

THE SUPERVISOR IN CHILD WELFARE

By¹

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Introduction

The learning organization is one that uses "new information which challenges accepted organizational norms and practices ... to reexamine the way in which the organization performs its functions, and thus helps the organization 'unlearn' its previously used dysfunctional patterns...[Information] becomes a vehicle through which the organization examines itself and its decision making and operational behavior; new information becomes a stimulant to rethink the norms of the organization and the way in which it delivers services." (Cherin & Meezan, 1998, p. 10). Organizational learning is a wonderful goal, and an occasional reality. A learning organization is one that has a questioning and harvesting mentality. Everyone individually, and the organization itself, are continually reviewing their activities and outcomes, extracting knowledge from that review, building better-to-best practices from that review, and implementing/applying those practices across the organization. Nothing is sacred in the learning organization; no practice cannot be improved, and no one has "custody" over any practice. Anyone, anywhere, can suggest improvements in anything. Thus, the "learning" organization is also the "unlearning" organization and, even more, the "teaching" organization. You cannot learn unless you also unlearn, and learning is enhanced by teaching what you have learned.

The ability to be a successful learning organization requires two factors to be present: 1) a culture of learning/unlearning/teaching; and 2) the time to do the learning/unlearning/teaching. The learning culture is what Chris Argyris (1993) called double loop learning. Single loop learning is responsive and adjustment focused: if the room is too hot, you lower the temperature; if it is too cold, you raise it. Double loop learning also *asks about* the temperature, and *thinks about* what the temperature ought to be.

Having the time to learn depends, in part, on whether the organization wants to learn and makes time for it. It also depends, in part, on the nature of the work the organization does, and how planful it can be in carrying out its functions. Child welfare agencies have trouble with respect to both of these factors, making supervision in these organizations a special challenge.

Crisis Management versus the Learning Organization

Work in child welfare presents at least seven obstacles that can impede agencies from becoming learning organizations. The first issue is the overwhelming and tragic nature of the job itself, especially in child protection. Pediatric trauma is among the most difficult things with which we deal, so the nature of child protection -- dealing with neglected, abused, and exploited children and the people who might have maltreated them -- is, per se, very stressful. Thus, the job is often not a "feel good" one, but rather a "feel bad" one.

Second, making matters even worse, is that a "job action" can occur at any moment. Problems can and do occur at any time of the day or night. In small communities, supervisors and workers are on call in the evening and on weekends, leaving little energy to devote to participation in learning activities. In larger communities, there is a separate staff that handles evening and weekend emergencies, but they have little contact with day staff. This segmentation of service delivery, as well as the segmentation of functions within a complex child welfare organization, impedes learning from experience.

Third, making matters more complicated, the "reality" of the situation in child protection is often contested in a variety of ways -- by parents, by other professionals, by the courts, and by the community. The Child Protection Services (CPS) worker has, somehow, become not the person who helps children and families, but rather the person who takes children away from

families. It is hard to be a learning organization when your workers are consistently feeling challenged or contested, and work on a sprint/pause basis.

A fourth problem is the poor harvesting of "best practices." Child welfare agencies are, in part, like surgical field hospitals. Much can be learned, tragically, *because* of the appalling conditions under which child welfare staff work and the tragic situations that they confront. For a variety of reasons, child welfare agencies are not good at sifting through practices to build knowledge, testing that new knowledge, and solidifying change based on proven knowledge. A culture of action, of child protecting, of "always-at-the-ready," is poorly suited to knowledge building and transfer. Emergencies and tragedies tend to form the impetus for policy and practice changes, rather than the availability of experience derived or empirically tested new knowledge.

Fifth, resource limitations impede systematic development and application of new knowledge. There is a perception in the United States that child welfare can be accomplished on the cheap. This results in high caseloads and insufficient services for families, to say nothing of the failure to provide a safety net for families that might prevent child maltreatment. Families needing services are often placed on waiting lists or are provided services that are available rather than those that are needed. This service delivery environment does not foster reflection on program effectiveness and innovation in service design or delivery.

A sixth problem is related to characteristics of staff. Child welfare staff tend to lack professional degrees in the helping professions and to turn over at very high rates (Pecora, Whittaker, Maluccio & Barth, 2000); in some communities, turnover rates reach 100% per year. As a consequence, personnel often do not have a framework within which to make decisions or

deliver services, and agencies often lack an institutional memory upon which to develop policies and procedures and the organizational mechanisms to transfer knowledge to new employees.

A seventh problem is the absence of opportunities for staff to be innovative. Staff's ability to be innovative tends to be hindered by legal frameworks and agency policies that make "playing by the rules" the dominant game in child welfare practice. This framework, of course, needs to be present, but it also creates a "chilling effect" on the supply of new ideas and the application of those that do emerge. The innovative spirit within the organization and its employees is devoted to developing "workarounds" to the politico-legal mandates that come from State and Federal governments through statutes and regulations.

In conclusion, there are many obstacles to the child welfare agency becoming a learning organization. Moreover, the very limited literature on supervision in child welfare reflects the fact that even the academic community has not taken up the challenge of helping these agencies move in this direction. In fact, there have been few attempts to specify the critical elements of supervision within this field of service, or to apply general supervisory principals to practice within it.

Supervision in Child Welfare

Material in this chapter is based upon a three year collaborative effort to develop and deliver training in child welfare supervision under the auspices of a grant from the U.S. Children's Bureau. It takes into account the harsh realities of work and supervision in child welfare. The chapter is divided into four sections: the legal and organizational framework for the provision of child welfare services; current thinking about best practices in child welfare; managerial elements of supervision; and the challenges to transforming child welfare agencies into learning organizations.

