

Learning to think like a supervisor

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Abstract:

Several writers have suggested that a key to supervisor training is helping counselors assume the role and identity of a supervisor. In particular, they assert that a pivotal skill in this role transition is the cognitive shift from thinking like a counselor to thinking like a supervisor. This paper (a) contrasts the thoughts and behaviors of supervisors who have and have not made the role transition and (b) describes interventions that facilitate the cognitive shift. Included are illustrations drawn from the author's experiences as a supervisor educator in academic and inservice settings. It is suggested that effective supervisors think of their counselors as *learners* and of themselves as *educators* who create appropriate *learning environments*.

Keywords: counseling | intern supervision | supervisor training | cognitive shift

Article:

It has become increasingly apparent that effective counselors are not necessarily effective supervisors (cf. Bartlett, 1983; Holloway & Hosford, 1983; Leddick & Bernard, 1980). A distinct body of knowledge and skills has emerged from the conceptual and empirical literature on supervision (e.g., Loganbill, Hardy, & Delworth, 1982; Russell, Crimmings, & Lent, 1984; Stoltenberg, 1981; Worthington, 1987), indicating that specialized training in supervision is required if competent counselors are to become competent supervisors. Professional guidelines for effective training programs, including specific competencies and learning objectives, are being identified (e.g., Borders et al., in press; Dye & Borders, 1990). Several writers, however, have suggested that a key to successful training is helping counselors assume the role and identity of a supervisor (e.g., Borders & Leddick, 1987; Heath & Storm, 1983; Loganbill et al., 1982; Styczynski, 1980). They assert that a pivotal skill in this role transition is a cognitive shift "from thinking like a therapist to thinking like a supervisor" (Heath & Storm, 1983, p. 36), and that deliberate interventions are needed to help supervisors develop this perspective.

The purpose of this paper is to extend previous discussions concerning this role transition by (a) elaborating on some specific aspects of learning to think like a supervisor and (b) describing interventions that facilitate this cognitive shift. Rather than an exhaustive list of interventions, this presentation is based primarily on the author's observations during varied experiences as a supervisor educator, including supervised practica for master's-level and doctoral students and inservice workshops for practicing supervisors. Some of the proposed interventions also are presented in the conceptual literature (cited below) and/or have been corroborated through informal discussions with other supervisor trainers. To date, however, no empirical investigations of the role transition from counselor to supervisor or the proposed interventions have been published. In fact, relatively few studies of supervisor training programs have been reported (Borders, in press-b). Thus, it is hoped that the ideas presented in this paper will stimulate research in this critical area.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE COGNITIVE SHIFT FROM COUNSELOR TO SUPERVISOR

What thoughts and behaviors seem to differentiate between those supervisors who think like a counselor and those who think like a supervisor? Perhaps the most obvious change is a shift in focus from the client to the counselor. For family therapy supervisors, this means broadening one's systemic thinking beyond the family subsystem to the therapeutic and supervisory subsystems (Breunlin, Liddle, & Schwartz, 1988; Liddle, Breunlin, Schwartz, & Constantine, 1984). To illustrate differences that characterize this cognitive shift, some specific observations will be shared.

Supervisors who think like counselors seem to fall into one of two groups. The first group focuses almost entirely on the client. Typically, they make thorough, copious notes about the client when they review counseling tapes, generate numerous hypotheses about client dynamics, and devise several plans for working with the client. They come to supervision sessions well-prepared to tell the counselor what they would do with this client, so that their sessions often are characterized by monologues or mini-lectures. As a result, supervisees become surrogate counselors who carry out supervisors' plans for counseling.

At times, these supervisors hardly seem aware of their counselors during sessions. They sometimes fail to notice counselors' reactions to their deluge of suggestions or hear whatever responses counselors manage to interject. They also forget to ascertain whether counselors can perform the interventions they have suggested. As a result, counselors may feel overwhelmed by the supervisors' feedback and insights, and even begin to doubt their ability to help the client.

