

Getting to the Heart of What Matters



Supervision: The Cornerstone for Caseworkers to Flourish

A Report to

The Alberta College of Social Workers

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Val has demonstrated that spirit at work can be developed and as it increases, so too does personal well-being and work-related outcomes. Her research is published in management, leadership, health care, and career journals and presented at national and international conferences.

Today, Dr. Kinjerski applies this knowledge to assist individuals and organizations flourish. She is the author of *Rethinking Your Work: Getting to the Heart of What Matters* and accompanying guidebook. An approved continuing education provider, Val offers online courses and self-studies at eLearning to Flourish.

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Getting to the Heart of What Matters

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Terms Used in this Report

Varying language and terms were used throughout this project. For example, many participants referred to themselves as social workers, others referred to their role such as assessor, child intervention worker or permanency caseworker. For the purposes of this report, the term *caseworker* has been selected and will be used throughout. *Supervisor / team lead* are used interchangeably to reflect the terms currently used in Alberta. The terms him and her are used interchangeably, but the weighting reflects the gender reality in Child Welfare. Lastly, the more generic/inclusive term, *child welfare*, has been selected over “child intervention,” the current term used in the Ministry, as some caseworkers, such as those responsible for placement support don’t identify with child intervention.

Executive Summary

The supervisory-caseworker relationship in child welfare is fundamental to caseworker effectiveness, job satisfaction, retention, well-being and the potential for positive outcomes.¹

The relationship between supervisory support and caseworker ability to flourish are intrinsically linked. A recent study revealed that social workers who flourish in child welfare in Alberta, rate their supervisory support at 80%, whereas social workers who struggle rate their supervisory support at 51%.²

But, what kind of support matters? What kind of supervisory support helps caseworkers to flourish? And, what do supervisors and team leads need to be able to provide that support?

About the project

This study was commissioned by the Alberta College of Social Workers, the designated regulatory body for the practice of social work in Alberta and professional association. The purpose of the project was to identify how best to support supervisors and team leads so they could support caseworkers in child welfare to flourish. The project was completed in collaboration with the Alberta Ministry of Human Services and focused on two areas:

1. The kind of supervisory support necessary for caseworkers to flourish at work and
2. The type of support that enables supervisors and team leads to more fully support caseworkers.

Overall, 82 caseworkers and supervisors participated in the study. A combination of focus groups and telephone interviews were held, separately, with caseworkers and supervisors and team leads across the

province. These were followed up by interviews with selected individuals to provide further clarification.

This study draws on excellence. Using an appreciative inquiry approach, the study looked for examples of excellence, strength, and moments of positivity and success. The premise behind this collaborative, strength-based approach is that if it happened before in the system, even once, it can happen again. It is possible, not just a dream. This is the hope that these stories and examples can provide.

What we found

How do caseworkers describe their experience of flourishing?

Times when caseworkers flourished stood out and were, for the most part, easily recalled. For some caseworkers, the experience was common and happened frequently. For others, it was rare and happened infrequently. Yet, for both, the experience was unforgettable.

Here is how caseworkers described the experience of flourishing:

1. Happy, hopeful and positive
2. Accomplished, competent and confident
3. Energized, engaged and excited about work
4. Passion, pride in work and job satisfaction
5. Motivated, empowered, encouraged and supported
6. Respected, trusted, and heard
7. Sense of belonging, connection and safety
8. Valued and cared about
9. Acknowledged, appreciated, validated and recognized

What kind of supervisory support assists caseworkers to flourish?

Caseworkers know what enables them to flourish. They know what they need, because they have received it and know the benefits. Not surprisingly, their experiences are congruent with the prevailing research. Caseworkers identified five key components of supervisory support which contribute to them flourishing in child welfare; that is, supervisors:

1. Are available, approachable and make supervision a priority,

2. Are knowledgeable, skilled and resourceful,
3. Create a culture of belonging and safety,
4. Foster personal and professional relationships, and
5. Build capacity and competence of caseworkers.

What kind of support enables supervisors/team leads to assist caseworkers to flourish?

In identifying the kinds of supports that will enable them to more fully support caseworkers, supervisors and team leads identified needs similar to caseworkers. One supervisor summed it up by saying, “I need the same thing I am trying to afford my staff.” The following five supports emerged as priorities for supervisors:

1. The organization values the supervisory role and treats supervision as a priority.
2. Ongoing, timely training and mentorship is readily available, supported and specific to the supervisor’s experience and requirements.
3. Elements of a supervisory practice model are clear, implemented and supported.
4. The organization, and especially the manager, trusts and believes in their supervisors.
5. Managerial support is readily available.

The responsibility for whether a caseworker flourishes or not does not lie solely with the supervisor. Indeed, it is a shared responsibility between the individual and the larger organization. For example, the supervisor’s ability to provide adequate, supportive supervision is impacted by the nature of the work and organization, constant organizational change and what some describe as “colliding initiatives,” employee turnover and vacancies, and the experience and knowledge of caseworkers.

