



Translating Group Learning into Individual Behavioral Change: The Role of Critical Analysis Tools in Professional Growth

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Introduction

Improving supervisors' ability to teach, supervise and develop clinical skills in front line child welfare workers is critical to improving the quality of services and retention of skilled workers. However, Supervisory development presents a dilemma for the employing agency. Empowering supervisors to develop workers' critical analytic abilities, which are critical to effective case work, will likely involve questioning dearly held assumptions, values, and policies of the organization. This article explores the dilemma of training and development. Should a staff development initiative for child welfare professionals be directed toward learning within agency defined boundaries, i.e. toward performance, or toward autonomous practice via application of critical reflection analysis, i.e. true learning. It details a three year supervisory development program designed to empower teaching and application of critical reflective skills in front line workers.

Background

Organizations in every sphere of the public, voluntary and private sectors have embraced the importance of using the total abilities of their staff. No longer just "hands," workers are now seen also as "minds." Within the public sector, local and state child welfare organizations are grappling with seemingly intractable problems of service quality (O'Brien and Watson, 2002) and the related problem of high levels of job turnover among skilled and experienced front line workers and supervisors (CWLA, 1995; 2004; OMB, 2002). How does training and development of workers and supervisors impact these two issues? What is the rationale for expending fiscal, temporal, emotional and intellectual resources on Human Resource Development (HRD) in public child welfare agencies? The obvious and simplistic answer is to improve the quality of service to clients. But how? Precisely what is the mechanism through which performance improve-

ment is achieved? There are differing approaches and philosophies of HRD which drive the educational model chosen with significantly different anticipated outcomes. The emphasis continuum runs from those interventions which focus solely on the technical/concept approach to those which champion critical analysis. In general HRD can be divided along the lines of approaches that concentrate on "performance" and those that spotlight individual "learning." The former centers on developing the individual's capabilities leading to improved performance for the organization. In contrast, a "learning" approach is based on building individual capacities and creating an environment where personal development can be facilitated and supported (Corley & Eades, 2006). While some authors (Harrison & Kessels, 2004) argue for integration of these perspectives, others see a continuing and essential conflict. For instance, a critical analysis approach to learning is congruent with the concept of professional autonomy but may be at odds with bureaucratic control. To borrow from an early organizational theorist, the critical analysis model supports a "cosmopolitan" while a strict performance orientation caters to the "local" orientation (Gouldner, 1957). While the goal of all training and development activities is to get individual staff to apply what they have learned by changing their behavior, the most effective and contextually congruent manner of doing so remains a dilemma for the staff development professional. When provided with the opportunity to design an innovative three year HRD program for child welfare supervisors the authors were faced with this complex issues in conceptualizing an educational model that would fit with both the professional aspirations of the trainees and the mandates of the organization. And once the core ideological questions were resolved, the practical issue of what appropriate methodology should be employed to achieve the desired end. This article examines the process used and the results achieved in that initiative. First we

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must look at the problems from a theoretical perspective. Next we follow the theory toward a practical solution to the key dilemma and discuss why we chose learning and how we developed a project to instill learning among child welfare supervisors. Finally, we discuss the strengths and possible pitfalls of the project based on quantitative and qualitative findings.

Learning Organizations

During the last two decades of the 20th century, managers in every sector began to hear of the need for organizations to be coming learning organizations. Senge (1990 p 3) define learning organizations to be — organizations where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning to see the whole together.— Senge's popular work credited earlier theoretical work by Chris Argyris and Donald Schön. These theorists have a particular import for our approach to learning.

Argyris and Schön's work (1974; 1978; 1996) is based on a belief that every practitioner uses two contrasting theories of professional action. The first is their "espoused theory" which is the theory they use to explain their actions to themselves and others. The other is their "theories in use" which govern actual behavior and tend to be based on tacit assumptions about self, others and the organization for which they work. Drawing the distinction between how we explain our professional actions and how professional actions are based on tacit assumptions means that training, development and learning can be contrasted between methods that recognize and challenge deeply held, often unconscious assumptions and those that do not.

Argyris and Schön emphasize that learning means detecting that something is wrong in professional actions and correcting the error. They note that the first response is to stay within a set of basic assumptions (such as established values,

beliefs, policy, etc.) and find a new strategy that fits comfortably within the assumptions. This they call "single loop learning." However, when something is wrong with professional action and the practitioner engages in corrective actions that question the basic assumptions (norms, beliefs, objectives, policies) then they are engaged in "double loop learning." Double loop learning, Argyris and Schön believe, is the only way for complex systems (client systems, organizations, communities) to make informed decisions in uncertain, complex and rapidly changing circumstances. Critical analytic skill or reflection's role is to surface the "theories in use" and compare their fit with "espoused" theory. The project discussed in the paper was an attempt to get beyond supervisory performance and develop learning that would strengthen the community of practice (Wenger, 1997).