A second group of supervisors who think like counselors actually do focus on their supervisees, but primarily view them as clients. These supervisors seem very attuned to their supervisees' personal issues; they even may assume that counselor dynamics are the sole reason for shortcomings in the supervisees' performance. These supervisors almost instinctively ask, "What keeps you from doing that?" or "Is that true in other areas of your life?" They forget to consider whether the supervisee knows how to perform a certain skill (as opposed to being afraid to do so) or has the knowledge needed to recognize and respond to certain client issues (e.g., recognizing symptoms of abuse or chemical dependency). While developing self-awareness is a critical goal

of supervision (e.g., Loganbill et al., 1982; Stoltenberg, 1981), overemphasis on supervisees' personal growth is inappropriate, if not unethical (e.g., Cormier & Bernard, 1982; Hart, 1982; Hess, 1980).

The challenge, then, is to help supervisors understand that to be truly effective they must think of their counselors as *learners* and of themselves as *educators* who create appropriate *learning environments* (cf. Blocher, 1983; Stoltenberg, 1981). Competent supervisors not only are competent counselors; they also are capable educators who apply their counseling skills, along with their teaching and consulting skills, in a new context and relationship, toward new goals (cf. Borders & Leddick, 1987). Rather than make plans for counseling the *client*, they devise learning strategies to help the *counselor* be more effective with that client (assuming there is no harm to the client).

Supervisors who think like supervisors give priority to counselors' learning needs and take primary responsibility for meeting those needs. They ask themselves, "How can *I* intervene so that this counselor will be more effective with current and future clients?" (Borders, in press-b; Breunlin et al., 1988; Ivey, 1977; Williams, 1988). From this proactive stance, they seek to create a productive environment that matches the learning needs of a particular counselor, then alter their approach based on changes in the counselor's needs, strengths, or motivations (Stoltenberg, 1981). They monitor the balance of challenge and support, innovation and integration in the environment so that the counselor is engaged in "discovery learning processes" (Blocher, 1983, p. 32). As needed, they attend to specific skills or immediate needs; as appropriate, they work from the context of a particular counseling session to teach general principles about client dynamics and the counseling process.

These supervisors are educators in the best sense of the word; they not only impart knowledge and skills, but also draw out the counselor's "inherent and natural skills so that he or she does not merely repeat what the master or others have done before" (Ivey, 1977, p. xi). As a result, their supervisees evolve an integrated personal and professional identity as a counselor.

Strategies for Facilitating the Cognitive Shift

What interventions facilitate the cognitive shift from thinking like a counselor to thinking like a supervisor? A variety of strategies is possible, depending on the preferences and creativity of the trainer, and the parameters of the training setting. Below are some descriptions of approaches that are drawn from the author's experiences as a supervisor educator and/or are suggested in the literature. These approaches range from "one-shot" interventions to methods that present a general framework for conducting supervision.

Tape review. One fairly simple but pointed method that helps supervisors change their thinking involves an introductory review of a counseling tape. Supervisors are asked to take notes on the session as if they are going to meet with the counselor the following hour. After watching 10-15 minutes of the tape, they are stopped and asked to look over their notes. They count the number of statements about the client, and then the number about the counselor (or some variation of this). Typically, participants report few if any statements about the counselor. This has been especially true of experienced clinicians in inservice workshops. Then they are reminded that

they will be meeting with the *counselor*, not the client, during the next hour. What are they going to do during the *supervision* session to help the *counselor*? They are to keep this question utmost in their minds as they review the remainder of the session. Then they compare notes and devise plans for supervision.

Planning for supervision sessions. Another way supervisors get practice thinking in their new role is through deliberate, educational planning for supervision sessions. The emphasis on planning begins with the initial session when supervisors help counselors write three to five learning goals for the supervisory experience (e.g., a semester). (See Borders & Leddick, 1987;) As part of this process, supervisors review a counseling tape and list strengths and areas for improvement. They also assess the counselors' developmental issues and stages (cf. Loganbill et al., 1982; Stoltenberg, 1981). Supervisors use counselors' learning goals and their own assessments to guide their feedback on future tapes. These assignments force supervisors to focus on the counselor rather than the client, and promote consistent planning for supervision sessions.

To further facilitate consistent, sequential planning across sessions, supervisors are encouraged to draw on their experiences in the supervision-related roles of counselor, teacher, or consultant. The procedures they already follow in these roles can be adapted to plan and evaluate supervision sessions (cf. Borders & Leddick, 1987). Similar to teaching, they can create unit and lesson plans for supervision sessions; parallel to counseling, they can devise "treatment plans" for supervisees. Frequently, this approach to planning helps alleviate anxiety; it allows supervisors to use familiar terms and procedures, gives them a concrete framework for planning, and helps them transfer supervision skills they already have developed.