Notwithstanding this shared responsibility and impact of organizational conditions, the relationship between caseworkers and supervisors is critical and known to impact caseworkers’ ability to flourish.

Recommendations

The supervisory role is vital to caseworkers' ability to flourish and their willingness to continue to work with the Ministry. Ultimately, the supervisory role is essential in ensuring positive outcomes for children, youth and families. These recommendations incorporate proven strategies and tools known to support supervisors as they carry out the diverse activities of their role and to assist caseworkers to flourish.

1. Create an organizational culture, inclusive of direct managers, especially; that recognizes, respects, appreciates and supports the central role of supervisors and team leads in supporting caseworkers to flourish.
2. Develop (or update) and implement a comprehensive model of supervisory practice that addresses the complexity of the role, is consistent with current knowledge about effective supervision in child welfare, is congruent with the Child Welfare Practice Model and reflects what is known to assist caseworkers to flourish.
3. Ensure that all supervisors are equipped to effectively carry out the administrative, educational, supportive and mediation functions of supervisory practice.
4. Create a culture of safety, self-care, and mindful awareness for supervisors and caseworkers.

Conclusion

There are obvious pockets of excellence and pockets of difficulty in child welfare throughout the province. Examples of caseworkers flourishing and being fully supported by their supervisors were counteracted by examples of caseworkers struggling and supervisory support lacking.

This study draws on the times caseworkers flourished and highlights the supervisory supports that assisted them to do so. In the same way, it draws on times when supervisors/team leads were able to supervise in a way that helped caseworkers to flourish and emphasizes the conditions that enable them to do that. The recommendations, therefore, build on what is possible, because it already exists, albeit in pockets and from time to time.

Introduction

“This is noble work. Supervisors need to look at themselves as the heart and soul of this Ministry. They are the gateway into the Ministry.” (Supervisor)

The supervisory-caseworker relationship in Child welfare is fundamental to caseworker effectiveness, job satisfaction, retention, well-being and the potential for positive outcomes.¹

Child welfare is a challenging, often difficult, yet tremendously rewarding career. Caseworkers, in particular, are exposed to trauma after trauma. Stress and demands that come with the work is high. Self-care and supervisory support are antidotes to compassion fatigue, vicarious trauma, and burnout.

Moreover, the relationship between supervisory support and caseworker ability to flourish are intrinsically linked. In a previous study, we found that registered social workers who flourish in child welfare, rated their supervisory support at 80%, whereas social workers who were struggling rated their supervisory support at 51%.²

But, what kind of support leads to caseworkers flourishing? And, what do supervisors and team leads need to be able to provide that support?

This research project was commissioned by the Alberta College of Social Workers (ACSW) and completed in collaboration with the Alberta Ministry of Human Services. The purpose is to better understand what support caseworkers need from their supervisors in order to flourish in child welfare and what those supervisors need in order to help them flourish. The project is a follow up to the *Flourishing in Child Protection* study completed in 2012 and is designed around the experience and knowledge of caseworkers and supervisors/team leads currently working in the field of child welfare.

Background

People who flourish at work are highly engaged and function at extraordinary levels. They build positive relationships with others and have a strong sense of well-being. Driven by a sense of purpose, people who flourish at work contribute meaningfully to the world. They are remarkably resilient to hard times and readily adapt to change – a definite strength in the child welfare field.

The aim of the *Flourishing in Child Protection* study was to better understand what helps registered social workers flourish in child welfare. Psychological well-being, spirit at work – where employees are engaged, energized and excited by their work – and management of workplace stressors were assessed.

The study revealed that although some social workers flourished and enjoyed well-being at work, many struggled. The results indicated that 66% of social work well-being was determined by the social worker's sense of engagement (spirit at work) and how well the organization responded to workplace stressors associated with health, well-being and organizational performance.

These key results indicated that effective management of workplace stressors was, in many cases, lacking. The most significant discrepancies among those who flourish and those who struggle occur in perceptions of managerial support, how change is managed and communicated, and supervisory support.

In the study, supervisory support was defined as the encouragement, sponsorship and resources provided by the immediate supervisor to the caseworker. A key workplace stress indicator, supervisory support in

child welfare in Alberta, was assessed by social workers as falling between the 20th to 50th percentile. Only 56% of caseworkers felt encouraged by their supervisors and that they could rely on their supervisor for help with a work problem. Sixty-one per cent said that they could talk to their supervisor about something upsetting or annoying at work.

A key recommendation of the *Flourishing in Child Protection* study pointed to the need for skilled supervisory support to all caseworkers. Thus, this current study asks: What supervisory supports help caseworkers working in the area of child welfare to flourish and what do supervisors/team leads need be able to provide that support?

It is recognized that supervision is but one of the factors that contribute to caseworkers ability to flourish. As one supervisor aptly stated: “It is more than the supervisors job to keep everyone solid and supported.” Other factors, including individual and organizational responsibilities that emerged in the previous study and the literature, which are not within the scope of the supervisors’ responsibility, are not addressed in this report.

Why do we care?