The Legal Framework of Child Welfare Services

The legal framework within which child welfare agencies operate is codified in federal law. The federal statutes, summarized in Figure 1, have, since 1974, provided the template by which state child welfare systems and child welfare supervisors must operate. These laws are often viewed as an obstacle to innovation in child welfare services and to child welfare agencies becoming learning organizations. Child welfare professionals devote a great deal of time and effort to ensuring and documenting compliance with the state laws and agency policies designed to meet the requirements of the federal statutes described in this figure. Much of the funding for child welfare services is dependent on such compliance, and failure to abide by federal mandates may result in a loss of programming money for the agency.

Additionally, agency staff must respond to periodic changes in federal mandates. These mandates are sometimes inconsistent with one another; at times, new mandates have contradicted those that have come before them. Moreover, many of the technicalities of the laws are difficult to understand and implement, making the supervisors' educational tasks all the more difficult.

A number of examples illustrate these points. The primary thrust of the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act, which became law in 1974, was the identification of maltreated children and the protection of such children from those who inflicted harm upon them. But between 1980 and 1997, the federal mandate shifted to maintaining familial integrity through the aggressive use of family preservation services. This position was reinforced in 1993 with the passage of the Family Support and Family Preservation Act. However, with the enactment of the Adoption and Safe Families Act in 1997, the emphasis shifted away from family preservation and back to child safety. Thus, within a generation, child welfare staff had to shift the focus of their thinking about how to serve children and families more than once.

Similarly, for almost three decades, child welfare professionals had been educated and trained to consider a child's and family's racial heritage when making foster and adoptive placement decisions. With the adoption of the Multiethnic Placement Act as amended by the Interethnic Placement Provisions (MEPA-IEP), these professionals are now restricted from considering race, color or national origin except in extraordinary circumstances.

However, there is an important exception to MEPA-IEP's general rule. According to the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA), which is exempted from the provisions of MEPA-IEP, when considering the placement of an "Indian child," child welfare professionals must place children according to criteria that require them to consider ethnic heritage² as an almost exclusive factor in determining where a child should be placed. To complicate this matter, a child may identify as Native American, and still may not qualify as an "Indian child" under statutory definitions. Therefore, not all children who identify as Native American are "Indian" within the meaning of the statute, and this group of non-"Indian" but Native American children do not benefit from the added protection of the ICWA.

These examples demonstrate why the evolution of the legal framework for child welfare services has contributed to the difficulties of child welfare agencies becoming learning organizations. When the "rules" change or contradict each other on a regular basis, as they have in child welfare, too much time is spent on "learning" or "unlearning" new or previous mandates, leaving little time for innovation or the application of lessons learned to the improvement of services to clients or organizational functioning.

² Note that the Federal government views the designation as "Indian" as a political rather than a racial or ethnic designation.

Figure 1

The Evolution of the Legal Framework for Child Welfare Services and Its Implications for Practice

Statute	Year	Major Provisions	Major Practice Implications
Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA)	1974	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establishes basic requirements for state child welfare systems to receive federal funds. • Mandated reporting of child abuse and neglect. • Mandated use of multidisciplinary teams. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establishes template for state child welfare programs. • Every state child welfare system reflects federal requirements to ensure federal funding. • Establishes child maltreatment is entry point to child welfare system, a more restrictive entry point than previously present in the system
Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA)	1978	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establishes federal <i>substantive</i> law for handling child welfare cases involving “Indian” children. • Applies on or off the reservation. • Requires notice to tribe or Secretary of Interior in child welfare cases involving Indian children. • Child’s tribe made party to legal proceedings. • Delineates tribe’s right to intervene or remove case to tribal court. <p>Higher legal standards required at each stage in legal proceedings.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognizes children as members of both a family and a tribe. • Placement based upon political designation of "Indian" • Exacting notice requirements to various tribal and non-tribal authorities may slow process and case progress. • Makes removal from home and termination of parental rights more difficult. • Children adopted by family members, within tribe or within Native American community.
Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act; codified as Titles IV- B and IV- E of the Social Security Act	1980	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Federal funding support for family preservation and family reunification services • Federal funding for adoption subsidies • Introduced time-limited foster care placement and required permanency plans within 18 months • Established administrative or court review process • Mandated information systems and enhanced record keeping. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Development of family preservation and reunification programs • Workers focus shift to achieving permanency within 18 months • By mid-1980s, lower number of children in foster care but numbers rise again in late 1980s and through the 1990s.

Family Support and Family Preservation Act	1993	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Established funding stream dedicated to family support and family preservation services within Title IV-B Expanded funding of family preservation service •Provided first coherent funding stream for family support services. •Increased flexibility in use of funding--savings from avoiding foster care placement can be used for family support and family preservation programs. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Expansion of family support and family preservation programs •Expansion of child welfare's functions to the provision of services to families not yet involved in the child protective services system •Purpose is to reduce the number of children entering foster care.
Multiethnic Placement Act (MEPA) & Interethnic Placement Provisions (IEP)	1994 and 1996	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Prohibits routine consideration of race, color or national origin in making foster care and adoptive placements or licensing foster or adoptive homes •Amendments prohibit any consideration of these factors except in the rarest of circumstances unique to individual case •Exempts application of ICWA from its provisions establishes specific financial penalties for failure to comply. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Requires shift in mind set of workers regarding the role of race in child welfare practice requires color blind practice •Requires rethinking and greater focus on cultural competency in practice to identify cases where race, color, national origin are significant issues •Creates seemingly differential treatment between Indian children and other children; demands greater efforts to recruit foster and adoptive families •Potential loss of financial support for states that do not comply
Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA)	1997	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •While recommits to family support and preservation, child safety is again paramount concern •Family support and preservation funds available for wider range of purposes than previously allowed, thus possibly making less money available for these services •Mandatory termination petitions under certain circumstances •"Aggravated circumstances" cases, as defined by individual states, permits early termination in any case •Shortened time limits for reunification •Concurrent planning for return home and alternative permanent arrangements 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Shift in focus to child safety may result in increase in out of home placement •Shortened time frames make the successful provision of services more difficult (especially in cases with co-morbid problems in parental functioning) •Mandatory termination provisions under federal and state law may result in many children being made permanent wards of the state •May result in quicker permanence for children •Expanded use of family support and family preservation funding may result in less money being used for these services.