A recent session of a new supervisor illustrates several of these principles for planning. The supervisor was working with a beginning, master's-level intern whose first learning goal was to apply the Reality Therapy approach with clients at a drug rehabilitation agency. The supervisor's review of the intern's first session revealed that she had made very few responses; she reported feeling frustrated but unsure about interrupting her client. The supervisor decided to apply a Reality Therapy approach with the intern. He asked her, for example, to identify what she was doing during the session and asked if that was working for her. He had chosen several points on the tape where the intern could have made a Reality Therapy response. He played these and brainstormed possible responses with her. Then he role played the client and gave the counselor immediate feedback on her responses. Finally, they devised a way ("cheat notes") the counselor could remember the steps of Reality Therapy in her next session.

Case notes. Supervisors are asked to write case notes that include goals for the supervision session, a brief summary of events, and an evaluation of their performance. An example may best illustrate how this approach can help supervisors focus on the counselor. For three weeks one highly experienced and skilled clinician continued to write case notes that were summaries of the client and the counseling session she had reviewed, despite my repeated explanations. These notes paralleled her focus on the client during supervision. Finally, we wrote the case notes for one supervision session together. After redirecting her several times during this activity, she finally remarked, "Oh. I have to think about my supervisee." This approach not only

helped her write appropriate notes; more importantly, it helped her begin to focus on her counselor during supervision.

Live supervision and live observation. These two approaches provide immediate feedback to help the supervisor think like a supervisor. During live supervision of supervision sessions, trainers can phone-in reminders that refocus attention from the client to the counselor. These messages may point out that the counselor looks overwhelmed by the supervisor's feedback, or remind the supervisor to check out whether the counselor can perform the counseling interventions being suggested.

These approaches also can incorporate direct feedback from the counselor, a potent way to redirect a supervisor's attention. The author observed one supervision session in which a doctoral student shared with her beginning counselor a minute-by-minute commentary (covering all ten pages of her notes) on the tape she had reviewed. Then she gave an extensive case conceptualization and a detailed account of what she would do with the client during the next session and over the course of the semester. The few times she asked the counselor a question, she usually did not wait for his answer. The counselor said less and less (she interrupted him when he did), and looked more and more discouraged.

As the supervisor began to close the session, the author knocked on the door and asked if we could briefly review the session. The author made a few (true) remarks about how committed each of them were to learning this semester and how open they were to feedback. The author noted how much time the supervisor obviously gave to preparing for these sessions, an indication of her intense desire to help the counselor. Then the author asked the counselor to give her some feedback. His responses were highly supportive, remarking on her vast knowledge and almost magical insights. Adjusting her approach, the author asked him to recall his thoughts and feelings during the session, and then tell her three things she could do differently. The author purposely waited while he reflected. This time he asked that she give him time to respond and listen to him more. In particular, he said he had already tried some of the things she had suggested. He also had wanted to talk with her about a new client. Maybe, he added, she could ask him each week if there was anything he needed to discuss during supervision. The author asked the supervisor to restate his suggestions, and facilitated their brief discussion of his feedback.

After he left, the supervisor and the author discussed what changes she needed to make to be more attentive to her counselor (than to her notes). She later reviewed the videotape of the session, noting the counselor's nonverbal behaviors and his attempts to interrupt her. Interestingly, in her final self-evaluation the supervisor reported she was pleased that the counselor "was able to interrupt me, stop me, back me up, and ask me questions."

Interpersonal Process Recall. Similarly, Interpersonal Process Recall (IPR) (Kagan, 1980) can be used to help supervisors focus on and "hear" their counselors at a deeper level (Borders & Leddick, 1987; Larrabee, 1988). This approach may be particularly effective in identifying supervisor-counselor relationship issues (Bernard, 1989). In one version of IPR, the supervisor-trainer serves as an "inquirer" who leads the counselor through a review of the videotaped supervision session. Using open-ended questions, the inquirer allows the counselor to reveal

unexpressed thoughts and feelings. This procedure elicits instructive feedback for the supervisor, who observes the process.