A growing body of research demonstrates that quality supervision positively impacts caseworker practice which, in turn, affects client outcomes. A meta-analysis of research spanning from 1990 to 2007³ pointed to the association between caseworkers’ perception of the quality of supervision, sense of emotional support received through supervision and feelings of competence, personal accomplishment, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment. Moreover, when supervisors provided tangible work-related advice and instruction, workers felt empowered, reported greater job satisfaction and were more likely to remain with the organization.

Specifically, quality supervision in child welfare is associated with the following caseworker outcomes:

- Reduced burnout and stress,³
- Increased job satisfaction,^{4,5,6}
- Increased retention,^{7,3} and
- Improved perceptions of the organizational culture and climate.^{8,9}

Client outcomes that are impacted by the supervisor-caseworker relationship and resulting casework practices included:

- Assessment and engagement,^{10,11,12,13,14}
- Client satisfaction and goal attainment,^{15,16} and
- Self-efficacy and child and family outcomes.⁸

When conducted in the context of a supportive, trusting and respectful relationship, supervision contributes significantly to quality outcomes for the caseworker and clients.

Focus of the Study

The aim of this study is to understand how to best support supervisors/team leads so they can support caseworkers to flourish in child welfare. The study focused on two areas:

1. The kind of supervisory support necessary for caseworkers to flourish at work and
2. The type of support that enables supervisors and team leads to more fully support caseworkers.

Method

This section discusses the research process followed and methodology used. It also provides demographics of participants.

Research Process

An exploratory study, using qualitative techniques described by Strauss and Corbin,¹⁷ was conducted. A combination of focus groups and telephone interviews were held, separately, with caseworkers and supervisors/team leads across the province. These were followed up by interviews with selected individuals to provide further clarification.

Focus groups were employed as they encourage participants to reflect on topics of common interest and to engage in dialogue in order to build on ideas. This type of data collection method helps generate rich insights into the topic explored.

Caseworkers and supervisors unable to attend a focus group or who preferred a private interview were invited to participate in a structured one-hour telephone interview, some of which extended to two hours.

Initially, five focus groups were set up for supervisors and five separate sessions were set up for caseworkers. Half-day sessions for each group were held in Taber (south), Calgary, and Edmonton. Sessions scheduled for Red Deer and Ft. McMurray/Grande Prairie were replaced with telephone interviews due to the limited number of registrants. Similarly,

due to the small turnout for the Edmonton group, the researcher attended a regional supervisory meeting held at a later date.

Data collection and analyses pointed to some discrepancies, for example, it was uncertain whether a provincial supervisory model existed. Thus, follow up interviews were held with two supervisors and employees from Workforce Development and Human Resource training.

Focus groups were held in October and November, 2013 and April, 2014. Telephone interviews were held in November, 2013. Follow up interviews were held in May, 2014.

An Appreciative Inquiry (AI)¹⁸ approach was employed. AI is a collaborative, strength-based approach to both personal and organizational development that is proving to be a highly effective way of engaging participants to come up with successful solutions.

Through personal reflection of times where caseworkers flourished and supervisors helped them to flourish, participants participated in structured, dyad interviews and small and large group discussions. The aim was to tease out the elements of supervisory support that helped caseworkers flourish and how supervisors/team leads could best provide this support. The responses were coded and categorized into themes. The supervisors were asked to go a step further to prioritize what would best assist them to support the caseworkers.

Participants

Overall, 82 caseworkers and supervisors participated in the study. Four people participated in the follow up interviews: two supervisors who participated in the focus groups/interviews and two additional people involved in training development.

	Caseworkers	Supervisors	Total
Focus Groups	27	28	55
Telephone Interviews	17	10	27
Total	44	38	82

Caseworkers. (37 women and 7 men) ranged in age from 24 to 61 years (average 39 years). Thirty-two were Caucasian, 5 were Indigenous, 3 were African, 1 was Asian, 1 was Sri Lankan and 1 was West Indian. Caseworkers' highest level of training were diploma ($n=2$), undergraduate degree other than social work ($n=11$), BSW ($n=27$), and MSW ($n=3$). Thirty-seven caseworkers were registered social workers, 7 were not. All worked full-time as a child intervention worker ($n=27$), assessor ($n=7$), permanency worker ($n=3$), generalist ($n=3$), or other ($n=2$). The time employed in child welfare ranged from 8 months to 22 years, with an average of 6.7 years. Eight caseworkers had less than 2 years experience, 11 had from 2 to 5 years, 14 had 5 to 10 years and 11 had over 10 years. Income ranges of caseworkers were \$30,000 to \$49,900 ($n=1$), \$50,000 to \$74,900 ($n=29$), and over \$75,000 ($n=14$).