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Mandates adoptive placement across county and state line •Requires use of electronic media to expedite permanence. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Expansion of funds for adoption promotion and adoption support services.
The Foster Care Independence Act & the Chafee Foster Care Independence Program	1999	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Mandates that certain portions of federal funds be spent on children to prepare them for aging out of foster care •Requires a conscious process of planning for aging out of foster care to begin at earlier age •Permits states to use portion of funds for rent, job training •Allows some services to continue beyond age 18. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Youth who age out of foster care system will be supported into their young adulthood •Helps young adults develop job skills or pursue education •May prevent homelessness among former foster children •Substance abuse and other problems experienced by youth who have spent time in foster care system may be diminished •May track children into independent living rather than adoption due to reduced hazards associated with this option

Current Thinking About Best Practices in Child Welfare

Central to adequate supervision in child welfare is knowledge of “best practices” within the field. This knowledge is especially important for supervision in child welfare, because many workers lack professional training and thus learn how to be competent child welfare practitioners on the job.

Just as legal mandates change, views of best practice in child welfare have varied over time. Indeed, best practice in child welfare is a dynamic phenomenon, and, to some extent, always in flux. An example of a ‘best practice’ that has been abandoned is the removal of out-of-wedlock children from the care of their single mothers. That is, ‘rescuing’ children from their immoral mothers is no longer regarded as best practice in the field.

In addition, definitions of best practice are reactive and vulnerable to external pressures. The media, policy makers, and the public all exert influence on the child welfare system, how it defines best practice, and how it carries out its tasks. For example, if a child is killed by a caretaker, the child welfare system, rather than the caretaker, is often the focus of blame. These tragedies sometimes cause changes in what is regarded as best practice, and therefore can affect both substantive and procedural issues that surface during supervision.

Moreover, as with the legal mandates, best practice concepts are sometimes in conflict with one another. In these instances, what supervision requires is a thoughtful consideration of the needs of individual children. A good illustration of this is the conflict between protecting children and preserving families. Most children who come to the attention of the child welfare system have been harmed in some way by their parents. At the same time, best practice recognizes the importance of family for children, and that most children are better off in their own families. Thus, in every case, child welfare supervisors must balance issues of child safety with the importance of family preservation.

Finally, there may be conflicts between what experts regard as best practices and the legal and policy mandates placed on the child welfare service system. These situations pose real challenges for child welfare supervisors. Supervisors cannot foster the violation of laws and policy by workers even though they may feel such violations are in a child's best interest. An example of where such conflicts are likely to arise is in the implementation of the Multi-ethnic Placement Act, which requires "colorblind" practice, as described above.

In this section, five child welfare best practice concepts that should be considered and balanced in supervision are discussed: child protection and safety; family centered practice; permanence for children; culturally competent practice; and outcomes-based practice.

Child Protection and Safety: Child protection and safety refer to the child welfare agency's duty to children who are neglected, abused, exploited, or rejected by their caretakers³. Child protection has been a central component of child welfare best practice since the late 1800s, following the much-publicized case of Mary Ellen, a child abused by her foster parents (Kadushin & Martin, 1988). Child safety became even more important in 1974 with the passage of the CAPTA, which focused on reporting and investigating possible child maltreatment. It was again reemphasized in 1997 in the language of ASFA. Both child protection and child safety guide practice during the investigation of initial reports of child maltreatment. And it continues to guide practice when one is monitoring cases open to the child welfare agency, where the goal is to prevent further maltreatment from occurring.

Supervisors must ensure workers gather data on child, parent, family, and community factors that can either foster or endanger child safety, and assist workers in decision-making about child safety and risk. Often agencies use standard risk or safety assessment tools to gather and evaluate these data. Best practice requires both the provision of services to prevent future

child maltreatment in cases where children remain with their parents, and the removal of children deemed to be in danger of further maltreatment from their home. Thus, supervisors must be cognizant of the critical dimensions of parenting styles and parental abilities that put children at risk or protect them from it.

Family-Centered Practice: The child welfare system's commitment to families has ebbed and flowed over its history. Family centered practice can be defined as practice demonstrating an appreciation that: 1) the well-being of all families is the cornerstone of a healthy society; 2) the primary responsibility for the development and well-being of children lies within the family; 3) every family has needs that are unique at each stage in its life span; 4) families are entitled to self-determination, privacy, and fair access to resources and services to help them care for their children; and 5) parental rights are conditioned by an obligation to protect children and promote their development and well-being (Manalo & Meezan, 2000).

The primary challenge in supervision is helping workers identify, respect, enhance, and build upon family strengths, not just focus on their problems. Services need to be directed to the family as a whole, as well as its individual members, and such services need to encourage family members to be independent and interdependent rather than dependent.

