

Organizational Culture, Supervision and Retention of Public Child Welfare Workers

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Abstract

Public child welfare retention, supervision and organizational culture are addressed. Public child welfare workers have better outcomes when supervisors are effective managers. Public child welfare workers have better outcomes including perceived efficacy when organizational factors such as supervision, a culture of caring and feelings of safety are present. Effective supervision requires competency-based training and evaluation. These findings and discussion suggest a need for further research on outcomes for workers who are supervised by supervisors who have received competency-based training and evaluation, and those that have not.

Keywords: public child welfare, supervision, organization culture, retention

Introduction

According to Williams, et al (2010) maintaining a well-trained pool of workers in public child welfare agencies continues to be an ongoing problem. Research suggests that it is critical that we continue to explore the factors associated with worker efficacy. Existing research has found that outcomes for families and children are affected by numerous individual and organizational characteristics one of which is workers' perceived efficacy. A report from the Institute for the Advancement of Social Work Research based on a study conducted in collaboration with the University of Maryland School of Social Work, Center for Families & Institute for Human Services Policy (2005), found that positive personal factors associated with retention include professional commitment to children and families, previous work experience, education, job satisfaction, efficacy, and personal characteristics such as age. Personal factors that negatively impact retention include burnout, defined as emotional exhaustion which is a component of burnout most linked to turnover, role overload, conflict and stress. Organizational factors that impact retention/turnover include better salary, supervisory support, reasonable workload, coworker support, opportunities for advancement, organizational commitment, and valuing employees. Recent studies have focused more specifically on organizational culture and supervision as factors influencing worker efficacy and retention. The Child Welfare Information Gateway (2015) conducted research that addressed the importance of the supervision in child welfare services by directly linking effective supervision with good practice. They state that supervisors offer valuable educational, social, and administrative support, which can in turn contribute to worker effectiveness that translates into quality service delivery, improved worker capacity, increased service provision, stronger client engagement, and improved goal attainment on the part of workers.

Jacquet, et al (2008) study of the retention of 765 title IV-E MSWs in public child welfare found that support from supervisors emerged as a pivotal factor in employee retention. This study corroborates literature indicating that support from supervisors enhances retention of specially trained child welfare workers. Landsman & D'Aunno (2012) hold that supervision in child welfare is a fundamental organizational factor in work force retention. Referring to the work of the Children's Bureau they note that supportive supervision is paramount in job satisfaction, commitment, and retention of child welfare workers.

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The problem that persists is that while worker intervention is needed, less emphasis has been placed on interventions targeting supervisors and providing training and mediation skills for supervisors that will lead to better supervisor-worker relationships, better outcomes and goal attainment for workers, and ultimately better services to clients. There is an extensive body of research in the child welfare field linking effective supervisory practices to positive outcomes for staff, agencies, and the children and families that their organizations serve. Supervisory effectiveness is felt most directly by the caseworkers being supervised. Research indicates that high-quality supervision can prevent or reduce employee burnout and secondary trauma, which in turn reduces staff turnover rates (Collins, Camargo & Royse, 2010; Landsman, 2007; Brittain & Conrad, 2006).

Williams, et al (2010) found that among study participants, workers were committed to the agency; however, they did not feel that the agency was committed to neither them nor their well-being. Workers reported enjoying the support of coworkers; however, they did not feel that they were supported by supervisors. For example,

When asked “What were their perceptions of management styles of supervisors?” they reported the following:

- They felt that supervisors were competent; however, not supportive
- Supervisors and managers do not acknowledge their work in a positive manner
- The management style of supervisors does not communicate that the agency values its workers.

When asked “What are workers’ perceptions of manager and supervisor professionalism?” they reported the following:

- Supervisors do not show leadership
- No incentives are provided for good work
- There is little recognition from supervisors
- They do not feel respected by supervisors
- Some question whether the agency values their safety and well being

Others have found similar results (Westbrook and Crolley, 2012 and Harbert, Dudley and Erbes, 2009). There is a need for continuous dialog and research regarding the development of best practices for management and supervision in public child welfare. Research is needed to develop best practices for supervision and management particularly as it relates to the areas itemized above. Such research must factor in the importance of environmental conditions within the agency setting. Following is a discussion of the conceptual framework for effective supervision and best practices in public child welfare services.

