

Article 81

Productive Conflict in Supervision

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Conflict is a component of supervision; however, many supervisors and supervisees may not expect to encounter conflict. Supervisors and supervisees may view conflict as a hindrance to the supervisory relationship, but when utilized productively conflict can be an asset. There are different conflictual themes that occur in the supervisory relationship. Supervisors and supervisees contribute different factors when conflict develops, and these contributions can positively or negatively influence the supervision process. A study conducted by Ramos-Sanchez, et. al. (2002) revealed the relationships between supervisors and supervisees are influential in the supervisees' training satisfaction level. It is important for supervisors to learn techniques to manage conflict productively, as this can result in increased satisfaction levels with the supervision process for supervisees and supervisors. Information derived from the research can allow supervisors to apply strategies to manage conflict in a productive manner, aiding in improved supervision outcomes, and lessening supervisory relationship disruptions.

Conflict is part of every human relationship, and the supervisory relationship is not immune to this phenomenon. Moskowitz and Rupert (1983) conducted a study consisting of 158 graduate students in Clinical Psychology. Their study found over one third of supervisees experienced at least one supervisory conflict that interfered with their ability to learn from supervision. In addition, a supervisee's or supervisor's ability to resolve conflict directly influences the supervisory relationship. Conflict that reaches a resolution is more likely to result in a strengthened relationship, positive supervision outcomes, and professional growth for the supervisor and supervisee. Conversely, inappropriately managed conflict can result in the supervisee feeling inadequate or dissatisfied (Duff & Shahin, 2010). When there is not a resolution, each conflict is likely to affect a gradual decline in the relationship, and could result in supervisees concealing their difficulties from their supervisors (Bernard & Goodyear, 2009; Moskowitz & Rupert, 1983). Moskowitz and Rupert (1983) also found that supervisees engaged in censoring reports to supervisors and disregarded supervisors' feedback while appearing to comply. These researchers concluded that supervisors who are respectful, establish rapport, and convey empathy, are likely to have supervisees who are receptive to learning.

Miscommunication, Differing Expectations and Conflict

The supervisory relationship will undergo a weakening and repair process, which can lead to positive change (Bernard & Goodyear, 2009; Bordin, 1983). This process allows for supervisees, as well as supervisors, to repair errors they make in relationships with others. When the weakening and repair process is practiced during supportive supervision, supervisees can learn to apply and model the mending of errors when working with clients (Bernard & Goodyear, 2009). Further, via this repair process, the supervisory relationship strengthens and the supervisee may engage in more efficient communication with the supervisor.

Conflicts in supervision can arise from miscommunication or differing expectations. Supervisees may struggle to communicate their ideas or concerns with their supervisors, particularly if supervisees are newer to the field and supervisory experience. For example, supervisees often experience difficulty communicating about disagreements that occur in the supervisory relationship. In addition, supervisees may feel uncertain about identifying what, and how much, personal information should be disclosed to their supervisor (Olk & Friedlander, 1992). These factors can increase supervisee anxiety, decrease productivity, and potentially increase conflict within the supervisory relationship. As the supervisory relationship develops, and supervisees gain experience and advance their skills, uncertainty decreases (Olk & Friedlander, 1992). While decreasing uncertainty may reduce certain types of conflicts, more advanced supervisees may waver between experiencing confidence and diffidence, which may result in different forms of conflict. Supervisors who understand developmental differences based on supervisee experience may be able to productively manage these potential conflicts (Bernard & Goodyear, 2009).

Conflicts arising out of differing expectations can occur in the supervisory relationship. Supervisors may have certain expectations about supervisees' skill level, professionalism, and timeliness that may differ from the supervisees' abilities or

developmental level. Further, supervisees may have certain expectations of their supervisors, such as level of direction, supervision style, and ideas about the supervision process (Bernard & Goodyear, 2009). In addition, differences in personality types among supervisors and supervisees have resulted in conflicts that interfered with the supervisory relationship. Other causes of “expectation conflicts” include differences in theoretical orientation, therapeutic approaches, or dissatisfaction with the style of supervision (Moskowitz & Rupert, 1983). Supervisors’ insensitive criticisms and disapproving attitudes were also found to have serious consequences on supervisee development. These attitudes can adversely affect the supervisory relationship and supervisees’ future career decisions (Ramos-Sánchez, et. al., 2002). Supervisors who have open dialogue and establish clear expectations with supervisees will be more prepared to manage expectation conflicts.