Many child welfare workers are so dedicated to child protection that they need help in developing supportive, empowering, and respectful relationships with families. They may also need the knowledge and skills that will enable them to link families to a wide variety of services that are crucial to meeting the array of needs that have brought them into contact with the child welfare system. Each family is unique, and as a consequence their service needs are unique. Thus, each family, in conjunction with the worker, will have to develop a unique service plan. "One size" service plans (e.g. sending all caretakers to parenting classes), while easier to

³ If someone other than a caretaker is responsible for harm to the child, law enforcement is the social agency responsible for investigation, unless

develop, will neither optimize results for families who are involved in the child welfare system nor empower them to take control of their situations.

Permanence for Children: Permanence for children emerged as a best practice concept in child welfare at the end of the 1970s, with the realization that a half a million children in the United States were languishing in foster care (Children's Defense Fund, 1978). The majority of these children had been removed from their families in order to protect them, but little was being done to rehabilitate families and/or to develop stable living situations for the children. Knowledge of the circumstance of these children, and the fact that there were interventions that could be successful in decreasing the number of children entering care (Emlin, Lahti, Downs, McKay, & Downs, 1977; Jones, Neuman & Shyne, 1976; Stein, Gambrill, & Wiltse, 1978) led to the passage of the Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980 (PL 96-272), which included provisions to foster permanence for children. And permanence continues to be a best practice supported by ASFA.

“Permanency planning is a systematic process of carrying out, within a brief, time-limited period, a set of goal directed activities designed to help children live in families that offer safety, continuity of relationships with nurturing parents or caretakers, and the opportunity to establish life-long relationships.” (Maluccio & Fein, 1983:197). Present child welfare best practice continues and reinforces the notion that children should remain with their biological family when their safety can be assured. When this is not possible, placement in the “least restrictive” setting that can meet the child’s needs is considered to be best practice. Therefore, best practice dictates the following preferences in the placement of children: 1) relatives known to the child; 2) fictive kin or family friends; 3) foster homes within geographic proximity of child’s home; 4) other foster homes, including therapeutic foster homes; and 5) group or institutional settings. The

placement hierarchy for children leaving care is slightly different: 1) return to the biological family; 2) adoption with a known family, including relatives; 3) adoption in a new home; 4) legal guardianship, preferably with long term foster parents; 5) permanent, stable foster care; 6) independent living; and 7) group or institutional settings. Situations in which the child grows up in substitute care and is discharged from the child welfare system without adequate preparation for independent living reflect poor child welfare practice.

Thus, good supervision ensures that workers attempt to return children who have been placed in care to their families in a timely manner. But if return to family is not possible or feasible, a timely move to an alternate permanent living situation, preferably an adoptive home, should be achieved. Workers require supervisory oversight in this regard, for, if they are not aggressive in their pursuit of permanency, the likelihood that a child will “drift” in the system and be damaged by it increases. Similarly, supervisors must assist workers in developing long-term plans leading to independence for children who “age out” of substitute care.

Culturally Competent Practice: Especially challenging in the current legal environment is the ability for workers within the foster care system to practice in a culturally competent manner. Cultural competence is defined by a set of attitudes, behaviors, and practices that enable child welfare professionals to practice effectively in cross cultural situations. It implies child welfare professionals have: 1) *awareness* of the impact that their views about race, ethnicity, and culture, as well as those of others in society, have on their practice: 2) *knowledge* of the role culture plays in the lives of clients: and 3) the ability to use *practices* that incorporate cultural understanding into their work. It is important to note that cultural competence is not required by any of the Federal statutes that guide practice, but is seen as critical by most child welfare professionals.

In ensuring the implementation of culturally competent practices, supervisors must be especially knowledgeable, aware, and creative. First, supervisors need to be familiar with current policies, including the current interpretations of MEPA-IEP and the provisions of ICWA. Second, they need to be alert to situations where worker's personal views and biases affect their ability to act in a culturally competent manner. Third, they must be able to help their workers craft novel interventions that take into account children's cultural needs but do not jeopardize their agency's compliance with MEPA-IEP.

This is particularly challenging, given that historically the child welfare system has had a disproportionately large number of children of color and a disproportionately small number of foster and adoptive parents of color. Workers may feel that most or all children have legitimate needs that cannot be met without taking race, color, or national origin into account during the placement decision-making process. Supervisors should therefore ensure that workers assess the individual needs of each child, as well as the ability of potential foster or adoptive families, to meet these specific needs before making a placement. Workers should be encouraged to communicate the needs of children to potential parents, and strive to ensure that foster or adoptive families behave in ways that nurture a child's sense of identity and a positive self-image. They should discuss with the family how the child's sense of racial identity can be nurtured, and teach substitute parents skills that will allow them to do this.

Outcome-Based Practice: The field of child welfare is moving toward what is being called outcomes-based practice, and child welfare professionals are being challenged to demonstrate their effectiveness. The 1994 amendments to the Social Security Act codified this requirement in the authorization of the Child and Family Services Review, an undertaking that requires each State child welfare agency to submit to an evaluation by the Federal government.

This evaluation is based upon the State's administrative data, an on-site review, and an in-depth examination of case records.

For the purposes of supervision, it is useful to partialize child welfare outcomes into process goals, outputs, and outcomes (Jones, 1991; Meezan, 2000). A *process goal* is a measure of whether service is being delivered (e.g. whether the parent attends parenting classes, the child receives therapy, or the worker visits on a monthly basis). The term *output* is used to describe a change in status of a child or family within the child welfare system (e.g. whether the child enters or exits foster care or parental rights to a child are terminated). The definition of an *outcome* is the presence or absence of change in the functioning of a child, adult, or family, (e.g. improved mother-child interaction; a child's improved feelings of self-esteem or diminished trauma).