Critical Analytic Skill

Corley and Eades (2006) explore the role of reflection or critical analysis in examining human relations (HR) practices and HR education. They note that critical reflection on practice is vital to development of critical analytic skills. However, they note that like social work practice in child welfare, questioning the basic assumptions in HR may lead the practitioner into direct confrontation with those who embrace the basic norms, objectives, and policies of the agency. Using the post-modern terminology of "dominant discourse," critical analysis of practice may challenge the dominant discourse in the agency. In terms of training and development, the dominant discourse is usually framed with the objective of training to be good job performance. That is doing the job within the established standards. Within child welfare performance usually means compliance with deadlines, following rules, and meeting established objectives.

Challenging the dominant discourse are learning communities of reflective practitioners who may "develop a common language that allows people to

communicate and negotiate meanings across boundaries” (Corley and Eades, 2006, p 30). Again, placing this within child welfare means peer to peer communication to share experience, ideas and methods, encouragement of thinking outside established rules, and seeking to share knowledge to improve the quality of practice for families, children, and youth.

Supervisory Development: Learning, Professionalism and Communities of Practice

The dominant discipline in the child welfare agency is social work and this is in direct contrast to host setting such as mental health or medicine where although the social work practitioners may be primary service delivery agents, they are in a subordinate hierarchical role. Whether this primacy in child welfare is sufficient to characterize the protective service supervisor as a “professional” in the strict definition of that term serves only to revisit long trampled ground (Greenwood, 1975, Etzioni, 1964, MacDonald, 1995). Certainly one key element of all definitions is missing, namely complete self-directed practice (May and Buck, 1998). What does exist is a form of limited professional autonomy based on negotiated order (Greenwood and Lachman, 1997) where the practitioner interprets and modifies policy and develops collaborative arrangements with the clientele to define goals and methodology. And while autonomy is clearly a key to professionalism, increasingly traditional professions are becoming more institutionally bound in what Parry and Parry (1979) first termed “bureau-professionalism.” But when one goes on to the other elements in defining professional practice one finds that they are clearly attainable. Of particular emphasis in this project were three: 1) a body of technical expertise; 2) authority based on demonstrated competence; and 3) self-critical evaluation. The curriculum was designed to address each of these salient aspects of professionalism. The extensive content on resiliency theory and solution-focused therapy was

designed to address the first element. This content and the methodology employed for instruction is detailed elsewhere in this volume (Anderson & Sundet, 2007). The core supervisory teaching model adopted (role demonstration) was specifically chosen to move from a management culture based on regulation to one grounded in competence (Sundet, Mermelstein & Watt, 2003). For the third element the authors relied heavily on the formulation of Michael Reynolds:

The aim of management education should not be to fit people into institutions as they currently exist but to encourage them in questioning and confronting the social and political forces which provide the context of their work and in questioning claims of common sense or the way things should be done (Reynolds, 1998, p.198).

Coupling directed contextual analysis with conscious self-scrutiny are hall marks of professionalism. The challenge became one of finding means to engage the supervisor-trainees in a self-analytic and data-based developmental process that had both credibility with them and one in which their immediate managers and the entire management structure would actively participate. A number of alternatives were considered but the one finally agreed on coupled the technology of 360 performance assessment, professional feedback and a structured form of Individual Development Plan.

The introduction of the 360 degree performance evaluation instrumentation and its resulting attendant individual development plans was the mechanism which strengthened the learning community orientation, became the major tool through which the ideology of critical analysis was introduced and ultimately the essential pedagogical methodologies around which a “learning” philosophy of HRD was organized in this project.

The 360-Degree (Full Circle) Evaluation

A 360 DEGREE evaluation has various forms both in the public and private arenas and is variously

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referred to as multi-source or multi-rater assessments (Lepsinger & Lucia, 1997; U.S. Office of Personnel Management, 1997). In its simplest form it is designed to provide an overview of a person's performance on the job by soliciting full-circle feedback from superiors, peers, direct reports and self on behaviors that are specific to the job assignment (Waldman & Atwater, 1998). The intent of this process is to allow each individual to understand how her/his effectiveness as a subordinate, co-worker or superior is viewed by others in the organization who have the most immediate knowledge and daily interaction with that person. Individuals providing feedback are usually limited to those staff with whom the employee routinely interacts although in some instances client/customer input is also sought. The 360 process is not without dangers with criticism focusing primarily on its use as a personnel management device rather than a tool of professional development (Kelly & Sundet, in press).

