

## **Introducing Group Supervision**

Group supervision is more than simply one-to-one supervision with several people. It can be a better use of financial resources and has a particular richness that is not available in one-to-one, though it does require particular skills on the part of supervisor and supervisees. For the supervisor, in addition to supervision itself, there is now the task of managing the group (monitoring dynamics, facilitating responses, paying attention to structure and boundaries). On the other hand, the supervisor gains from the insights and reactions of group members. Supervisees need to be able to tolerate group process and observe structures around time and boundaries. In order to supervise a group you will need to think about:

- the style of group you would like to supervise
- the make-up of the group
- the group alliance and ground rules
- group dynamics

### *Style of group*

There are four main styles of supervision group:

- **Authoritative** – each person receives supervision *in* a group with the focus on the supervisor. Group members learn by watching the supervisor. The group may feel risky for supervisees (or supervisor!) who feel exposed in front of the others. What is the group agreement for the members who are not being supervised at any given time?
- **Participative**: the supervisor takes responsibility for the supervision but all members are invited to participate as co-supervisors. The supervisor needs to be alert to interpersonal processes and pay careful attention to group maintenance. Supervisees may or may not be ready to take responsibility in the group, and may be at different stages. What is the group understanding about how to respond to each other? (The 'Four Elements' is one way of doing participative group supervision.)
- **Co-operative** – has much in common with an advanced participative group. The supervisor will tend to contribute later rather than sooner to a piece of work. S/he retains overall responsibility for the safety and effectiveness of the group although leadership may change hands during a session, and again group dynamics are very important. What is the group agreement about presenting and time-keeping?
- **Peer** – there is no one supervisor. Each member is a supervisor for the other members. Contract is very important so that it does not become simply a support group: what is the accountability of the group for its members' work? What are the ground rules around structure and time?

None of these styles is preferable to another: it is a question of what suits the situation and developmental stage of the supervisees. Groups may move in and out of these styles, or develop from one to another.

### *Make-up of the group*

Some issues to consider are:

- Do members see each other in other contexts besides the group?
- Do they understand each other's contexts?
- Do they have different levels of experience, position, qualifications etc.?
- Do they have different approaches (medical, CBT, arts therapies, counselling etc)?
- Who are the stakeholders in the group (organisations, clients, patients etc.)

### *Ground rules and group alliance*

Some questions you might want to consider in setting ground rules (or what Brigid Proctor calls good manners):

- How can we build an alliance around respect and good will?
- What ground rules do we need for confidentiality if members may know the people being brought to supervision, or meet each other in other contexts outside the group?
- Is it a closed group – if not, what is the understanding about people leaving or joining the group?

### *Group dynamics*

Becoming part of a group has impact on each member (including the supervisor) behind the scenes, beneath the words. In particular it may trigger forgotten memories of school, of the playground or of the family of origin.

It is worth reflecting on the impact on you of new groups – excitement, dread, paranoia, hope ....? Does being in a group make you want to withdraw? Do you need to sit where you can see out of a window? Do you feel the need to achieve? Are you happy to let the others get on with it? You might find it helpful to reflect on your own process in the course group since September.

Any group has its own life or 'group plot' (Leach and Paterson), and the supervisor needs to be aware of these in order to manage both the group *and* their own responses to it. The group will feel different to its members at different stages of its life – commonly known as **forming, storming, norming and performing** (Bruce Tuckman). To manage these stages the supervisor needs to pay attention to:

- **Beginnings (forming)**. This involves building a safe space and being aware that people are unlikely to take too many risks until they get an idea of how the group works. Some people deal with anxiety by taking larger risks than are appropriate in order to get something moving – or try to drown out the group process with a comic act – or shrink into themselves and wait. It is important to give people the opportunity to name their fears as well as their hopes and expectations in building the group covenant. The early stages may also be marked by a kind of euphoria – people are relieved and on their best behaviour as they realise they can cope with the group.
- **Early conflicts (storming)** will inevitably arise as people relax into the group space and make it their own. Leadership and boundaries may be tested. Disappointment may set in – 'My hopes for this group are not being met' – and people may become defensive, over-assertive or suspicious. It is important for the supervisor to keep modelling the terms of the contract (and name this if necessary) by reacting openly and non-defensively. Recognising that conflict is a natural part of group development can help the supervisor maintain a non-defensive, calm approach. Regular reflection on group process and an awareness of shared vulnerability can help to diffuse the unconscious processes that lead to conflict.
- **Mid-stages (norming and performing)**. The group settles into the task and its own rituals. Members become aware of each other's quirks and find ways to tolerate them. The group has become valuable to its members so people take care with their interventions but also take appropriate risks. The supervisor's task is to nourish this and bring the group back to functioning after disruptions of the process. Special attention may be needed if a new person joins the group or someone leaves.
- **Endings**. As with all endings, there is a danger of avoiding the tasks of ending that allow people to draw on the experience and move on, whether the whole group is ending or a member or supervisor is leaving. Important ingredients of a good ending are negotiation (within the organisational limits), planning, opportunity for review, expressing appreciation, making space for honest feedback to the supervisor, thinking about what members will take away from the group into their practice.

**Further reading:** Leach and Paterson , chs 7 and 8; Hawkins and Shoet 4<sup>th</sup> edn Part III; Brigid Proctor, *Group Supervision*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn, 2008, Sage.