Supervisors. (36 women and 2 men) ranged in age from 33 to 63 years (average 49 years). Thirty-six were Caucasian, 1 was Indigenous and 1 identified as multi-racial. Supervisors' highest level of training were diploma ($n=8$), undergraduate degree other than social work ($n=5$), BSW ($n=20$), and MSW ($n=5$). Thirty supervisors were registered social workers; 8 were not. All worked full-time. The time employed in child welfare (in Alberta or elsewhere) ranged from 5 to 39 years, with an average of 19 years. Income ranges were \$75,000 to \$99,900 ($n=34$), and over \$100,000 ($n=2$). Two supervisors did not report their income.

Demographic data was not collected for those individuals who participated in follow up interviews.

Project Findings

This section is presented in three parts: caseworkers' description of the experience of flourishing in child welfare, key elements of supervision that support caseworkers to flourish, and what supervisors/team leads need to be able to more fully support caseworkers to flourish.

Surprisingly, there was little, if any, discrepancy between caseworkers and supervisors' perceptions about what supervisory support helps caseworkers to flourish. Similarly, in order to be able to provide caseworkers with that support, supervisors, for the most part, identified with the same support needs as caseworkers. For the purpose of this study, supervisors were asked to prioritize the support that would best assist them to help caseworkers flourish.

A. Caseworkers' Description of the Experience of Flourishing

Times when caseworkers flourished stood out and were, for the most part, easily recalled. For some caseworkers, the experience was common and happened frequently. For others, it was rare and happened infrequently. Yet, for both, the experience was unforgettable.

Here is how caseworkers described the experience of flourishing:

1. Happy, hopeful and positive
2. Accomplished, competent and confident
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4. Passion, pride in work and job satisfaction
5. Motivated, empowered, encouraged and supported
6. Respected, trusted, and heard
7. Sense of belonging, connection and safety
8. Valued and cared about
9. Acknowledged, appreciated, validated and recognized

B. Key Elements of Supervision that Supports Caseworkers to Flourish

Supervisory support that helps caseworkers flourish falls into five categories; that is, supervisors:

1. Are available, approachable and make supervision a priority,
2. Are knowledgeable, skilled and resourceful,
3. Create a culture of belonging and safety,
4. Foster personal and professional relationships, and
5. Build capacity and competence of caseworkers.

Each of these elements are examined below.

1. Supervisors are available, approachable and make supervision a priority.

Supervision is the cornerstone of good social work practice.¹⁹ The availability of supervisors (along with a quality relationship), is a significant predictor of caseworker satisfaction with supervision²⁰ and critical thinking.²¹ Given the nature of the work, access to supervisors is required on a spontaneous basis, in addition to the need for regular scheduled supervision. Structured, focused and frequent supervision goes hand-in-hand with job satisfaction.^{7, 25}

Caseworkers report that they flourish when *supervisors make supervision a priority, they make themselves available for unscheduled supervision, and they schedule formal, regular supervision.*

Makes supervision a priority.

“I know and see the impact on my caseworkers when I am pulled away from supervision.” (Supervisor)

Caseworkers have a sense that supervision matters to the supervisor and that it goes beyond administrative supervision to include educational and supportive supervision. The supervisor is proud to be a supervisor; and sees how she makes a contribution through work. She is there for the caseworker and makes decisions in the best interest of the caseworker. For example, the supervisor may choose to opt out of a meeting if the unit is in crisis or if her attention is required.

Makes self available for unscheduled supervision.

“She always seemed to be available. I knew that I could rely on her.” (Caseworker)

“I negotiate my availability with the unit. They are waiting on me to do my work so that they can do their work.” (Supervisor)

With an attitude that supervision is a priority, supportive supervisors make it easy, comfortable and inviting for caseworkers to make contact. They are approachable. Supportive supervisors have an active presence and are readily accessible on an as-needed basis: in the office, by phone or text. They appreciate that the nature of the work requires supervisors to be available to provide spontaneous (on-the-spot) supervision: brief conversations, consultation, support, and in-the-moment guidance.

Schedules regular, formal supervision.

“She made time for me on a regular basis. She supported me to think outside of the box. Then she asked: What do you need from me to make this happen?” (Caseworker)

“I felt important, to have carved away a time each week devoted to me and my families.” (Caseworker)

While on-the-spot consultation is essential in child welfare work, supportive supervisors know that it does not take the place of regular, scheduled supervision. They commit to consistent, planned, purposeful and uninterrupted supervision as dictated by the needs of each caseworker.

2. Supervisors are knowledgeable, skilled and resourceful.

“I felt really confident coming to work. She was a strong leader and was teaching me.” (Caseworker)

Skilled supervisors know that supervisory expertise is more than being a competent caseworker. Just like it takes more than a skilled hockey player to make a competent coach, it takes more than a proficient caseworker to make a capable supervisor. Supervisors are called upon to provide four interrelated functions of supervision: administrative, educational, supportive,²² and mediation.²³

Caseworkers report that they flourish when *supervisors are skilled at providing reflective or clinical supervision, provide instrumental support around workload, are excellent models and are resourceful.*

Skilled at providing clinical supervision.

