

Top Six Tasks for Supervision

*Laura S. Bruneau
Kent State University*

The purpose of this article is to describe the top six most important tasks when supervising a counselor trainee. This article was inspired by a question during my doctoral comprehensive exams and was written from the perspective of how to supervise counselor trainees as a doctoral level supervisor. It is my hope that this list will provide direction for beginning supervisors in what to pay attention to and what to do when conducting supervision. The top six tasks for supervision are as follows:

1. Monitor client welfare.
2. Establish a positive working relationship with supervisees.
3. Assess and monitor supervisees' developmental level.
4. Monitor and evaluate supervisees' skills as counselors.
5. Respond to supervisees to promote growth and development.
6. Avoid taking on the supervisee's case in supervision.

I developed this list of top six tasks based on the existing literature on supervision and on my own experiences as a beginning supervisor. This list is ranked by most important to least important as well as ranked by what I would do first to what I would do last with a supervisee.

1. Monitoring Client Welfare

The most important function of the supervisor is the monitor client welfare and to discuss risk management with the supervisee. Counselor trainees tend to lack little awareness of clients and tend to focus on their own experiences as a beginning counselor (Stoltenberg, McNeill, & Delworth, 1998). Thus, there is a high probability that supervisees will miss critical information about clients. It is the role of supervisors to monitor counseling sessions in order to assess the severity level of the case. Supervisors run the risk if they rely solely on the self-report of supervisees; thus direct observation of counselor trainee's work allows a supervisors to provide feedback and ensures the safety and ethical treatment of clients (Bernard, 1997).

Counselor trainees also tend to have little knowledge or experience in case conceptualization, intervention skills, and working with culturally different clients. Counselor trainees may rely more on personal standards rather than professional ethical standards (Bernard, 1997; Stoltenberg et al., 1998). Supervisors, therefore, need to attend to the presenting concerns and treatment goals for clients. Obviously, safety issues are important, but so is the overall outcome of the counseling process. Supervisors can monitor clients' needs and provide direct feedback or consultation with supervisees in order to provide the most effective and holistic treatment for clients. Supervisors also need to monitor diversity issues and ensure those clients are receiving the most ethical and professional care possible.

2. Establishing a Working Relationship

A supervisory relationship relies on the same core conditions of counseling, such as openness, respect, honesty, and genuineness (Bradley, Gould, & Parr, 2001). Without this open relationship, supervisees may feel devalued and judged in the supervisory process. Supervisees may also not feel comfortable disclosing their feelings about the counseling process during supervision sessions or about the supervision process. Attending to personal issues of supervisees is a main role of supervisors and supervisors need to provide a supportive atmosphere (Bernard, 1979). Bernard (1979) suggested that a core role of supervisors is one of a counselor; supervisors may respond to personal disclosures of counselor trainees from this role.

It is also important to stress a collaborative relationship between the supervisor and the supervisee (Bernard, 1997). Supervisees have responsibilities in supervision, such as seeing clients, following directives in supervision, completing case documentation, viewing audio or videotapes of their counseling sessions, etc. Supervisors, in turn, must review these tapes to monitor clients and evaluate the supervisee's skills, review case documentation, and provide feedback during supervision sessions. Thus, both parties need to work together to ensure the process of supervision is beneficial.

3. Assessing and Monitoring Developmental Level

It is important to be able to assess and monitor these developmental needs to provide appropriate supervision strategies based on need, evaluate supervisee's skills, and to provide a supervision environment appropriate for these needs. For example, beginning supervisees usually feel incompetent in their work as a counselor and will rely on the supervisor for direction in their work.

It is the role of the supervisor to determine what aspects of counseling supervisees feels least confident about and works with them on these skills in order to increase confidence levels. Supervisors also need to provide the appropriate supervision environment based on the developmental level of supervisees. Counselor trainees will need a more stable, structured environment versus a more advanced counselor who will benefit more freedom in their work (Stoltenberg et al., 1998). Bernard (1979) also suggested that supervisors can be flexible in deciding which role to take with a counselor trainee; a supervisor would rely more on the role of a teacher with a novice counselor and the role of a consultant with a more advanced counselor.

