

CHAPTER 3

Making the Transition from Caseworker to Supervisor

Most child protective services (CPS) supervisors are promoted from within the agency. Often, there is little preparation, training, guidance, or support provided to new supervisors. The reality of their situation becomes readily apparent, and the previously competent and confident caseworker may feel inadequate, confused, and overwhelmed. This chapter examines the first key tasks, common experiences, and issues facing new supervisors.

ISSUES RELATED TO MAKING THE TRANSITION TO SUPERVISOR

Caseworkers who become supervisors for the first time often react similarly. They may vow never to do what their supervisors did or, alternatively, seek to emulate previous supervisors. The fallacy of either premise is that the new supervisor has immediately forgotten one of the first lessons of casework—each person is an individual with unique needs and qualities. Hence, each caseworker requires a somewhat different supervisory approach. There are numerous issues that new supervisors may face. Some are common to all, and others are related to how supervisors move into their position.

Role Transition—From Unit Peer to Supervisor

Perhaps one of the most difficult role transitions is from unit peer to supervisor. Before examining the pitfalls, there are some positive aspects to note in this situation. First, as a member of the unit, new supervisors often have direct knowledge of individual caseworkers, including their personalities, individual needs, skills, and job satisfaction. Second, supervisors have some idea of how the unit is viewed within the agency and community, as well as its strengths and needs. Third, while still a caseworker, the supervisor has probably given some thought or consideration regarding how to handle certain situations as a supervisor. They also may have some initial thoughts about what elements to preserve and what situations to try to change. Finally, new supervisors know the practices and policies within the program they will be supervising.

When moving from a peer to a supervisory relationship, new supervisors must be clear about how they expect the relationships to remain the same and how they will change, what is needed from the unit, and what they are prepared to offer in return. Most new supervisors do not take the time to work through such transition issues. Rather, they attempt to carry out the supervisory role while maintaining previous patterns of peer interaction.

Maintaining a peer relationship with caseworkers will inevitably lead to role conflict. The staff expects leadership in the supervisory role, not just another person to “share the load.” Failure to exercise leadership creates insecurity among the staff.

There are two common mistakes made in exercising leadership by supervisors who have been promoted from within the unit. Supervisors who feel uncomfortable in close relationships with the caseworkers they now oversee may rely excessively on the formal authority of their role. This leadership style distances supervisors from former peer relationships and emphasizes their authority. In contrast, supervisors who are feeling insecure in their new role and depend on closeness in relationships for reassurance may rely excessively on nurturing staff. Although the nurturing may be welcomed initially, staff will begin to doubt the ability of the supervisors to make difficult decisions.

Role Transition—From Outside the Unit or Agency

Whereas the situation of a caseworker promoted to supervise another unit or hired from outside the agency may offer some freedom from the friend-to-supervisor transition, it does not necessarily reduce the insecurity felt by staff. Some of the positive aspects of this type of role transition include:

- New supervisors are unlikely to have preconceived notions about the unit or individuals within the unit and, as a result, may be able to be more objective.
- New supervisors may come in with a “clean slate” or with no baggage that may affect how others in the unit view them.

One common difficulty encountered is staff who question whether the new supervisor really understands the CPS mission. They may have more experience in the program than the new supervisor, and they are feeling vulnerable because of the change in management. To ease the transition, the supervisor should:

- Develop a plan for professional growth. For example, a supervisor may need to learn about State law and policy, how to assess risk and safety, or the dynamics of abuse and neglect.
- Be honest about what he or she knows and does not know.
- Acknowledge any professional development needs to the staff, and determine how the staff’s need for consultation and decision-making will be met.
- Accelerate personal learning. A large amount of information must be learned in a short period. In accepting the position, even while lacking the technical expertise needed for the job, the supervisor must make the extra effort needed to acquire the expertise quickly.
- Assess the current functioning of the unit and of individual caseworkers, develop goals for the unit, and determine what is needed to achieve these goals.

Common Issues Affecting the Transition to Supervisor

Other issues new supervisors may face include: dealing with others within the unit who applied for the position; disparities in age and experience between themselves and the existing staff; the current climate and culture of the unit; difficulties in making the shift from doing the work themselves to getting results done through others; and discomfort with being caught in the middle.

Others in the Unit Applied for the Position

Other members of the unit may have applied for the position, may believe they deserved the promotion, and resent being passed over. Being mindful of possible concerns, the new supervisor may want to set up an informal meeting with the other staff, individually or collectively, to discuss their feelings. Again, it is important to assess every individual’s

reaction to the change in the relationship and renegotiate the conditions of the relationship accordingly.

Age and Work Experience

Although other staff members may not have aspired to the position, a factor that can cause some questioning of ability or resentment is the age and work experience of the caseworkers in the unit compared to that of the supervisor. When large gaps in age or work experience exist, it is probably best for the supervisor to acknowledge these differences with staff. In addition, the supervisor should encourage staff to express the feelings they have, in group or individual meetings, about being supervised by a manager who is younger or less experienced.