Workers are likely to focus on process goals – getting the parents involved in services. Unfortunately, process goals are necessary but not sufficient to achieve child safety and wellbeing, for simply providing service does not guarantee that the family situation will improve.

Agency administrators are most likely to be concerned with outputs, for status changes are often tied to child welfare expenditures, and States are being held accountable for the achievement of such events so that monies can be saved. Unfortunately, these measures tell us little about whether or not the status change was associated with a change in the safety or well-being of the child or the ability of a family to better care for the child.

Although supervisors need to attend to both process and outputs, they especially need to focus workers and their case plans on outcomes. The ultimate purpose of child welfare intervention is to change the functioning of families and the well-being of children. Without such changes, the provision of service is meaningless, and the decision to move toward a change

in status will be based on either fiscal pressures on the organization or the individual predilections of the worker.

The Managerial Aspects of Supervision

Although the supervisory skills required for child welfare practice can be derived from the existing literature on the management of human services organizations, their application to the child welfare setting is unique. Legal mandates must be complied with, and these mandates involve adherence to time lines that are not always congruent with best practice. Supervisors must deal with the realities of social work practice in a child welfare setting, where the problems of children and their families are not easily “fixed” and can cause feelings of frustration and stress for both workers and supervisors. And supervision must be accomplished within Civil Service requirements, with their own set of demands and rules that often override the use of best managerial techniques and decision-making.

Training for child welfare supervisors, therefore, must merge managerial theory with the reality of practice within a child welfare system, creating the need for a training environment that remains flexible and allows for a great deal of interaction between the training facilitator and the training participants. The following illustrates one way of addressing the special challenge of adapting general managerial skills to the specific context of child welfare, thereby moving the agency closer to achieving a learning organization model.

To develop the content for the training, we conducted a needs assessment with public child welfare staff in the localities where the training was piloted. Five focus groups with approximately 50 child welfare supervisors, caseworkers, and senior management staff were employed to help determine the content areas for the specific applied curriculum. Focus group members were given a list of possible training topics based upon a review of the social work and child welfare literature. Group members were asked to review and comment on a list of topics

that included the need for information on best practices in child welfare and current legislation driving the child welfare system. Their responses indicated that coverage of these topics was important, and thus was included in the first part of the supervisors training, the content of which is described above.

In addition, the participants were asked about the importance of fourteen topics regarding the roles and responsibilities of supervisors in the child welfare system. These topics were based upon a review of the literature of social work supervision, and included 1) supervising to accomplish tasks in a timely way, including the management of disagreements between worker and supervisor; 2) counseling workers to help them deal with conflicts within and outside the agency; 3) communicating and coordinating, including the exchange of information with others; 4) recruiting, selecting and maintaining staff; 5) planning, including determining goals and objectives and the ways to meet them; 6) team building including managing meetings and building coalitions; 7) facilitating appropriate actions through modeling and empowering techniques; 8) appraising performance, including monitoring, reviewing and evaluating; 9) managing relationships within the agency and with others in the child welfare network; 10) problem solving; 11) management of self, including stress and time management, issues that might lead to burnout, etc.; 12) advocacy for the agency's and client's interests; 13) negotiating within the agency and with entities that impact the ability to complete one's job; and 14) the management of resources (see additional resources on supervision at the end of the chapter for reference to these topics). The responses of the focus group participants led to our deciding to concentrate the training to the seven, somewhat revised elements of supervision, that are described in detail below.

A number of training techniques were used to ensure that the material presented was both meaningful and reinforced through application. First, the sessions were facilitated by a professor

of human service management, assisted by a supervisor/manager in child welfare, thus allowing for the more abstract and theoretical constructs to be related to the situations faced on a regular basis in practice. Second, concepts from management theory were augmented with applications based on specific problems in child welfare. This format allowed the training participants to apply what they learned in each session to the practical problems they face in the workplace. Third, participants were encouraged to apply the material they learned by choosing a specific managerial practice from each session to implement in their own work setting and were asked to report the results of this application at the beginning of the next session. Finally, participants were asked to present individual concerns and problems at the beginning of each training session so that the training materials could be applied directly to current concerns.

Illustrative of the crisis nature of the child welfare organization, and their concomitant difficulty in becoming learning organizations, was an unforeseen event that occurred at the beginning of the supervisory training sessions. In an effort to save money, the State of Michigan offered early retirement options to State workers with long-term service, including child welfare workers. This offer resulted in a reduction of about 20% in the number of experienced personnel in both worker and supervisory ranks. Thus, supervisors participating in the training program faced enormous additional challenges, as they attempted to deal with personnel shortages and a large numbers of workers with little or no experience. In addition, the new Federal mandates discussed earlier in this chapter were already stretching supervisory personnel in terms of their own learning. These dual problems of training a new workforce and dealing with changed expectations associated with new Federal mandates surfaced again and again during the training.

The seven training sessions that were offered usually incorporated information from three different domains: 1) interpersonal skills needed by supervisors to assess such things as worker skill levels and to provide feedback to workers, and conduct meetings; 2) intrapersonal issues

that provided supervisors with ways of assessing their own and their supervisees personal characteristics and that stressed the need for supervisors to understand their own strengths, weaknesses, and motivations as they helped workers; and 3) specific tools that could be used to accomplish various supervisory tasks, including ways to assess training needs, structure meetings, and to organize workloads. As noted, general managerial techniques in each of these areas were adapted to the child welfare setting and grounded in the experiences of the training participants.