Evaluative Process and Conflict

The evaluative process of supervision can raise anxieties, resistance, and avoidance in some supervisees. Bordin (1983) found that bonding problems exist in the supervisory relationship because of the evaluative components of supervision. Supervisees may experience lack of trust, lack of communication, and decreased desire to engage in the evaluative process because of elevated anxiety levels. In addition, the evaluative nature of supervision makes the relationship more vulnerable to conflicts (Bernard & Goodyear, 2009). Supervisors need to be aware of the power differential inherent in the supervisory process, and how this power differential may influence supervisees’ willingness to express their goals in supervision (Ramos-Sánchez, et al., 2002). Supervisees often experience multiple roles. Olk and Friedlander (1992) purported that supervisees are commonly in the student, colleague, and counselor roles, and this role multiplicity often results in conflicts, particularly when the role of student opposes the role of counselor or colleague. The student role involves receiving direct feedback and recommendations from the supervisor, but the role of counselor or colleague requires supervisees to act more independently. Though role conflict does not occur frequently, when it does occur it can result in adverse outcomes in the supervisory relationship (Olk & Friedlander, 1992). Trust in the supervisory relationship becomes more necessary since the evaluative information can be difficult for supervisors to deliver and supervisees to receive (Bordin, 1983).

Adopting a pre-emptive approach toward conflict in the supervisory relationship can strengthen trust and clarify the importance of open communication. Early in the supervisory relationship, it can be helpful for supervisors to introduce conflict as a natural component of supervisory relationships (Moskowitz & Rupert, 1983) that can occur during periods of evaluation. This not only helps normalize the experience, but also serves as a reference point when conflict occurs. Supervisors who communicate openly about healthy conflict management, and who engage supervisees as active participants in using these skills, may allow supervisees professional growth opportunities (Duff & Shahin, 2010).

Other Contributing Factors and Conflict

Supervisors and supervisees contribute factors that can escalate or create conflict in supervision. Supervisee factors found to contribute to conflict included personality style, attitudes conveying supervision as unnecessary, being defensive and unwilling to share their work, lacking responsibility, being overwhelmed or over committed, difficulty managing demands of the field, experiencing evaluation anxiety, and transference (Duff & Shahin, 2010; Nelson, Barnes, Evans, & Triggiano, 2008). Supervisee resistance was also found to contribute to conflict. Resistance could be present for a number of reasons including a perceived threat, a need to individuate from the supervisor, disagreements about goals, decreased trust in the supervisor, and a high reactance level (Bernard & Goodyear, 2009). The developmental level of the supervisee contributes to different types of resistance; for example, supervisees who are advanced are more likely to individuate from their supervisors, resulting in conflicts of individuation more often than novice supervisees. Supervisees' shame and anxiety influences conflict, and the supervision process may elicit shame and anxiety, resulting in withdrawal, avoidance, or attack on self or others (Bernard & Goodyear, 2009).

Supervisor factors that contribute to conflict include the lack of communication about expectations, supervisors' own anxiety about evaluating supervisees, not addressing problems early in the relationship, having expectations much higher than the supervisees' developmental level, burnout in the field, inadequate supervision, unaddressed issues related to power differentials, personality style, and the supervisors' defensiveness in response to supervisees' feedback (Duff & Shahin, 2010; Nelson, Barnes, Evans, & Triggiano, 2008; Nelson & Friedlander, 2001). Supervisor transference was also a factor that influenced conflict, with negative transference resulting in supervisees viewing the supervisor as punitive. Supervisor countertransference was often associated with external stress from a heavy workload, disappointment that supervisees were not taking work seriously, overidentification with what it was like to be a beginning counselor, or wanting the supervisee to be a better counselor (Bernard & Goodyear, 2009).