Current Climate and Culture of the Unit

A supervisor's initial experiences also are influenced by the current climate and culture of the unit. When the work environment is positive, there will be increased expectations for an incoming supervisor who may have to work through staff loyalties to a well-liked and respected predecessor. On the other hand, staff difficulties with the predecessor may have generated distrust or other negative feelings. Such feelings also would have to be worked through to produce an improved work environment.

Discomfort with Getting Results Through Others

Caseworkers who are promoted to supervisors are typically excellent practitioners. Consequently, some new supervisors have difficulty making the shift from doing the work themselves to empowering and enabling their staff to get the job done through guidance, direction, and coaching. This discomfort with the role may be manifested through such actions as micromanaging, being too commanding, having difficulty delegating, and not allowing caseworker autonomy.

Discomfort with Being Caught in the Middle

When caseworkers are promoted to supervisors, they become part of management. New and even experienced supervisors may over-align themselves with their caseworkers. The possible consequences of this include producing poor quality work, the administration viewing the supervisor as not being a team player, or a loss of confidence in the new supervisor. (See Chapter 10, "Managing from the Middle," for more on this topic.)

CRITICAL FIRST STEPS

Making the transition from caseworker to supervisor is a difficult one and new supervisors often are provided with little guidance and support. The following are helpful suggestions for building a foundation for success.

Perform a Unit Assessment

One of the first, critical steps for a new supervisor is to conduct an accurate initial assessment of individual and unit functioning, strengths, and needs. In certain ways, this is similar to a casework assessment with children and families. In this instance, assessment means determining what caseworkers need in the supervisory relationship to be able to do their job. Some caseworkers require more feedback than others, while some need more information. If the supervisor believes the individual "should" need these things, it is of secondary importance. Meeting these needs is the key to influencing caseworker behavior, and influencing caseworker behavior is the key to effective supervision. In addition, caseworkers who have not had their professional needs met will require consistent and persistent attention before patterns of behavior and feelings change.

The assessment process also considers the reaction of individual staff to a new supervisor. Caseworkers naturally feel vulnerable when a new supervisor enters the unit. The predictable pattern of interaction with the previous supervisor, no matter how ineffective, is being replaced.

Make Changes Slowly

As stated in the previous section, when a new supervisor is promoted in a unit, it is a change for staff who may feel vulnerable. The new supervisor should try to project a sense of stability and continuity. It is recommended that the supervisor first identify the unit's strengths and needs, and then try to reinforce the strengths and discuss with the staff the needs that were identified. Finally, a new supervisor should involve the staff in problem solving and in identifying solutions as much as possible. Do not introduce too many new factors at once and do not make major changes quickly. It will be easier for the unit to undertake major changes if the caseworkers can assimilate them one at a time.

Meet with the Manager

It is important for a new supervisor to meet with his or her immediate manager to begin establishing positive interactions and a shared understanding of the supervisor's responsibilities. The initial meeting is an opportunity to begin work that builds a strong relationship, not an attempt to cover and resolve all relevant matters. Critical points to work toward include:

- Learning or clarifying the manager's expectations;
- Identifying the information the supervisor needs to communicate to the manager on a regular basis;

- Establishing a structure for meeting with the manager;
- Knowing the manager's assessment of the unit's current functioning, including strengths and needs;
- Specifying any immediate initiatives the supervisor is expected to undertake;
- Identifying sources of managerial support.

Create a New Support System

When an individual moves into a new position, typically there is a lot of excitement, enthusiasm, and motivation. There may be some negative feelings as well, such as being overwhelmed, confused, or feeling inadequate. Being promoted to supervisor means becoming part of administration and management. One of the consequences of the promotion is a change in the relationship with previous peers. There will come a time when a new supervisor walks into a room and the caseworkers' discussion stops. Therefore, the new supervisor will need to create a new support system for him or herself. One important way to accomplish this is to seek out a mentor or another supervisor who can provide support and assistance in developing supervisory capacity. Some may choose to seek support from sources external to the agency, such as professional organizations, faith-based groups, or counseling services.

Creating a Relationship with Staff

If the supervisor is promoted from outside the unit, he or she must establish a relationship of trust, openness, and respect with staff. Trust involves:

- Sharing appropriate personal matters, such as family events and personal feelings;
- Acknowledging personal limitations;
- Being loyal and committed to the goals of the organization, its leaders, and staff;
- Accepting the unique qualities of others;
- Involving others by seeking their input;
- Valuing the exchange of ideas and values;
- Recognizing the needs of others;
- Being honest, sincere, and truthful.

Openness includes:

- Asking for and seeking feedback from staff to increase the supervisor's self-awareness;
- Expressing, listening to, and soliciting others' reactions, ideas, and feelings openly;
- Showing interest in and receptiveness to what others are saying and feeling;
- Pointing out the caseworker's value and strengths, even when disagreeing;
- Communicating clearly;
- Using self-disclosure with staff, when appropriate.

Creating mutual respect involves:

- Reacting without evaluating other's actions;
- Valuing and communicating acceptance of each staff member as a person and their unique background and qualities;
- Focusing on the strengths a caseworker brings to the job;
- Recognizing that caseworkers have the right to their own opinion;
- Not imposing personal thoughts and values on caseworkers;
- Communicating with each caseworker on a truly personal and individual basis.⁴