In the Missouri implementation both the positives and negatives were carefully weighed and plans made accordingly. First, a 360 format that had been successfully used with social service supervisory personnel in other settings was chosen (Organizational Excellence Group, 2000) and the participants were given detailed oral and written instructions on its use. Considerable time was allotted to answer questions and address unique structural arrangements.

Next a carefully crafted agreement was developed with top agency administration to ensure that the process would be used for professional development purposes only. Great pains were taken to ensure that the responses would be confidential. The form for rating was individually computer generated with unique identifier codes known only to the rater and the external data compiler. Because of the agreement noted above that the assessments were used for developmental purposes only the results were solely the property of the individual supervisor. In some instances the participants

decided to share the information with their superiors as part of the agency's performance management process but it was clearly understood by both upper and middle management that the 360 process was not part of the Division's personnel evaluation process and that the data were controlled by the recipient of the rating.

Based on extensive analysis of the 360's use in a variety of setting it was clear that an absolutely essential element in effectively using this technique was tying the assessment data to an Individual Development Plan (IDP). Project personnel from the School of Social Work met individually with each supervisor for an extended debriefing and discussion of the rating results. These conferences centered on both performance strengths and areas identified for improvement. Each supervisor then drafted an IDP and submitted it to the project director for input and consultation. At the conclusion of that process the supervisor then met with her/his immediate manager for further refinement of the plan which was then signed off on by the supervisor, manager and project training director. This IDP was then a roadmap for the supervisor's development activities during the following year and performance was jointly evaluated by the supervisor and project staff consultant at the end of that period.

Process and Findings

The Findings reported here concern the first two project years (PY1 and PY2) of the three year intervention. The 360 evaluation instrument used included five sections with six questions in each section (total of 30 questions) which ask the rater to judge the subject on a Likert type scale ranging from strongly agree (5) to strongly disagree (1) with a "not applicable" option. The instrument measures reactions to the subject's performance as a communicator, leader, manager, facilitator and professional. Respondents can also enter open-end comments in each area and after the structured questions are asked to volunteer qualitative comments regarding

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the subjects' areas of strength, areas to improve, and general comments.

A detailed orientation to the 360 evaluation instrument was conducted during one of the formal training sessions and a demonstration on how to access and complete the web based survey was given. Methods for protecting anonymity of the respondents was discussed and every supervisor was provided with a packet with instructions for completing a self-evaluation and instructions for distribution on up to twenty (20) respondents. The packets contain coded personal identification numbers (PIN) which the supervisors are instructed to distribute in a manner which insures that they will not know and respondent's PIN, They are asked to select persons they report directly to (their superiors), other supervisors filling the same job responsibilities (peers) and individuals reporting to them (direct report workers). A two week window was allowed for the respondents to complete the assessments. Completed data were returned in 10 working days with each supervisor receiving a confidential report with the average response scores for all respondents as well as those for the superiors, peer and subordinate along with their self-evaluation. The standard deviation for respondents' scores was provided along with the scale average score from past administrations of the instrument.

Along with mean scores for each question, the report provides a bar graph of the five areas overall scores and a mean score for all five areas. In addition, bar graphs for each of the five areas provide a bar for the subject's individual score on the area, the average score in that area for all subjects from that organization, a bar for the subject's overall score, and a bar showing the "benchmark." The benchmark score is the average score in that area for all persons who have completed the instrument regardless of their organization. Finally, the report provides the strengths and areas for improvement according to the subject and according to all of the respondents.

Quantitative Findings of 360 Data

The quantitative data was subjected to a comparison of means between the PY1 baseline and the PY2 one year intervention data. The first analysis is a simple look at the overall mean scores on all five scales for the entire group. By the second program year only 29 of the supervisors who started in the first year remained in the project due to advancements and retirements. Table 1 shows the comparisons of the PY1 and PY2 results. Responses from all rating sources for all supervisors were subjected to a paired T-test analysis and differences were found to be statistically significant. The T-test value was 2.782 with 358 degrees of freedom, resulting in a significance of .006 (two tailed test with significance level of alpha = .05). Within the overall group, 19 supervisors' scores had improved while 10 had declined. This clearly show a mixed pattern of growth for some supervisors while others had declined in terms of the scores provided by all respondents — supervisors, peers and direct reports. The "Gap Analysis" displays graphically (see figure 1) the pattern. Here it is interesting to note the close matching of the scores by areas of evaluation with the PY1 line being remarkably similar to the PY2 line.