Seven sessions, derived from the focus groups, were designed that integrated management and supervisory theory into the applied format of child welfare:

1. Supervising – The Front End
2. Training/Coaching/Teaching/Educating/Mentoring: The Learning Connection
3. Supportive Communication: Three Major Conversations
4. Working with Workers (and others) With Strong Opinions: Managing Difficult People
5. Decision Making/Problem Solving
6. Supervising – The Back End including Monitoring, Reviewing, and Performance Architecture; and
7. Management of Self.

Supervising -- The Front End. Child welfare workers are involved in work requiring them to meet legal deadlines and intervention requirements both competently and efficiently. Supervisors must have the skills to organize their own workload to meet these requirements, and must be able to impart these skills to the workers they supervise. This requires that they and their workers agree about what tasks should take priority, what the appropriate expectations are for the completion of necessary tasks, and how long the completion of specified tasks should

take. Supervisors must also know the individual ability of staff and set expectations for task completion accordingly. In order to accomplish this, supervisors need practical methods for achieving these tasks and measuring whether or not expected outcomes are achieved.

Thus, training materials identified supervisors' need to differentiate between urgent and important tasks in order to better manage workloads, and were taught to start with the end in mind and work backwards. The urgent/important grid, illustrated in Figure 2, demonstrated a way of organizing tasks when it was coupled with the idea of the 80/20 rule – 20% of the work will be urgent and important.

Figure 2

The Urgent/Important Grid

Important Items	Urgent Items	
	Low	High
Low	Modest decision items	Moderate decision items/brainstorming
High	Moderate decision items	Your toughest item

This training session also identified effective methods for dealing with conflicts about expectations for task completion between workers and supervisors. For example, such conflicts can occur over the necessary content of reports and the need to report objective rather than subjective information, definitions of promptness in returning phone calls to collateral agencies, and/or completion of required agency paperwork.

Conflicts between workers and supervisors may also occur in case recommendations, particularly when the definition of best practices has changed. Workers who have operated under old policies and agency mandates (e.g. placing children with adoptive parents of the same race) may have difficulty accepting new mandates, especially when they are at odds with the new expectations. Such differences can also occur when outside pressures on the child welfare system, that compromise the worker's ability to follow what they consider to be appropriate

practice principles, occur. For example, when outside demands (e.g. comply with a case record review), impinge upon the internal priorities of the worker, disagreements between workers and supervisors can occur. By providing supervisors new communication tools as well as concrete tools to deal with such situations, the training allowed supervisors to develop more constructive ways of dealing with these very real issues with their workers.

One tool that supervisors were introduced to, The Index of Difference (Tropman & Tropman, 2001), helped supervisors deal with conflicting expectations between themselves and their workers, as well as their own, internal conflicts about how to spend their time. It allows them to compare actual time spent on tasks with the ideal amount of time that should be spent on that task based on how important it is. This tool is illustrated in Figure 3.

Figure 3

Index of Difference

Work/task	Ideal	Real/Actual	Difference
Home/school visits	35%	25%	10%
Collateral contact	10%	5%	5%
Paper work	20%	35%	15%
Court	25%	25%	0
Other/misc.	10%	5%	5%
	100%	100%	$\Sigma(\text{rows})/2$

In the example noted in Figure 3, the supervisor is asked to identify what would be the “ideal” amount of time to spend on common agency tasks (Column 1). Then the supervisee is asked to estimate how much time they actually spend on those tasks (Column 2). The absolute differences (differences without regard to sign) are then calculated for each row (Column 3), and those differences are then summed and divided by 2. The resulting number – the index of difference – suggests the “distance” between what the supervisor thinks and what the worker actually does. In Figure 3, the sum of the differences is 35%. Divided by 2, that leaves 17.5%,

slightly over the ideal of a 10% difference or less. Supervisors and workers, armed with this knowledge, can then work together to come to a “tighter fit.”

This technique was identified as being useful for supervisors in assessing the organization of their own work as well as a technique they could use with their subordinates. Although this tool is subjective, it can serve as a place to begin a discussion between supervisors and their subordinates when workers are having difficulty agreeing upon expectations.

Training/Coaching/Teaching/Educating/Mentoring: The Learning Connection. Child welfare supervisors must recognize the steps involved in moving from novice to master. If workers are not challenged, they can become bored. If they are challenged too much beyond their current skill, they become anxious. Thus, supervisors must be able to evaluate a worker’s current skill level and, while maintaining appropriate expectations, provide the proper support to encourage employee growth. This is particularly important in a child welfare setting, where employee turnover is frequent and the pressure of the child welfare setting can push supervisors to expect more from new employees than they should based on their skill level.

This session provided tools for assessing the skill level of the worker and the tasks the worker were assigned. By examining this relationship, tensions between worker challenges and skills could be examined. If the challenges were too great in relation to the skill level, high levels of anxiety, and worker failure, can be expected. If challenges were simple, and worker skills were high, boredom and disengagement can occur. Ideally, one attempts to match skill levels with appropriate challenges so that the worker feels competent and productive.

The “ladder of supervisory behaviors” illustrated in Figure 4 (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), was used to highlight this relationship between worker challenges and skills, and the effect of this relationship on caseworker behavior. The flow channel in this figure illustrates the balance that one aims for in assigning tasks to workers and matching these tasks to the worker’s skill

Figure 5

Levels of Competence

FLOW AREA	WORKER SKILL LEVEL	HALLMARKS	SUPERVISORY STYLE
f1 and below	Novice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Performance slow and jerky •Attention to facts and rules •Works with book in hand 	<u>Training</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Specific instructions •10 % worker initiative
F2-f4	Beginner	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Performance somewhat faster; •Rule fade begins* 	<u>Coaching</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Provide suggestions and options •20% worker initiative.
f5- f7	Journey person	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Standard competent worker •Rule fade largely complete •Uses the book only for exceptions 	<u>Teaching</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Share information with worker •Worker configures tasks •50% worker initiative
f8- f9	Expert	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Smooth, quick, sure performance •Knows a lot 	<u>Educating</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Accepts improvements from worker •Mutually explore problems and fixes in the system •60% worker initiative
f10+	Master	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Seamless, effortless performance •Never sweats •Could write the book 	<u>Mentoring</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Assists worker in career development •Uses worker as teacher for others •70+% worker initiative

* Rule fade is the process one goes through when we begin to speak, for example, in a new language without translating from our original language.

