have noticed a growing emphasis on the role of supervisors as gatekeepers to the profession, monitors of quality, conduct and standards. There is also recent evidence from practice that the normative task is becoming more dominant. On a supervision training day, supervisors were invited to identify their current challenges. Out of 30 challenges, 28 consisted of normative tasks. I have also noticed that a new generation of supervisees may not have much respect for the supervisor's authority and experience.

What are the implications of this shift for supervisors, supervisees and clients? It affects the supervisory relationship at a fundamental level; it may undermine trust and make supervisees more reluctant to present their work. It further shrinks the thinking space in which the supervisee's own reflective capacity is nurtured. It may threaten the supervisor's professional independence if supervision becomes the agent of the organisation; and the focus on the client's process may be lost. Some of the consequences of the shift are illustrated in the third vignette below.

### Contracts and boundaries in supervision of workplace counselling

There is a distinction between in-house and external provision of workplace counselling and supervision<sup>7</sup>. This distinction will determine the details of contracts between all affected parties. In workplace counselling there are overlapping boundaries and contracts. Regardless of whether the services are provided by internal or external practitioners, clear contracting is essential for the establishment and maintenance of trust between all parties. Without a safe supervision environment, counsellors will find it impossible to present their work, and the fundamental objectives will not be met.

There will be several parties to the contract. For example, in EAP work there might be at least this number of separate contracts:

- in-house counsellor + EAP
- affiliate (external counsellor) + EAP
- supervisor (in-house) + EAP + in-house counsellor/s
- supervisor (external) + EAP + in-house counsellors
- supervisor (external) + affiliate (external counsellor)
- client + affiliate + EAP
- client + in-house counsellor + EAP
- corporate client (organisation) + EAP

Both in EAPs and other settings, including training placements, the contracts for counselling and supervision need to make clear some or all of the following:

- lines of accountability
- who holds clinical responsibility
- confidentiality: its extent and its limits
- case notes: sharing, storing, destroying (and Data Protection compliance)
- how risk (to client, other adults, practitioner and organisation) will be managed
- how risk to children and vulnerable adults will be managed
- how competence (counsellor or trainee counsellor) will be assessed, reported and shared
- how any professional concerns (eg competence, fitness to practise) will be reported and managed
- access to and limits of the service (eg number of sessions)
- cost and payment<sup>8</sup>.

Supervisors also hold and contain information, feelings and projections from their supervisees and the organisation. They are not immune to commercial pressures, conflicting loyalties and existential worries. Doing supervision at the best of times can place a heavy burden on supervisors, who are often isolated, nomadic outliers; all the more reason for supervisors to ensure that they have access to the support (in confidence) of a consultant and a network of colleagues.

The three vignettes that follow illustrate how the setting affects supervision and the supervisor in the current economic situation.

### Vignette 1

#### External supervision in the workplace

Brendan is an experienced and accredited self-employed supervisor, working in several different settings. He is a skilled group facilitator. For four years, he has provided monthly group supervision for part-time counsellors in an NHS sexual health clinic for young people and adults. He is paid on a sessional basis.

He has handled some difficult situations. For example, in this setting two years ago, he judged that one of the counsellors was not fit to practise. Within the terms of his contracts with the group and the manager, he was able to report and manage the situation. The counsellor was eventually able to return, and trust between all parties was restored.

Eighteen months ago, there were five counsellors at the clinic all on temporary contracts. When the service was relocated, two counsellors left and have not been replaced. The long-serving manager retired last year.

After a gap, a new manager arrived, tasked with 'meeting targets and improving throughput'. There have already been some changes: shorter counselling contracts (cut from six to three sessions), shorter (30-minute) appointments, and a ruthless overhaul of the waiting list. Counsellors have also been told to close the case if a client misses a session, and not to send a letter. Last week, the manager told one counsellor to split her hours across two locations. To ensure that targets are met, a new computerised casenotes recording system will be introduced next month.

The new manager has also introduced individual line management supervision. He has hinted to some of the counsellors separately that he sees external supervision as an unnecessary expense. One counsellor talks about this in group supervision and Brendan brings out into the open issues of mistrust, and the impact on team cohesion. It feels to all of them as if the team itself is being killed off.

Brendan has asked for a meeting with the manager, but has not had a reply to his emails. In his own supervision with his consultant (supervision of supervision) Brendan says that, because of the issues affecting the group, no client work is being presented. The group can talk only about their rage and grief at what feels like the destruction of the service and its values. He knows that it is not his job to rescue them and save the service, but he also knows that they feel devalued and abandoned and are furious (as he is himself). He is thinking of quitting but has not told the group. His consultant says that, at some level, the group probably knows that Brendan is going to leave them, and that (to make as good an ending as possible<sup>9</sup>), this needs to be addressed.

*'I have noticed a growing emphasis on the role of supervisors as gatekeepers to the profession'*

### How is the supervisor's work affected by all of this?

Brendan believes that attending to group process is his central task. Only then can any case work be done. His task is to provide restorative containment, maintaining the life of the group as it faces huge changes to the service.