“The role of the child welfare worker is to make decisions. The supervisor is a support – to help with critical thinking; encourage her to think through the next steps. To empower her to make those decisions.” (Supervisor)

Supportive supervisors recognize the role and importance of reflective and clinical supervision in child welfare. They focus on the work that caseworkers do with children and families using a strength-based perspective. Making the link between social work theories, research and practice and reinforcing social work ethics and values, supervisors provide opportunities for caseworkers to think critically and reflect on their practice. They debrief and provide support regarding difficult and emotional cases.

Provides instrumental support around workload.

“She asked: ‘Are you okay? What can I do?’ And, she meant it!” (Caseworker)

“I am here for them. I am a leader, but I am not beyond going out with a worker or doing paperwork or doing an investigation when it gets too busy.” (Supervisor)

Supportive supervisors keep their eye on the workload and subsequent impact on the caseworker. When the workload gets overwhelming, they take work away from the caseworker. They may cover the unit so that paperwork can be completed; attend case conferences; participate in stressful, high-risk or difficult cases; or complete court documents on a multiple apprehension case. They draw on the team to support one another. They advocate with management on the caseworker or unit’s behalf.

Models the way.

“I interact with my staff the way I want to see my caseworkers conducting themselves with clients in the field.” (Supervisor)

Supervisors are aware that they are constantly modeling. They are role models of an ethical practice, a strength-based, collaborative approach, workload management, self-care, and commitment. Aware of the parallel process, they model for caseworkers the way they would like to see them treating clients.

Is resourceful.

“The work we do is very adrenalin-focused. I don’t get caught up in the drama. I remain calm and help break down complex problems.” (Supervisor)

Team Leads have expertise and experience in the field and are known for their good practice. They have supervisory training specific to child welfare. They also understand the organization and have connections and good working relationships with other offices, supervisors, community agencies and resources. They work effectively in the current socio-political environment.

3. Supervisors create a culture of belonging and safety.

To ensure the best possible service for children and families, caseworkers must feel comfortable to disclose their most intimate thoughts and experiences with the client and be open to present their work honestly.²⁴ A trusting, safe foundation is key for caseworkers to process the personal impact of practice experiences.²⁴

Caseworkers report that they flourish when *supervisors create a sense of belonging and a safe environment, promote open communication and protect caseworkers.*

Creates a sense of community /belonging.

“I felt like I was on a team . . . not us against them . . . not caseworkers against management. We were all in this together.” (Caseworker)

“No one is alone in this work. No one goes home until we all go home.” (Supervisor)

Supportive supervisors help caseworkers feel that they belong, they and their work matters, and that they feel part of the team and the organization. They foster team and team support by solidifying a group identity. If they see someone struggling, they ask “how can we support this person this week?”

Creates a safe environment.

“My supervisor doesn’t expect me to do things that she wouldn’t do.” (Caseworker)

“We have a very clear bullying policy here. If a manager knows that someone is being bullied and does nothing about it, they can be fired. If you are bullying, being bullied, or witness bullying, we have a care team that helps everyone through the process.” (Supervisor)

Supportive supervisors know that a safe environment is required for caseworkers to bring forth case difficulties, discuss practice, and share vulnerabilities and emotions associated with the work, including feelings of emotional exhaustion and compassion fatigue. They create and foster environments of mutual respect and trust, openness, acceptance and inclusivity. They make it safe to share, ensuring the caseworker that it will not be held against them. They deal with issues and conflicts, such as bullying, in a proactive manner.

Promotes clear and open two-way communication.

Communication is open and regular so that caseworkers feel safe talking about any topic. Caseworkers are kept up to date regarding changes and expectations. Regular meetings are held

to keep everyone informed. Supervisors are active listeners and open to feedback from the caseworkers.

Protects caseworkers.

“She was amazing. I knew that she had my back. She made me feel that she would always stand up for me.”
(Caseworker)

Caseworkers who flourish feel that supervisors “have their back.” “That they won’t be thrown under the bus.” They are protected from the elements and, in some cases, themselves. Supervisors protect/support caseworkers from abusive clients, bullying and the system. They share responsibility for decision making, whether outcomes are positive or negative.

4. Supervisors foster positive personal and professional relationships.

“Relationships are of utmost importance. The quality of that relationship determines the worker’s future in the organization.” (Supervisor)

“This is a really stressful job. If you don’t have a good supervisor and team, I can’t see how you can stay. I have it really good with my supervisor.” (Caseworker)

One of the strongest predictors of worker satisfaction and decision to stay or leave an organization is the quality of the supervisory relationship.²⁰ A positive relationship between the supervisor and caseworker creates the context for learning and performance²² and emphasizes the parallel process between the caseworker-client and supervisor-caseworker relationships.

Caseworkers report that they flourish when *supervisors actively care about their staff and show compassion, demonstrate professionalism, maintain and promote healthy and clear boundaries, and are transparent and accountable.*

Cares about staff and demonstrates compassion.