Supportive Communication: Three Major Conversations. Child welfare supervisors must understand the way in which negative self talk (I can't...) and problem constructs (This problem is dumb) can impact their interactions with others and erode their ability to provide support to those they supervise. Such talk impacts a supervisee's ability to perform their job.

Internal conversations can inhibit organizational change, as individuals complain or blame rather than constructively plan. Supervisors need skills in interpersonal communication. They need to understand the dimensions of supportive communication, and know when to provide information (coaching) rather than a counseling response when there is an "attitude" problem that requires

intervention. Finally, supervisors need to understand that feedback is different from criticism, and should be focussed on the problem rather than the person. The nature of child welfare work – its concern with child safety and family functioning – and the need to carry out legal mandates that may not match employee values and beliefs require that communication between all organizational members be smooth and complete.

Vignettes representing actual job situations can be a good tool to use in differentiating these types of communications. Using vignettes, supervisors can discuss the impact of negative self-talk. Application in large group discussions can also be helpful in this area, where leader and worker/facilitator can apply this concept to actual situations in the child welfare arena.

Working with Workers (and others) With Strong Opinions: Managing Difficult People.

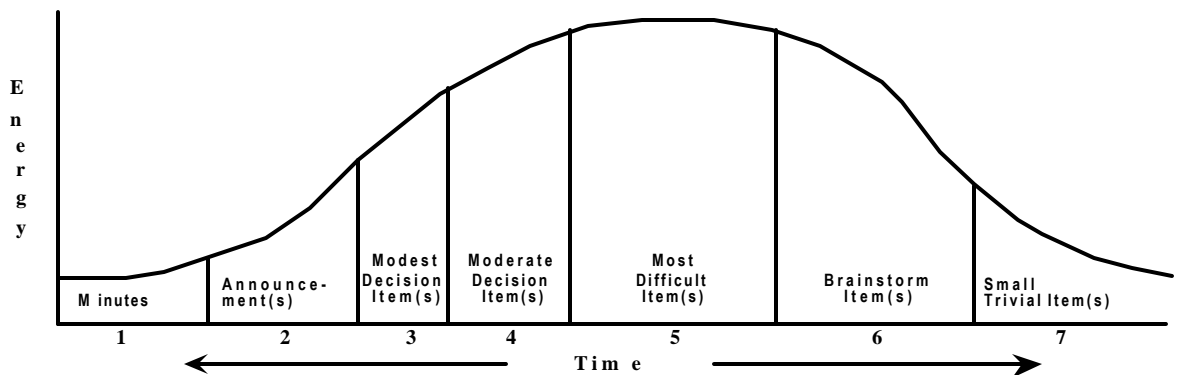
People with strong opinions can be a problem for child welfare supervisors, whether they are peers, subordinates, or their own supervisors and managers. Because issues in child welfare involve competing values and beliefs, opinions can be particularly strong about individual situations. Supervisors need tools to deal with individual behaviors that can disrupt and derail the decision making process during meetings as well as impact individual interactions that take place on a daily basis. One important aspect of dealing with problematic individuals involves emotional self-awareness and an ability on the part of supervisors to handle the emotional reactions of others.

Tools that are particularly useful in this regard are tests for “emotional intelligence” that aid supervisors in knowing themselves – an important element in communication. The emotional intelligence test was introduced as something that could be used by supervisors with staff as an aid in establishing better communication between workers and between supervisors and their subordinates.

Decision Making/Problem Solving. The misuse of meetings (for announcements and reports) is a common practice in many organizations including the child welfare setting. The Agenda Bell was used as a tool to teach this skill. Developed by one of the co-authors, it suggests that meetings be organized with the flow of energy and time in mind. Thus, meetings should begin with announcements and minutes. These are followed by items requiring easy decisions. Such decisions are followed by items that require difficult decisions that might be contentious -- the middle of the meeting, when energy and attention are highest, is when the hardest items should be addressed. Because difficult decisions can tear at the fabric of group cohesion, it is important never to end a meeting right after a difficult decision. So, when these items have been dealt with, brainstorming for the next meeting or another positive task should take place. Figure 6 below depicts the Agenda Bell.

Figure 6

Tropman's Agenda Bell



The Agenda Bell was an important tool for supervisors, since meetings were identified by participants as necessary within the child welfare setting. Re-conceptualizing meetings as contexts for decision making rather than as venues for reading agency announcements enhanced

supervisors' opportunities to contribute to worker training and to making decisions about policies and practices that effected their unit's functioning. Meetings thus became a venue for organizational learning, particularly when they were planned and used proactively. Interestingly, between training sessions, many participants chose to focus on the task of reorganizing meetings, and reported savings in time and increases in efficiency after they modified their practices based on this new information.

Supervising – The Back End including Monitoring, Reviewing, and Performance Architecture. Staffs in child welfare, as in other professions, are made up of people with different levels of intelligence. Some people are facile in language use, while others have logical and analytical skills. Some workers are visual or artistic or have a high degree of physical aptitude. Good supervisors understand the talents of their staff as well as their own talents and shortcomings. With this knowledge in mind, a good supervisor will be aware of others' moods, temperaments, intentions and motivations. They will also be award of their impact on others.