Organizational dysfunction within the training site can also contribute to conflict within the supervisory relationship. Poor administrative guidance and structure can result in a lack of organizational support for supervisors and supervisees. Supervisors can become overburdened with clinical responsibilities, limiting their availability for supervision and training. Training and supervision can become neglected, leaving supervisees disappointed and unsupported. This lack of support can thwart the development of trust within the supervisory relationship. The supervisee may distrust that supervision will occur every week and that they cannot count on their supervisor. As noted earlier, when distrust exists within the supervisory relationship, conflict is more likely to occur without a supportive relationship to help manage it. When overburdened or not supported by the organization, supervisors can become desensitized over time, neglecting to support their supervisees in a similar manner as they have been neglected by the organization. Additionally, supervision can be eclipsed by complaints and grievances regarding the dysfunction within the organization, leaving less time for dialogue about meaningful clinical material.

Effects and Management of Supervisee Anxiety

Many supervisees experience anxiety due to the evaluative nature of the supervision process and the desire to be perceived as capable. Supervisee anxiety may also be associated with competency concerns and is commonly experienced by novice practitioners and trainees (Harvey & Struzziero, 2008). A certain degree of anxiety is considered adaptive as it increases supervisee motivation and attentiveness resulting in enhanced learning; however, excessive anxiety can inhibit the acquisition of new skills and negatively impact performance (Harvey & Struzziero, 2008). Anxiety may also result in attempts by supervisees to conceal their mistakes or perceived flaws from supervisors (Liddle, 1986). In a recent study of 204 therapists-in-training, Mehr, Ladany and Caskie (2010) found that greater trainee anxiety was associated with a greater amount of nondisclosures and lower willingness to disclose in supervision sessions. The researchers concluded that supervisees may be more willing to disclose information if the supervision environment itself provoked less anxiety.

Due to its potential influence on the supervisory relationship, as well on the clinical effectiveness of the supervisee, recognition and management of anxiety is essential. Supervisors can proactively manage supervisee anxiety by acknowledging and normalizing feelings of anxiety related to inexperience and competence concerns (Harvey & Struzziero, 2008; Mehr et al., 2010). Ongoing discussion and clarification of the evaluative process and procedures may also reduce supervisee anxiety. Setting specific, explicit and measurable goals combined with the provision of clear, timely, and reciprocal feedback is recommended (Woika, 2010). Supervisor openness, including inviting supervisee feedback, being open about limitations, being receptive, and being non-defensive, has been found to be negatively predictive of supervisee anxiety (Lizzio, Wilson, & Que, 2009). Balancing support and challenge in response to the developmental and situational needs of supervisees is also important. Anxiety increases in situations when supervisees have less experience or confidence; thus increased structure and guidance from supervisors in these circumstances is appropriate (Harvey & Struzziero, 2008).

Strategies for Managing Conflict

There are several effective strategies that can assist supervisors with managing conflict in the supervisory relationship. Conflicts could be mitigated or resolved by the supervisor initiating and addressing the concerns directly with the supervisee; however, the research indicates most supervisees initiate communication as opposed to their supervisor (Moskowitz & Rupert, 1983). Supervisors need to be aware of the supervisees' developmental level. For instance, early developing supervisees require more attention and more effort toward developing a solid working relationship. Addressing relationship issues directly can help alleviate conflicts and reduce negative consequences (Ramos- Sanchez et al., 2002). Supervisors should consider encouraging supervisees to be candid about their anxieties and their specific supervision needs (Ramos-Sanchez et al., 2002). Supervisors who utilize immediacy and open discussion about supervisee anxiety can help foster personal and professional growth (Nelson, Barnes, Evans, & Triggiano, 2008). It is the supervisors' use of inquiry, open and

appropriate communication, and feedback—in conjunction with responsiveness and sensitivity to supervisee needs that help minimize or prevent alliance ruptures which coincide with conflict.