“If he saw that you were upset, he checked-in. I knew that he gave a damn.” (Caseworker)

“On my first day of work, the whole office got together for a welcome breakfast!” (Caseworker)

Supportive supervisors know that child welfare is difficult and emotionally challenging work. Compassion fatigue is a reality. Supervisors check-in daily. They recognize when caseworkers are struggling and inquire about how they are feeling, sleeping, and if there is something they can do to support. They make sure that new caseworkers are welcomed and that they have a desk, phone and computer. They are present for the caseworker and demonstrate positive regard.

Shows professionalism.

“Right from day one, he always asked my opinion as to what I thought I should do.” (Caseworker)

Supervisors are aware of the inherent power dynamics that comes with the role, but rather than use their power to lead, they model a parallel process of journeying together. They demonstrate respect and integrity towards the worker and faith and trust that she can and will do the job. Caseworkers see alignment between social work values and ethics and how they are treated in the workplace.

Maintains and promotes healthy and clear boundaries.

Skilled supervisors are aware of and maintain the boundaries and limits of the professional role and supervisory relationship. While supervisors know the caseworkers as individuals, they respect personal boundaries and maintain professionalism. They encourage self-care, work-life balance, and vacations.

Is transparent and accountable.

Supportive supervisors are aware of their own biases and how they impact relationships and decisions. They model willingness to take risks and are transparent about their own areas requiring growth and development, taking steps to ameliorate them. They know their limits. They balance work and life so that they are better able to handle workload demands. They are reliable. They are aware of and take responsibility to keep the workflow moving by being available and responding to caseworkers and reviewing documents in a timely manner.

5. Supervisors build capacity and competence of caseworkers.

The heart of supervision is learning.²⁶ Advancing the practice of caseworkers is well accepted as a key role of supervisors,^{22,23} but caseworkers come with a diverse array of knowledge, skill, experience, learning style, and aspiration. Their supervisory requirements vary and change as they pass through stages of their careers.

Caseworkers report that they flourish when *supervisors value and appreciate each caseworker, recognize and respect individuality, create learning environments and opportunities for mentorship and teaching, and engage and support caseworkers to create career plans.*

Values and appreciates each worker.

“No matter how busy, she takes time, even a second, to acknowledge me and my work and will follow up later in an email or note. There is no substitute for this kind of sincere appreciation and praise. There is no monetary compensation that will do that.” (Caseworker)

“When I finished my delegation training, my unit took my picture and bought me a plaque.” (Caseworker)

“When someone does something positive, or over and above what is expected, it is shared here. People feel good and valued. I know that I have it good.” (Caseworker)

Supportive supervisors validate and recognize each worker and the work they do in a way that is meaningful for them. For example, they know whether the caseworker prefers public or private recognition, a thank you card or verbal praise, a hug or a ten minute chat. Supervisors “say it forward” by documenting on the worker’s personnel file, sharing it with the manager, or providing recognition globally. However appreciation is given, it is genuine, specific, and meaningful. They welcome new caseworkers, celebrate successes, and recognize milestones.

Recognizes and respects individuality.

“She allowed me the opportunity to risk, fail, and try new things. She provided me the autonomy to grow within clear expectations.” (Caseworker)

Supportive supervisors know each caseworker: their learning style, strengths, gaps and areas for growth, and aspirations and helps create individualized learning plans. They appreciate differences among new and seasoned caseworkers and respond

accordingly. For example, they recognize the huge learning curve for new caseworkers, so provide more one-to-one training, mentoring, and support. On the other hand, they develop a more collaborative approach with senior caseworkers and give increased autonomy in accordance to the depth of experience and skill.

Creates learning environments and opportunities for mentorship and teaching.

“They have the expertise, modeling and ability to bring the worker along.” (Caseworker)

“I felt confident coming to work. She was a strong leader and she was teaching me.” (Caseworker)

Supportive supervisors allow and encourage opportunities for growth and critical feedback with a view of improving skills and abilities. They seek opportunities to build worker confidence, competence and capacity. They give concrete, specific, and timely feedback on performance. Rather than establish blame, they look for teachable moments, including those situations with difficult outcomes. They encourage caseworkers to seek support from other supervisors with different skills and expertise and facilitate mentorships and partnerships with veterans who are skilled and know the system, policy and regulations. They use unit meetings as an avenue for learning opportunities and group supervision.

Engages and supports caseworkers in career planning.

Supportive supervisors recognize that career planning is part of supervision. They are open to the caseworker’s aspirations and desire for growth and development. Career planning is included in the caseworker’s annual learning plan and opportunities are created, for example, to shadow other positions, take on more

challenging or different situations, or cover-off supervisor positions.

C. What Supervisors/Team Leads need to be Able to More Fully Support Caseworkers to Flourish

“What we do is hard work and there are certain things that help us choose this work and certain things make it more manageable. When you take that away, it weakens us and the support we can provide.” (Supervisor)

“I need the same thing I am trying to afford my staff.” (Supervisor)

Supervisors report that they require the same type of support they are trying to give their caseworkers. Times when supervisors felt that they helped caseworkers flourish, supervision was considered a priority by the organization. Managers were knowledgeable, skilled and resourceful and readily available and approachable. The organization fostered a sense of belonging and created a culture of safety. Managers facilitated and promoted personal and professional relationships. Finally, they built capacity and competence of supervisors.

