THE IMPORTANCE OF HONESTY IN CLINICAL SUPERVISION

Part 1. Developing and maintaining honest relationships

In the first of two articles, Sue Knutton and Jane Pover explore the interdependence of honesty and challenge in clinical supervision. Aimed at practitioners working as supervisors, or who are supervised, it considers how honesty is inherent in the development of productive relationships.
CLINICAL SUPERVISION is advocated in current government policies as a useful tool for continuing professional development (DoH 1999). It is also supported by professional bodies such as the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC 2001).

There is much published material to encourage and guide practitioners in establishing supervision (van Ooijen 2003), and indeed many professional groups such as nurses, physiotherapists and occupational therapists are now engaged in clinical supervision as part of a drive towards better health care (Hawkins and Shohet 2000).

The authors have had extensive experience of clinical supervision, as supervisors, supervisors and trainers, and have experienced supervisory relationships where an inability or unwillingness to maintain honesty has led to dissatisfaction, or even discontinuation of supervision. They have also seen relationships develop significantly as a result of honest disclosure.

Creating honest relationships

Feasy (2002) identifies integrity and honesty of both supervisor and supervisee as irreplaceable in the supervision relationship. Without this, Feasy suggests, difficult issues will not be explored. One of the key tasks of clinical supervision, therefore, is to create and maintain honest relationships in which people can learn.

Honesty, then, is important in creating learning environments, and the authors identify three areas that can hinder supervisory relationships unless they are identified and explored:

- past relationships
- multiple roles
- levels of congruence.

Creating safe learning environments

Openness to learning is fundamental in supervision (Hawkins and Shohet 2000). For learning to take place, change has to occur, and it is acknowledged that change creates disturbance or chaos among the people involved in the change process (Allen 1996) such as those who have worked in a particular way or held a belief about themselves for a long time. However, through supervision, their perspective may alter, potentially leading to a sense of vulnerability or uncertainty. It is important, therefore, that they feel safe in order to manage this chaotic stage of change.

Page and Wosket (2001) suggest that this safe space can only exist if enough time is allowed to create and maintain working contracts with mutual agreements on the structure and boundaries of the relationships. They state: 'When these are established and functioning well the supervisor and supervisee can have confidence to take risks and be experimental within the space.'

Another important aspect of creating safety in learning environments relates to the attitudes of those involved. Rogers (1969) identifies these attitudinal qualities as:

- ‘realness’ or honesty
- prizing: a positive attitude to the other person
- acceptance
- trust.

In a study by Bulmer (1997), nurses identified trustworthiness, honesty and openness as supervisors’ most highly rated traits, and where these are present individuals are likely to feel safe and therefore likely to disclose. As Corey and Corey (1997) state: ‘It is through self disclosure that they begin to learn about themselves.’

Safety may be compromised by a lack of honesty, but honesty can lead to feelings of unease. In the authors’ experience, however, unease is only temporary if a sense of safety has been achieved.

Honesty is particularly important, and potentially difficult to achieve, when there is a need to share feelings about how supervisory relationships are working. It can lead to avoidance (withholding) and it is therefore useful to create a formal space for reflection on relationships so that avoidance is less likely to occur. Space can be created while the working agreement is negotiated (contracting), at the end of supervision sessions or during more formal evaluations.

This sharing is a responsibility of both supervisors and supervisees. The following questions can help as a general tool to check levels of honesty in working relationships:

- Are you withholding?
- If so, what is it you are withholding?
- What do you gain from withholding?
- Is it fair to do this, given the contract you have made with the other person?

When the participants in the supervisory relationship have recognised that they are withholding, they need to consider whether to say something to the other person. It is not always essential for them to reveal their thoughts, and a period of reflection may be necessary, but withholding is often sensed by others and hinders feelings of safety. Supervisees, for example, may feel resentful and raise concerns if they believe their supervisors are withholding useful feedback and being less helpful than they could be.

Past relationships

It is important for supervisors and supervisees to explore past relationships with one another as they can affect current contacts.

Supervisors are often chosen by supervisees because their practice is respected or their positions are aspired to, and frequently they have greater authority or power in organisations than the
supervisees. This can lead to difficulties in supervisory relationships because, due to previous power dynamics, supervisees can be inhibited from taking responsibility for learning that is desirable in supervision (Box 1). The following questions may be useful to consider, especially when establishing supervisory relationships:

- What contact have you had before?
- How did or do you feel about this previous contact?
- Do you need to share anything with each other about it?
- How will the new contact with one another be different?

Multiple roles
The role of the clinical supervisor is ideally the only one clinical supervisors have with supervisees (Bond and Holland 1998), although in complex organisations this is unlikely.

Contact in other roles sometimes increases positive feelings and enhances supervisory relationships but more usually produces negative feelings and inhibits the supervision work (Box 2). The following questions may be useful when considering the influence of multiple roles:

- In what other settings do you work with or meet the other person?
- How does the way the other person acts in these situations make you feel?
- How does this influence your perception of them in the supervisory relationship?
- If you believe the influence is negative how will you share your belief?

Congruence in current relationships
Congruence is consistency. Nelson-Jones (2003) suggests that incongruence occurs when there is a mismatch, for example between what is said and what is done, or what is communicated verbally and non-verbally. People are often unaware that they are displaying incongruence (Box 3).

Box 2. Multiple roles
A supervisor and supervisee were both members of a multi-disciplinary policy development group. The supervisor backed down very quickly in one meeting when her view was challenged. The supervisee felt annoyed that the supervisor had given in so easily. It was on her mind at the next supervision session and distracted her in her work. The supervisor picked up on her lack of concentration, and this provided an opportunity for the supervisee to be honest about her feelings and for them to discuss its impact.

Box 3. Congruence
A supervisee was talking about a recent practice experience and the supervisor observed that the supervisee seemed distressed. Discussion about honesty with the supervisor was discussed and whether it was appropriate to discuss honesty with the supervisee.

Discussion and conclusion
Productive supervisory relationships are most likely to be achieved when supervisors try to create safe spaces for supervisees, when different factors that influence the relationships are explored, and when there is commitment to developing and maintaining honesty.

These things may only occur, however, when honesty is recognised as a powerful tool that requires sensitivity if it is to be effective. For example, timing of disclosure in terms of the likely receptiveness of other people should be considered carefully. As the authors have suggested, the other people involved may come to their own conclusions and need no intervention at all.

Being honest often involves a challenge. The authors’ second article will provide a practical example that will illustrate the potential benefits of honesty, as well as specific guidance on the use of challenging skills.

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references