4. Monitoring and Evaluating Skills

As supervisors act as gatekeepers to the profession, making judgments about the quality of work of supervisees is inherent in the role of supervisors. Supervisors can use several assessment measures to carefully assess the skills and abilities of supervisees. Supervisors have an ethical responsibility to the profession to ensure that counselors are competent and adhering to professional and ethical standards (American Counseling Association, 2005). To entrust a supervisee who is not functioning at expected level would compromise the profession and the treatment of future clients of the supervisee.

Evaluation is essential in supervision. This process can promote a conversation about the supervisee's strengths and weaknesses from both the supervisor and the supervisee's perspectives. Constructive feedback and serve as a source of growth for both parties. It is essential for supervisors to critically evaluate the learning needs of counselor trainees; it is with this information that supervisors can decide how to interact and work with counselor trainees that will be most conducive to development.

5. Responding to Supervisees

Once a supervisor has correctly identified the developmental level of the supervisee and has monitored and evaluated their skills as a counselor, the supervisor then has the information to respond to the supervisee. This response should be based on what roles or focus areas will be most conducive to the growth and development of supervisees (Bernard, 1997).

For example, a counselor trainee may struggle with being able to conceptualize a case from assessment to termination. A supervisor who provides direction on too many topic areas at once may actually complicate this process. Therefore, a supervisor would have to identify the most pressing and important learning needs (Bernard, 1997). The counselor trainee may be struggling due to working with a client culturally different from themselves. The counselor trainee may have struggled with the same personal issues that the client is currently experiencing. Or the counselor trainee may be too focused on one diagnostic area

or one theoretical orientation. Therefore, having an open discussion about these struggles and learning needs will provide information on where to begin with this counselor trainee. The supervisor is then able to assist the counselor trainee through these issues.

6. Avoiding Taking on the Case

This item is personally relevant to me as a beginning supervisor. In a reflective piece, Rau (2002) described his transition from being an advanced counselor to a beginning supervisor and identified "taking on the case" as an easy pitfall for beginning supervisors. Many counselors make the transition to a supervisor early in their career with minimal training and experience as a supervisor; thus novice supervisors who lack experience in conducting supervision may run the risk of wanting to take on the supervisee's case. For example, a novice supervisor may say, "If he (or she) was my client, I would..."

This is an important concern when a novice supervisor is working with a counselor trainee. On one hand, the supervisor can ensure that the client is receiving appropriate treatment, but on the other hand, it may dismiss the supervisee's professional and clinical development. This is another reason why monitoring the skill and developmental needs of the supervisee is important. The supervisor can make an educated guess as to how the supervisee will respond and grow professionally and clinically based on such a statement. Counselor trainees who lack autonomy and intervention skills may learn best by modeling after the supervisor, but those counselor trainees who are more advanced may feel devalued by a supervisor who takes on every case.

Conclusion

When I developed this list, I was under the pressure of having to complete an essay question in less than two hours for my comprehensive examination question on supervision. I had approximately ten minutes to develop this list. In reflection, what strikes me as most interesting is that I came up with this list rather quickly, actually in under one minute. I was able to integrate all that I had learned in my coursework and from my experience as a supervisor to create a list of the most important tasks of supervision. Of course, this list could always be longer and include more tasks. However, this list does provide a basic structure and order for conducting supervision, which may be particularly useful to beginning supervisors.

Overall, this article has allowed me to reflect on my own development as a supervisor. I also struggled with what tasks were most important and how to place them in order from what to do first, etc. I believe the latter part depends on the supervisee in question. For example, some supervisees may prefer a "counselor" or "teacher" approach to supervision, while others may prefer a "consultant" approach. By being able to assess the developmental needs of the counselor trainees and establishing a supervision relationship, the supervisor will be able to effectively determine which task will be most beneficial to a supervisee at a given time.

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