

RAN Advice Forum Report

“Effective Supervision”

June 21, 2019

Introduction

1 The Forum began with the award of the RAN Quality Standard to Age UK Berkshire, Launchpad and West Berkshire Carers Hub. Richard Harrison, RAN Chair, then highlighted the way RAN defines ‘supervision’ in its Quality Standard, and this was followed by three presentations:

- Francesca Yates described supervision at Communicare
- Ali Carroll described supervision at Reading Mencap
- Sarah del Tufo talked about the different approaches to supervision she had observed during assessment of RAN members against the Quality Standard.

2 Participants then worked in discussion groups to consider 3 questions:

- What does effective supervision look like in our organisation?
- What are the problems we encounter?
- What could we do better?

3 Each group’s conclusions were then shared in a plenary session. The key points emerging from the presentations and discussions are set out below.

Why is supervision important?

4 For two main reasons:

- To ensure that your service users are at the centre of your work and get a high quality experience and outcome
- To develop your staff and volunteers - by providing a safe and supportive opportunity for them to reflect on their experience, raise issues, explore problems, discover new ways of handling situations and themselves, and make action plans for the future

5 But there are other reasons too:

- To protect your staff and volunteers - by identifying significant levels of stress and excessive workloads
- To help you identify and manage risk to your organisation
- To ensure that your policies and procedures are being followed, and that boundaries are being properly managed

6 There can be a tension in supervision between accountability and learning and development and every organisation has to find a balance between the two. But the potential benefits are significant:

- Better outcomes for your service users
- More aware, skilled, confident and less stressed staff and volunteers

How should you supervise?

7 There is no single right way of doing effective supervision - it depends on the nature of your work, the level of service you offer, and the experience of your staff and volunteers. **But there is a wrong way, and that is not to do much supervision at all.**

8 There are two main methods - formal supervision and informal supervision. Every organisation has a different balance between the two, partly determined by the services it offers. If it does casework then formal supervision is particularly important. Organisations which run a number of different projects may well have different supervision arrangements for each project. Each organisation needs to find the balance between formal and informal supervision that works for them.

9 Formal supervision can involve case-checking or time specifically set aside for staff and volunteers to have a 1 - 1 discussion with a manager or an external consultant about particular experiences with service users. This should be underpinned by a clear supervision policy, with the roles of supervisor and supervisee explained, and supervisors receiving supervision training.

10 Informal supervision works best where managers have a genuinely 'open door' policy and are ready to listen to staff and volunteers whenever they have a problem they need to discuss. It can take many forms:

- Shadowing and observation
- Conversations with a manager over a cup of tea
- Team meetings
- Daily meetings to share current issues
- Using mentors
- Peer support through conversations with experienced colleagues

Should you treat staff and volunteers differently?

11 No. All of the RAN member organisations that have achieved the RAN Quality Standard and use both paid staff and volunteers take the same approach to supervision for both groups.

What are the main problems organisations have with supervision?

12 There are several common problems:

- Finding time to do it, with all the other pressures on managers
- In a busy office with limited space, doing informal supervision when a staff member or volunteer needs to talk about an experience with a client can be very distracting for others who are trying to cope with heavy workloads
- Doing informal supervision while maintaining client confidentiality
- Supervising volunteers. They are typically only available for short periods each week, and not all at the same time, so ensuring their work is monitored and they can share in the feedback is not as easy to arrange. Some may not accept the need for supervision or understand the importance of maintaining standards and accountability, and they can, of course, leave at any time. So robust recruitment processes, training, clear expectations in the form of a code of conduct, and a budget for their supervision are all important
- The work in many of our organisations is emotionally draining, because of the complex and difficult issues many of our service users bring to us. This is true for both staff and volunteers, and can make it difficult to maintain their motivation or to retain them at all. But the manager or CEO very often feels the stress of the job most acutely yet may have no arrangements for regular supervision. The stress is made worse if the CEO does not have a supportive relationship with his or her Chair.

What could we do better?

13 There were several suggestions:

- Organise regular time slots for training and development, including supervision training.
- Make someone responsible for ensuring that supervision is taking place
- Arrange mental health first aid training
- Get access to Employee Assistance Programmes
- Create arrangements for regular supervision for our managers and CEOs

Richard Harrison
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