To reduce miscommunication and differing expectations, a clear training contract and/or informed consent should be utilized (Bordin 1983; Cobia & Boes, 2000; Veach, 2001). Training contracts provide opportunities for role clarification, establishment of supervision goals, explanation of rights and responsibilities, and clarification of the nature of the supervisory relationship. Role induction is also an essential component of supervision as it allows the supervisee to clearly understand the scope and breadth of the supervision process (Bahrack, Russell, & Salmi, 1991). Further, Cobia and Boes (2000) postulated that the following topics should be covered early in supervision: risks and benefits of supervision, supervisee confidentiality and privileged information, the types of strategies and interventions used by the supervisor, ethical guidelines of supervision, length of each supervision session, supervisor's approach to resolving or reporting disputes or complaints, and consultation procedures.

Evaluative information should be delivered in a manner in which supervisee strengths and growth areas are recognized (Baird, 2005) and shared with the supervisee in a balanced format. Baird (2005) indicated that viewing the feedback as a progress report versus a grade report can help supervisees recognize that supervision promotes learning. Feedback should focus on professional work and not personal circumstances. He further indicated that supervisees like to view their supervisors as teachers, mentors, and role models. Bordin (1983) opined that supervisors should clearly communicate their perceptions of supervisees' skill level directly to the supervisees. This type of communication is typically an unstated goal of supervisees and not often found in training contracts. Bordin (1983) stated, however, that supervisees who do not receive this type of feedback from their supervisors experience more anxiety, predominately about their supervisors' perception of their abilities. Unclearly communicated feedback can adversely influence supervisees' performance with clients, and their relationship with their supervisors. A clear contract and informed consent process mitigates conflicts in supervision, including the evaluative components. Providing structured, balanced, and constructive evaluative feedback to supervisees can lessen conflict and result in a positive supervision experience.

Supervisors who closely monitor and provide balanced feedback create an environment that could help minimize conflict (Veach, 2001). This type of checks and balances system increases awareness that conflicts exist in the first place. In addition, Veach (2001) opined that supervisors should be aware of their respective code of ethics for the field as it relates to the supervisory relationship. Because conflicts may be related to transference and countertransference, use of objective third party consultation or peer supervision is important (Veach, 2001). Further, third party consultation or peer supervision helps supervisors maintain accountability for supervisees (Ramos-Sanchez et al., 2002).

Several common themes among effective supervisors were revealed in one study. These themes included the supervisors' openness to conflict, ability to take a developmental approach to supervision, attributes and attitudes reflecting care and a sense of humility, willingness to learn from their supervisees, awareness of their own shortcomings, willingness to regularly attend to the supervision process, and their

commitment to working in a collaborative manner and soliciting feedback from their supervisees (Nelson, Barnes, Evans, & Triggiano, 2008). Further, these authors found that effective supervisors viewed conflict as useful and necessary to improving the relationship.

There are several strategies, that when incorporated into supervision, can facilitate productive conflict resolution. Some strategies recommended for working through conflicts include being aware of the supervisees' developmental level and needs, using of empathy, patience and flexibility, utilizing colleague support, providing difficult feedback in a sensitive manner, using behavioral approaches and problem solving techniques, directly observing supervisees performance, and communicating supervisees' successes and strengths (Nelson, Barnes, Evans, & Triggiano, 2008). Utilizing techniques such as these is likely to foster a strong supervisory alliance and reduce the chances of disruption.

Conclusion

Conflict is an innate part of the supervision process, thus making it unavoidable. While most conflicts can be resolved quickly, some conflicts may take longer to resolve or may never be resolved (Bernard & Goodyear, 2009). Regardless, it is important that supervisors learn to manage conflict effectively, thereby increasing the potential for supervisees' professional growth. The productive management of conflict can improve the supervisory experience and strengthen the relationship. Increased awareness of the supervisees' skill level can result in shared perspectives, improved communication about needs, and increase problem solving abilities (Bernard & Goodyear, 2009), among other proficiencies.

Based upon the literature, several factors can contribute to productive conflict in supervision. Supervisors should be aware that this type of conflict can be beneficial in the supervisory relationship. It can help foster a stronger working alliance, improve communication skills, and help develop resolution abilities. When conflict is managed appropriately and is considered a normal part of the supervision process, the supervisor and supervisee are likely to experience a better relationship and supervision outcomes.

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