Such awareness will allow the sensitive supervisor to move among different groups, helping to set specific, manageable, achievable, realistic, and time-bound goals. It will also allow them to sensitively monitor progress toward the goals and help staff achieve measurable success. Successful supervisors will use their knowledge of others' skills to help workers recognize things that have gone "right," what might have gone better and why, and new challenges to tackle.

Knowledge of how to perform individual employee assessments allows supervisors to adjust their style to that of their workers, and thus relieves some of their stress about the supervisory process and potential conflicts within it. It allows them to create a less stressful environment for subordinates, who will not have to wonder about how their job performance was

judged or the reasons they were judged in particular ways. This will, in turn, increase morale in an organizational system that suffers from poor morale in the first place.

Management of Self. Finally, child welfare supervisors need to understand what creates stress for them and develop means of reducing stress where they can. This involves self-assessments of their own physical and mental health, and establishing a lifestyle that promotes their personal well-being. Part of this process is understanding one's own personality characteristics. Supervisors need to make self-assessment opportunities available for staff under their supervision as well.

One helpful tool to do this is the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator that can help supervisors discover clues to their own temperament. Use of this tool also provided and opportunities to discuss its use by their subordinates. Coupled with other resources that could help supervisors assess the ways in which they handle stress and avoid burnout, these resources were particularly important to this group of supervisors as they faced the departure of many of their experienced workers as a result of the early retirement policy implemented during the training.

The Challenges of Transforming Child Welfare Service Agencies into Learning Organizations

There are numerous challenges to transforming the child welfare agency into a learning organization. A number of impediments were outlined above, including the nature of the work itself, the regulatory climate, resource constraints, and the nature of helping in child welfare. Organizing and systematizing these challenges are best approached using the "change cost" framework developed by Herbert Simon in his book (with Smithberg and Thompson) called *Public Administration* (1959). Simon and his colleagues developed the following five impediments to organizational development and change. From our experience, these "costs" are very relevant to child welfare agencies, whether public or voluntary. It is important that they be kept in mind as these organizations attempt to transform themselves into learning organizations.

Cost Number One: Inertia. This is the cost to the organization of beginning the development or change effort. Simon says it helps to “make compliance easy” and “make noncompliance difficult.” This means that the organization should smooth the way for the introduction of new procedures (incentives, support, etc.) while withdrawing support for ineffective or outdated older ways of doing business. In child welfare, changing some compliance costs will be difficult, for it will require changing Federal and State statutes and regulations. However, other compliance costs can be more easily diminished, such as supporting and rewarding workers who are creative in their application of culturally sensitive practices which do not violate MEPA, a skill that most workers want to develop.

Cost Number Two: Cultural Costs. Organizations have a lot invested in doing things as they have always done them. A secret here is to avoid “trashing the past.” Even if the past deserves it, trashing it means criticizing at least some of the people with whom you hope to work to move in a new direction. In the child welfare field, an example would be a recognition that “outputs” and “process goals” are critical information needs for the agency, while at the same time introducing “outcome” measurement in order to help workers improve their practice skills.

Cost Number Three: Self Interest Costs. One of the things that change requires is that each worker (and supervisor) must learn new things and unlearn old ones. This process requires work. If agencies understand this, are willing to support training in new practices, and are able to provide some compensation for the energy of change, the process will go much more smoothly. Most organizations expect workers to bear this cost in its entirety, and then are surprised at the slow pace of movement. Child welfare supervisors can avoid this cost to workers if, for example, they introduce group supervisory techniques that expose workers to new interventions or skills and reduce the amount of supervisory time spent on tasks of organizational maintenance.

Cost Number Four: Rationality Costs. Most organizations, as they move toward change, fail to communicate the reasons for the change. Why should, for example, child welfare learn new techniques. Workers will say, “We know enough and have enough to do already.” Overcommunication (many iterations) and several paths (many modes—oral, written, visual, etc.) are needed to make changes, and agencies often fail to appreciate this. Thus, in child welfare agencies, teaching about what workers recognize they need to know (such as resources in the community) both during supervision and in writing (through resource directories) will diminish resistance to learning and to the agency becoming a learning organization.

Cost Number Five: Subordination Costs. Agencies continually forget to involve the people who are to be affected by a change in the process of making that change. Agencies frequently talk about getting “buy-in” but fail to begin that process with “build-in.” There seems to be a fear that involving employees is a “loss” of authority. Supervisors and administrators need to remember that involvement is not suzerainty. Staff has a voice, not a veto. Child welfare agencies are particularly challenged in this regard because historically they have been hierarchical in their structure, especially public child welfare agencies. Nevertheless, there is a growing trend in child welfare practice of client involvement (Burford & Hudson, 2000), and family-centered practice dictates that such efforts continue. Inclusion of workers in decision making should become easier as supervisors expect to help their workers allow clients a greater voice in their futures. Empowerment of clients should also lead to empowerment of workers within a large bureaucracy.

Conclusion

Providing child welfare supervisors with specific skills in supervision and information about best practice, and encouraging them to place agency policies within legal mandates, can help them move their agencies toward becoming learning organizations. But it must be

remembered that the commitment to becoming a learning organization must start “at the top,” and some child welfare bureaucracies are dominated by people whose major orientation is toward organizational maintenance rather than learning. Further, there are times in child welfare that practices derived from organizational learning cannot be brought to bear -- the environment of child welfare is one in which supervisors are forced to make life and death decisions based on incomplete information and knowledge in a service environment that is often inadequate.

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