Discussion

The Eco-systems Theoretical Framework

Kondrat (2008) and Sawssan, Mona & Amal (2017) hold that the person-in-environment perspective is a central and guiding framework for social work practice. It is based on the belief that an individual can only be understood within the context of his/her environment including physical, familial, spiritual, social, political, and societal conditions. There must be consideration of both the person and the various aspects of that person’s environment. This dual focus on the person and the environment has been a distinguishing feature of social work, setting it apart from many other disciplines.

The Eco-systems Theoretical Framework and Supervision

When considering the role of supervision in public child welfare, one must factor in the impact of the organizational culture as a pivotal dimension of the culture and environment in which workers perform their jobs. This can be likened to the worker within the context of the environment and the situation whereas supervision is a major dimension.

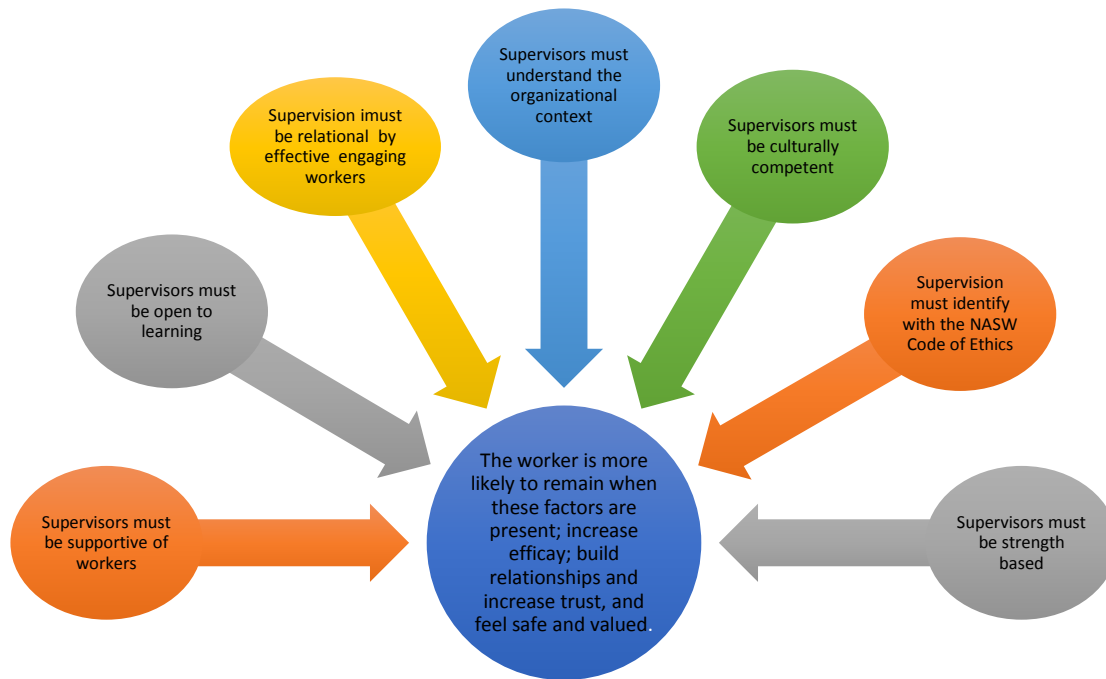


Figure 1: Factors Associated with Effective Supervision and Outcomes for Workers in Public Child Welfare

Borrowing from the work of Landsman and D’Aunno (2012) and Salus (2004), there are several dimensions of effective supervision. Per the figure above, supervision and its various dimensions impact workers and their decision to stay or leave an agency. Below is a brief discussion of each dimension.

Support: Research has shown that workers do not feel supported by supervisors (Williams, et.al, 2012). It is very important that supervisors engage in supervision practices that lead to better communication and worker supervisor contact. For example, during weekly consultation supervisors can utilize some of the time to engage in communication by “checking in” with the worker, thus moving beyond the case reviews and attending to the worker.

Open to learning: Supervisors must adhere to the perspective of being a life-long learner. Supervision is developmental and effective supervision requires planned, systematic training based on competencies for use as an evaluation tool.

Relationship oriented: Establishing the professional relationship requires that the supervisor engage in practices that enable workers to trust that supervisors care about them, their feelings and their safety.