His consultant says: 'Maybe your job is to face with them their fears about the possible extinction of the service, to keep your feelings to yourself, to address with them your planned exit and prepare them for a future without you. You also need to think about the impact on the group of the manager's sharing secrets with individuals.'

### Vignette 2

#### Internal supervision in the workplace

The setting is an independent EAP service which has not (so far) been taken over by a health insurer.

Laura is an accredited counsellor who has been employed here for three years as a telephone intake counsellor. She has been promoted to the role of team leader and in-house supervisor (replacing an external supervisor). She hopes to go on a supervision course soon. She has no group work experience. She has been told that her supervision reports will contribute to the counsellors' annual performance reviews. This is an innovation. Management have told her not to reveal that the strategic plan includes counsellor redundancies.

She manages a team of 10 part-time people who used to be her peers. Some of them are telephone counsellors, others travel to satellite offices and rooms within client organisations. She has seen her supervisees twice in newly formed groups, but has not yet got around to contracting with them. All the time has been used for management issues, and no client work has been presented. She is finding it difficult to form any sort of supervisory alliance with the counsellors, and knows that people do not trust her and she is viewed as 'poacher turned gamekeeper'. She has to defend company policies (eg cutting back on face-to-face referrals). Last week her manager said: 'We are a business, not a charity. We have targets. The market place is very competitive and we have to drive down costs.'

Privately Laura is feeling very isolated and uncertain about her new role. She realises that the boundary between herself (as manager) and the counsellors, needs to be made clear and firm. She also realises that there is a clash between her values as a therapist and the commercial values of the EAP. It is not clear how Laura will manage to balance her obligations to the organisation with her obligations as a supervisor.

### Vignette 3

#### Placement issues

The setting is a voluntary sector agency which helps refugees and asylum seekers. The service has managed to keep going in spite of budget cuts. Each year, three second-year counselling diploma students are placed here by a local college. They see three clients each for up to 10 sessions. Clients are assigned by the manager, Mrs Preston.

External group supervision, paid for by the college, is provided every fortnight by Zohra. She has been doing this for several years. The lines of communication are clearly set out in multiple contracts and there are clear policies about risk, immigration law and child protection.

Zohra writes a report on each student, which contributes to their course marks. As part of the final report, the manager of the agency is also asked for brief feedback about the students' professional behaviour.

The clarity of her contracts with the placement, the students and the course stood Zohra in good stead two years ago. When she failed a student, she was pressurised by the diploma course leader to give the student a pass. She stood her ground, paying attention to BACP's *Ethical Framework* and the terms of her contracts.

This year she has faced several challenges from Mrs Preston, who has made it clear that she thinks that the confidentiality counsellors insist on is 'precious'. Recently Zohra realised that one student has been given an inappropriate client. This situation is not covered in her contract with the agency or the course, and she takes the dilemma to her own supervision.

### Reflections on the vignettes

What do these three vignettes show us? They provide a picture of the complexity of supervising workplace counselling; particularly in an environment of change, cuts and targets. Furthermore, they highlight the importance of clear contracts and boundaries and the perils of inexperience. We see Brendan and Zohra (who are both very experienced) acting as a container, and as two independent defenders of therapeutic standards and supporters of embattled counsellors.

### Supervisor qualifications and training

Over the last few years, I have encountered a lot of confusion about supervisor qualifications and training. Participants at my workshops ask:

'I see people advertising themselves as "trained and qualified supervisors". What does this mean?'

'What do I have to do to become a qualified supervisor?'

'Does it matter that my supervisor hasn't got a supervisor qualification?'

My response is that, in order for any training to offer a meaningful qualification, and for different training pathways to achieve parity, there has to be an agreed core curriculum (hours, content, and process). In respect of counsellor training courses and BACP individual accreditation, this has been achieved. (Note: I am not referring to the Register. See [www.bacpregister.org.uk](http://www.bacpregister.org.uk))

But there is, as yet, no recognised core curriculum for supervisor training, and therefore no parity between different courses. At present, the only meaningful qualification is BACP Accreditation as a supervisor. The number of accredited supervisors is very small in relation to the number of counsellors requiring supervision.

Elsewhere in the profession the issue of supervisor qualifications is being addressed. In 2009, the British Psychological Society (BPS) agreed a set of supervision skills, based on specific competences<sup>10</sup>, and set up a register of practice supervisors who can demonstrate that they have achieved the standard. In 2012, the United Kingdom Council for Psychotherapy (UKCP) published standards of education and training leading to formal registration as a UKCP Registered Supervisor.

So the three questions currently all get the same response: until there is a core curriculum, there is no meaningful qualification other than BACP supervisor accreditation, or a qualification based on an agreed curriculum and endorsed by another professional body.

What are the implications of all this for workplace supervisors? How much does all this matter to you, whether you are reading this as a supervisee or a supervisor? My personal view is that when an activity is made compulsory, monitoring of its quality should also be introduced.

In conclusion, supervisors need to be experienced, wise, robust and well supported in order to uphold ethical standards and therapeutic values in workplace settings that are fighting for survival.

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