The manager is very influential with regard to the role of the supervisor and how supervision is practiced in their office. Yet, just like it was recognized that it is not the sole responsibility of the supervisors to ensure that caseworkers flourish, participants also are aware that it is not the sole responsibility of managers to ensure that supervisors are able to support caseworkers in a way that they will flourish. Perhaps more importantly is the realization that it is not solely in their sphere of influence, as one caseworker observed:

“We are all driven by an outside source. Managers wish they had time to give supervisors support and supervisors wish they had time to give workers support.” (Caseworker)

Based on their experience and reflecting on times they were able to help caseworkers flourish, supervisors prioritized five specific supports that enhanced their ability to help caseworkers flourish.

1. The organization values the supervisory role and treats supervision as a priority.

“I need the time and ability to support my caseworkers.”
(Supervisor)

“Take another look at the role of supervision. What is the job description? What is the priority? What can be taken away?” (Supervisor)

Managers that make supervision a priority recognize the importance of the role and do what they can to support it and the supervisor. They protect the supervisor’s time to enable him to honour his supervisory commitments, shifting priorities when needed. They actively manage competing priorities or what was referred to as “colliding initiatives.” Appreciating the nature of the work and the requirement for timely decisions, managers make themselves available to discuss complex situations and strategies. They consider the experience and competency of the supervisor and caseworkers, turnover and vacancies, and the impact of demands and organizational change with a view to attaining adequate staff ratios. Recognizing the value of team and team support, they create and foster a strong, supportive supervisory team, within the office and region.

2. Ongoing, timely training and mentorship is readily available, supported and specific to the supervisor’s experience and requirements.

“My manager has empowered me to make a difference, increased my confidence, and increased my critical thinking. I want to mirror that.” (Supervisor)

The move from caseworker to supervisor is a big transition. A competent caseworker does not guarantee a competent supervisor. Supervisors who are successful in this transition and are able to help caseworkers flourish identify the value of ongoing supervisory training, refreshers and opportunities to reflect. New supervisors, especially, benefit from frequent supervision and mentorship. Seasoned and experienced supervisors tend to benefit more from coaching that emphasizes professional development.

Ongoing, regular, managerial supervision/ coaching contributes to supervisors' development and ability to help caseworkers flourish. In addition to casework and administrative support, all supervisors benefit from developmental support, critical thinking, reflective and professional development opportunities and career planning. Leadership training for supervisors is appreciated and helpful to those fortunate to take it, especially when a mentor is available to help make the connection to child welfare.

3. Elements of a supervisory practice model are clear, implemented and supported.

"I am at my best when I know what is expected of me, and what is expected of me is in line with evidence-based practice." (Supervisor)

A supervisory practice model is adopted and is consistent with the prevailing casework philosophy. A shift from a crisis, reactive orientation and deficit mode is replaced by a strength-based, collaborative perspective. A fear-based culture is replaced with an open, supporting culture. Supervisors are trained in and supported in this new perspective. They experience congruency between how they are supervised, expected to supervise, and evidence-based practice.

4. The organization, and especially the manager, trusts and believes in their supervisors.

“He believed in me, it is as simple as that.” (Supervisor)

“She acknowledges that I know what I am doing . . . so doesn’t question everything I do. She trusts me.”
(Supervisor)

Supervisors are at their best in supporting caseworkers to flourish when they feel valued and recognized. They know and feel that the organization believes that they are competent and capable. They are trusted to do the work. Supervisors are given autonomy to manage their unit, decide what it needs and how best work gets done. At the same time, supervisors know that support is available when required.

5. Managerial support is readily available.

“When I am supported by management . . . that frees me up and gives me energy to do other work.” (Supervisor)

“She [the manager] said, ‘You did your best and you did it in good faith, so we will support you.’” (Supervisor)

Supervisors are best able to help caseworkers flourish when they sense that management is there for them. Moreover, managers are part of the team, readily becoming involved with the supervisor and caseworker on difficult cases. Rather than feel vulnerable and at risk, supervisors feel safe and supported. They are respected and provided with a safe environment to have difficult conversations without judgment. It is safe to vent. They know that they can call on the manager to discuss complex cases or issues.

Conclusion and Discussion

There are obvious pockets of excellence and pockets of difficulty throughout the province. Examples of caseworkers flourishing and being fully supported by their supervisors were counteracted by examples of caseworkers struggling and supervisory support lacking or, as described by some participants, as supervisory bullying. Examples of supervisory support illustrating the four supervisory functions widely accepted in the literature^{22,23} – administration, educational, supportive, and mediation – were offset by examples of supervisors who were unavailable and unable to provide adequate supervision, often resorting to administrative supervision alone.

This study draws on excellence. Using an appreciative inquiry approach, the study looked for examples of excellence, strength, and moments of positivity and success. The premise behind this collaborative, strength-based approach is that if it happened before in the system, even once, it can happen again. It is possible, not just a dream. This is the hope that these stories and examples can provide.