Understand the organizational context: Supervisors need to be familiar with organizational context, the culture of the organization and how it either support or impede workers.

Must be culturally competent: Supervisors need to be knowledgeable of the agency context with regards to the social demographics of the workers and the clients they serve. This will assist the supervisor in planning for training needs of workers and themselves.

Must identify with the NASW Code of Ethics: The Code of Ethics serves as the guiding principles by which all social work related activities are governed. The Code of Ethics serve as guides for what is perceived appropriate comportment and behavior.

Must be strength based: It is important that supervisors not only focus on areas needing improvement, but also on what the worker does correctly. This builds confidence and efficacy, which is related to retention.

The seven dimensions discussed above serve as guiding principles for effective supervision from a developmental and eco-systems perspective.

Competency Based Training

Several researchers engaging in inquiry in the child welfare field have linked effective supervisory practices to positive outcomes for staff, agencies, and the children and families that their organizations serve. Supervisory effectiveness is felt most directly by the caseworkers being supervised.

Research indicates that high-quality supervision can prevent or reduce employee burnout and secondary trauma, which in turn reduces staff turnover rates (Collins, Camargo & Royse, 2010).

Training of supervisors must be ongoing and competency based. Below is a list of 24 competencies as espoused by Landsman and D'Aunno (2012). These competencies can be adopted by an agency to engage in developing training modules, implementing training of supervisors, and the evaluation process. Such training would likely lead to more effective supervision and better outcomes for workers.

1.Ensures an effective work environment that supports organizational goals, values and policies.
2.Uses supervision and the supervisory relationship to promote the values, principles, and standards of practice and a practice culture that is family-centered, strength-based, and solution-focused.
3.Implements a supervision program.
4.Communicates effectively, including use of communication technology.
5.Supervises staff in implementing the agency/program's practice model.
6.Demonstrates culturally competent supervision and develops cultural competence in staff.
7.Adapts supervisory interventions to supervisee developmental stage, skill level, learning style, and culture.
8.Uses strength-based, reflective supervision skillfully.
9.Provides training, education, coaching and mentoring to enhance competence and professional development of staff.
10.Evaluates staff performance and responds effectively to performance issues.
11.Promotes team building and peer support.
12.Recognizes, rewards and celebrates staff accomplishments.
13.Assures ethical practice and an ethical workplace; manages legal risk of practice and supervision.
14.Manages crisis situations effectively and sensitively.
15.Counsels impaired staff whose professional judgment may be adversely affected.
16.Stays current on evidence-based and promising practice and clinical issues affecting client families (e.g., substance abuse, mental health and psychiatric conditions, abuse and violence, assessment methods, and treatment modalities.)
17.Uses data effectively to improve practice and demonstrate results.
18.Establishes and maintains working relationships with referral networks and coach staff to collaborate effectively with the families' other providers.
19.Recognizes indicators of potential danger and employs strategies to enhance staff safety on the job.
20.Promotes the organization's mission effectively with a variety of community entities.
21.Works effectively with media to build positive relations and maintain open communications.
22.Advocates for resources and other supports (including organizational decisions) necessary to support the provision of high quality services to families.
23.Promotes staff resilience and addresses the origins and consequences of work-related stress.
24.Establishes a network of supportive peer relationships and employs strategies for self-care.

Utilizing a competency-based model for training will enable agencies to better define effective supervision, the competencies needed to evaluate supervisors, and to evaluate the performance of supervisors. Effective supervision is paramount to retaining workers in public child welfare.

Summary

Research clearly demonstrates the supervision is a critical component related to retention of public child welfare workers. When evaluating outcomes for workers it is important to maintain a dual focus on both worker outcomes within the environment by drawing from an ecosystems theoretical perspective. Supervision must be perceived as a component of the organizational culture and impacts worker outcomes (Hess, Kanak and Atkins 2009). Supervisors must receive proper training that is ongoing and developmental. Competency based training and evaluating supervisors based on these competencies will serve as a model for developing best practices for effective supervision in child welfare agencies.

Implications

Research is needed to standardize an inventory for developing training modules and evaluating supervisors using well defined competencies. Further, comparative research is needed to evaluate outcomes for workers who receive supervision from supervisors who are trained and evaluated on a competency-based model and workers who are supervised by supervisors who are not.

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