Table 1: Mean Scale Scores by Rating Category

<i>All Respondents PY1 VS PY2</i>			
	2003	2004	Difference
Communicator	419	428	9
Leader	411	424	13
Manager	397	407	10
Facilitator	409	421	12
Professional	425	437	12
Mean All Scales	412	423	11

Note: Means Scale Score are multiplied by 100 for clarity.

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Figure 1: Gap Analysis All Respondents

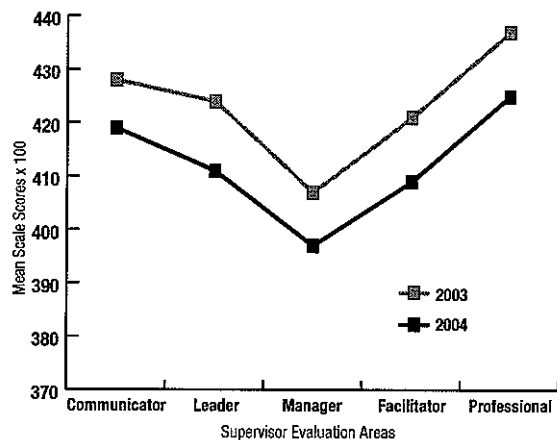


Table 2: Mean Scale Scores by Rating Category

Direct Report Respondents Only: PY1 VS PY2

	2003	2004	Difference
Communicator	420	436	16
Leader	413	433	20
Manager	402	434	32
Facilitator	410	448	38
Professional	418	442	24

Note: Mean scale scores are multiplied by 100 for clarity

When overall scores are compared to the external baseline data, the profile is exactly the same with manager and facilitator functions rating the lowest and communicator and professional the highest. The Missouri supervisors' scores on all items are significantly higher than those reported for the national baseline of comparable positions in like agencies.

Of particular concern in this project and congruent with its focus on role demonstration teaching methodology was improving the working relationship between the supervisors and their immediate subordinates. Consequently these data were isolated for special analysis. Table 2 provides the group means scores by direct reports. Again all the differences show improvement on each scale from PY1 to PY2. All direct report responses for all supervisors were subjected to a paired T-test analysis and differences were found to be statistically significant. The T-test values was 3.5666 with 138 degrees of freedom resulting in significance greater than 1 in 1000 (significance >.000, two tailed test with alpha+.05). The gap analysis (see Figure 2) shows a very different pattern for PY2 than for PY1. (Insert Figure # 2) The PY1 line for direct reports is remarkably similar

to the pattern shown for all respondents in PY1. The PY2 scores show a different pattern with pronounced growth in the manager and facilitator roles and some growth in the professional roles. Clearly the direct reports are scoring their supervisors higher in these areas. The overall pattern shows 22 supervisors to have gained in the views of their workers. The gain from direct reports is offset in the overall score (cf. Table # 1 and Figure #1) by a slight decrease in peer scores in the second rating period.

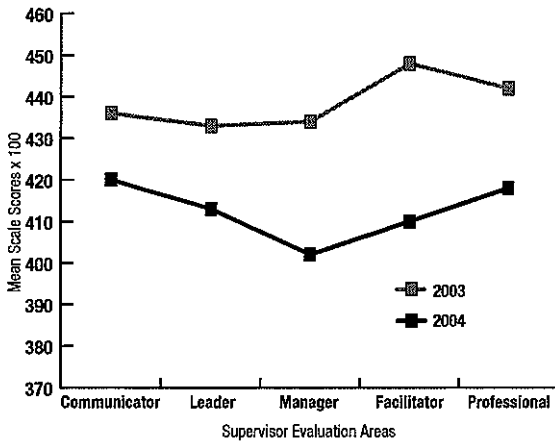
The data from PY1 and PY2 for all respondents and for direct reports only cannot be said to meet a rigorous standard of statistical significance. However, the overall improvement in scores from all respondents and the differing pattern from direct reports suggests that the supervisors were showing different patterns of behavior toward those they work with. The next section turns to more qualitative analysis.

Individual Development Plan Results

The entire process of input, evaluation, critical analysis, feedback and interpretation of results that forms the core of the 360 process would be pointless unless it were coupled with an action phase building upon those data. As noted previously, the Individual Development Plan (IDP) is a critical aspect of employing this tool to produce behavioral and organizational change and the results further reinforce the comparative score data described above.