The focus of this research project was two-fold. The first was to ascertain the kinds of supervisory support necessary to support caseworkers to flourish. Caseworkers know what enables them to flourish. They know what they need, because they have received it and have benefited as a result. Not surprisingly, their experience is congruent with the prevailing research. For example, it is known that years of supervisory experience and the amount of time spent in supervision are not significant predictors of worker satisfaction. What are significant predictors are the availability of the supervisor, the quality of relationship between the

supervisor and caseworker, the level of critical thinking and participation in group supervision.²⁰

Caseworkers identified five key components of supportive supervision which echo the current literature. Supervisors who support caseworkers to flourish:

1. Are available, approachable and make supervision a priority,
2. Are knowledgeable, skilled and resourceful,
3. Create a culture of belonging and safety,
4. Foster personal and professional relationships, and
5. Build capacity and competence of caseworkers.

The second aim was to identify the kinds of supports that will enable supervisors/team leads to more fully support caseworkers. Supervisors identified similar support needs they are attempting to provide for their caseworkers and prioritized the top five:

1. The organization values the supervisory role and treats supervision as a priority.
2. Ongoing, timely training and mentorship is readily available, supported and specific to the supervisor's experience and requirements.
3. Elements of a supervisory practice model are clear, implemented and supported.
4. The organization, and especially the manager, trusts and believes in their supervisors.
5. Managerial support is readily available.

The responsibility for whether a caseworker flourishes or not does not lie solely with the supervisor. Indeed, it is a shared responsibility between the individual and the larger organization. This study simply acknowledges the critical relationship between caseworkers and supervisors and its known impact on caseworkers' ability to flourish. Therefore, it seems appropriate to focus recommendations on strengthening support to supervisors so they can provide support necessary for successful casework and client outcomes.

Recommendations

The supervisory role is vital to caseworkers' ability to flourish and their willingness to continue to work in the Ministry. Ultimately, the supervisory role is essential in ensuring positive outcomes for children, youth and families. A strong organizational supervisory framework is required to support effective and sustained child welfare supervision. The following recommendations incorporate proven strategies and tools known to support supervisors as they carry out the diverse activities of their role and to assist caseworkers to flourish.

1. Create an organizational culture, inclusive of direct managers, especially, that recognizes, respects, appreciates and supports the central role of supervisors and team leads in supporting caseworkers to flourish.
 - a. Prioritize the supervisory role, including formal and informal supervision.
 - b. Protect the availability and accessibility of supervisors so that they can be available and accessible to caseworkers.
 - c. Promote and support strong relationships between supervisors and their caseworkers.
 - d. Assist supervisors to balance the administrative, educational and supportive functions of the role and demands.
 - e. Ensure managerial support is available to supervisors in order to fulfill their role.

2. Develop (or update) and implement a comprehensive model of supervisory practice that addresses the complexity of the role, is consistent with current knowledge about effective supervision in child welfare, is congruent with the Child Welfare Practice Model and reflects what is known to assist caseworkers to flourish.
 - a. Delineate a current child welfare practice philosophy and approach that is consistent with an engaging, strengths-based, collaborative perspective.
 - b. Clarify and prioritize the role and responsibilities of supervisors in an updated job description.
 - c. Identify expectations of supervisors/team leads and of the supervisory relationship (e.g., requirement for formal supervision, supervisor-caseworker ratio, building caseworker competence, evaluation of supervisor).
 - d. Underscore the importance of the supervisory role in helping caseworkers to flourish.
 - e. Identify a progressive continuum of training and professional development for new and experienced supervisors that is consistent with the supervisory practice model.

3. Ensure that all supervisors are equipped to effectively carry out the administrative, educational, supportive and mediation functions of supervisory practice.
 - a. Foster a culture of critical, reflective thinking within a strength-based, collaborative perspective, providing additional training where required.
 - b. Assist supervisors in evaluating their proficiency to provide supervision in line with the supervisory model and current child welfare practice approach; develop and implement a learning plan to address their learning needs and increase competence.
 - c. Create and implement a strategy to assess personal suitability of aspiring supervisors and continued “fit” of existing supervisors.

- d. Implement a progressive training continuum and provide ongoing supervisory training, starting with the immediate needs of new supervisors for ongoing professional development and coaching for seasoned supervisors.
 - e. Make regular supervision and mentorship available to all supervisors, giving special attention to first year supervisors.
 - f. Provide opportunities for formal and informal peer supervisory support.
4. Create a culture of safety, self-care, and mindful awareness for supervisors and caseworkers.
- a. Acknowledge the potential emotional consequences of the work and offer researched-based stress reduction methods such as mindfulness training.
 - b. Foster a safe, supportive environment where caseworkers and supervisors can identify concerns and support needs and receive emotional support.
 - c. Assist supervisors and caseworkers to self-identify when issues and stressors are becoming overwhelming and provide the necessary supports.
 - d. Create systematic responses to stress, secondary traumatic stress, compassion fatigue and burnout.

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