Supervisor’s Role in Training Is Critical

When a family in crisis answers that first official knock on the door, the person they see standing there is often a child welfare worker from the local county department of social services.

Although much of what ultimately happens to that family has to do with the family itself, a lot is also riding on that child welfare worker. Is she the right person for the job? Has she been adequately trained? Does she know her personal and professional strengths and weaknesses? Is she properly supported in her agency? Will she be with the agency for long?

The answer to most of these questions depends in large part upon the person who hired, trains, and supports this child welfare worker—her supervisor.

Supervisors

It is hard to overstate the effect supervisors have on the people who work for them. They influence not only how well they understand and do their work, but whether they stay with their jobs.

Research shows a clear relationship between turnover and supervision. Compared with those who leave their jobs, child welfare workers who stay with their agencies are more likely to rate their supervisors as competent, appreciative, approachable, and concerned for their well being.

Training

Child welfare supervisors are responsible for ensuring that the people they send out to work with families and children have the skills and knowledge they need to do the job right.

Yet given the time, money, and resource constraints they face, how can supervisors make sure their workers are getting the training they need? The following strategies should help.

Begin with the Work Environment. In order to develop professionally, workers must want to learn and grow. This desire must come from within themselves, out of their awareness that they do not have all the skills and knowledge they need to do the job. Yet supervisors can nurture this desire by creating an atmosphere at work that makes it clear that continuous professional learning is expected and prized.

This atmosphere cannot be created by decree. Instead, supervisors must model the behavior they wish to see in their employees. They can do this by incorporating discussions of training and new approaches to practice into formal unit meetings.
They can also encourage workers to talk informally amongst themselves about training (what’s helpful, what’s not so helpful) and practice. This will help individuals select courses to attend and give workers a sense of what to look for in a particular training.

Also, supervisors can demonstrate the importance of professional learning by attending training themselves.

Training Courses. The training provided through the NCDSS Children’s Services Statewide Training Partnership is a tool to help supervisors develop their employees. To use this tool to their best advantage, supervisors should try to attend as many of the courses relevant to their work unit as they can. This will help them know what each course covers and what it doesn’t. Knowing what’s in a course will enable them to prepare their employees to attend training and assess whether workers have learned what they should when they return. If there are important areas they feel the training did not address, supervisors will also be able to formulate a plan for teaching those elements to their workers.

Supervisory Training Courses. Supervisors should not neglect their own professional development. Attending Introduction to Supervision for Child Welfare Services will help new supervisors understand the scope of their jobs, develop their own personal leadership style, and support and develop their employees. More experienced supervisors should attend courses such as Conflict Management for Supervisors, Motivating Staff, and Results-Oriented Leadership. These courses will help them expand the skills and knowledge that enable them to do their important, challenging work.