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Figure 2: Gap Analysis Direct Report Respondents



At the conclusion of the year 2003 (PY-1) feedback sessions, each supervisor developed an IDP that specified from one to four behavioral goals to be accomplished during the coming year along with action steps and resources required for achieving the objectives. These objectives were specifically based on the areas that the 360 data indicated were most salient for performance improvement. The thirty-two participants and their managers together identified and agreed on 108 goals ($m = 3.38$) and the attendant steps, resources and timelines. A supervisor/manager countersigned copy of each IDP was filed with research team. While the goals determined by the participants were closely geared to the content of the adopted instrument, latitude was also provided for them to specify arenas of professional concern not addressed by this 30 items SOE form. The open-ended comment sections provided significant content for self-analysis and goal selection.

By the time of the second administration of the instrument the number of participants had decreased to twenty-nine though promotions and resignation. During the 2004 debriefing sessions, the IDP document was individually reviewed with

Table 3 Individual Development Plan Goals

Most Common IDP Goals

Item	2003 score	2004 score	change +/-
Model practice for workers (14)	3.91	4.20	+.29
Provide structured feedback (12)	4.00	4.27	+.27
Sense of community/morale (12)	3.87	4.19	+.32
Better control of emotions (10)	4.21	4.00	-.21
Improved unit communication (10)	4.05	4.28	+.23
Work organization/time management (10)	3.93	4.07	+.14

each supervisor and their subjective assessment recorded. Subsequently an item comparison analysis linking the goals with instrument items was conducted. The mean score of the keyed items for the 2003 iteration of the 360 was 3.97 and that number increased to 4.17 in 2004. Twenty-one of the 29 remaining supervisors had an increased mean score on their particular constellation of behavioral aims. Scores ranged up to .78 higher while the range of lower scores was considerably lower. Interviews with participants who did not fare as well in the second administration pointed to a consistent pattern of staff unrest and labor-management problems in those offices and again illustrate the environmental sensitivity of 360 (Sundet & Kelly, in press). Seventy-two percent of the unique behaviors targeted among all the supervisors showed improvement from the year one to the year two ratings. Table 3 lists the most commonly specified goals and the 360 scoring on those items in the first and second rating periods.

The first item is of particular interest in the overall evaluation of this project since the model of

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supervision being tested is "role demonstration" which requires the superiors to show techniques to their subordinates. Associated with this element is the structured feedback which, in these sites, was principally through regularly scheduled case conferences, a departure from the former practice of case consultation on an ad hoc basis.

Organizational morale shows the greatest gain among the top six goals and this might be expected for an item that is actually an aggregate of many behavioral changes in an organization. The one goal in which respondent raters did not see growth among these supervisors was in the area of appropriate control of emotional response. Although the composite rating does not meet the standard for an "area of concern," the slippage is notable as a departure from an otherwise positive trend. Better work organization and time management may be linked to the perceived improvement in unit communications. Since the inception of this process most of the supervisors report that they have instituted regular group meetings within their units both for administrative purposes and as a medium for teaching clinical practice skills.

Implications for Practice

Involving child welfare supervisors in a learning culture means more than having them be passive recipients of information. "Culture" is a dynamic element assuming transaction of ideas and ideology. When one adds the modifier "professional" to that culture expectation it becomes absolutely essential that critical analysis of those ideas/ideologies is a

core construct that must be not just included but a principal emphasis. But such analysis must be progressive and developmental with the goal of service improvement through professional growth. Therefore it is critical to a professional development program to find means to structure that practice analysis and self-evaluation. The 360-degree evaluation, when carefully employed as a development tool, provides good "evidence" for the evaluation of supervisory performance. When supervisors are evaluated by those who report to them a new dynamic of collegiality and mutual professionalism is established. Third, the 360 evaluation when coupled with feedback focused on the supervisor's own development provides a source of empowerment, refreshment, and support. These actions alone may reduce stress and burnout enabling the supervisory to have "more to give" to their workers.

This experience does support the contention that specifically targeted supervisory behaviors can and do change when a developmental plan of action is designed and carried through and that having critical analysis feedback data upon which to build clearly assists in focusing such action plans. However, it is also evident from this experience that managerial commitment and support for the supervisor is essential if the individual development plans are to achieve their intended aims. Where the IDP was viewed by management as an organizational contract to which the agency as well as the supervisor was committed to professional development, the results were successful in promoting and sustaining employee growth.

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