IPR also can be used to process supervision sessions. In this approach, the supervisor-trainer or a peer supervisor serves as the inquirer. As the supervisor recalls thoughts and feelings during the session, the focus necessarily shifts to his/her experience of the counselor and their interactions. Bernard (1989) has provided detailed illustrations of the impact of IPR on supervisor development.

Peer review. A structured approach to peer group review of videotaped supervision sessions also can help supervisors focus on the counselor. Following one such format (Borders, 1991), the supervisor identifies goals for the videotaped session and requests specific feedback about his/her own performance. Peers are assigned a particular task or perspective for reviewing a preselected videotape segment. For example, one or two group members may focus on the supervisors' and/or counselors' nonverbal behaviors. Others may assume the role of the counselor and then give their feedback from that perspective (e.g., "As the counselor I'm feeling discouraged. I thought I was doing well with this client, but now I think I ought to refer her to you. I wonder if I did anything right.") Group members also give attention to the supervisor's goals and requests for feedback. This structured procedure indirectly trains supervisors to observe a counselor's nonverbal behavior and encourages them to consider what a counselor may be thinking and feeling during supervision sessions.

Modeling and meta-modeling. Finally, the author has become acutely aware of how much modeling can and does occur during my sessions with supervisors, so that the author very consciously tries to model what she is teaching them to do (albeit not always successfully). For example, the author helps doctoral students assess the skills they have already developed that are applicable to their new role (cf. Borders & Leddick, 1987). Based on this assessment, we write learning goals for their supervision internship. The author begins individual and group sessions by identifying my objectives and asking for their agenda items. Whenever possible, the author refers to at least one of the supervisor's learning goals in my feedback, giving concrete observations and examples. A variety of supervision interventions (e.g., role play, IPR) may be employed to help the supervisor make desired changes.

Sometimes this approach is extended to "meta-modeling" of a particular skill or attitude. "Meta-modeling" is based on a recognition of parallel process (Doehrman, 1976; Ekstein & Wallerstein, 1972; Mueller & Kell, 1972) and deliberately exploits that dynamic. More specifically, an intervention is chosen to parallel the intervention the supervisor (and often the counselor) needs to make. As several writers have indicated, simply pointing out parallel process may be insufficient or even unwise (McNeill & Worthen, 1989; Williams, 1987). In fact, ill-timed interpretations of parallel process may lead to denial or intellectualization. In contrast, metamodeling is a more indirect way of learning through experiencing.

In one instance a counselor, who problem-solved and provided answers to his clients, looked to his supervisor for an evaluation of his feedback to clients. The supervisor, who was thinking like a counselor, willingly obliged with monologues about client dynamics. In turn, the supervisor looked to me for feedback about the accuracy and completeness of her case conceptualizations.

She was confused when, instead, the author asked her to describe the counselor's view of the counselor role and *his* perspective of his clients, and then to determine ways she could help him expand those ideas.

Similarly, a counselor's sessions evidenced random questioning and a lack of direction. The supervision session also wandered here and there, and the supervisor reported feeling lost and bored. In structuring our session, the author asked her to identify goals for the counselor and brainstormed with her ways to teach the needed skills. Near the end of the session, she remarked, "This is the kind of structure I need to provide for her, isn't it?" After a brief pause, she added, "And she needs to do the same with her clients."

Not all supervisors, however, recognize the parallel process aspect of meta-modeling. In these cases, it may be important to point out the purpose of these interventions so that supervisors can maximize their understanding of the dynamic and transfer their learnings to their own sessions. Trainers must determine whether supervisors' levels of readiness and self-awareness allow implicit discussion of parallel process.

DISCUSSION

Although making the conceptual shift to thinking like a supervisor may sound relatively simple, the transition from the counselor role to the supervisor role often seems confusing, even arduous for some. In addition, untrained professionals do not necessarily make this shift on their own simply as a result of experience as a supervisor. As a matter of fact, some "experienced" professionals seem to have more difficulty changing their thinking than do doctoral or advanced master's students in academic courses. The role transition truly seems to require deliberate interventions.

Supervisors who have extensive clinical experience seem to have the most difficulty focusing on the counselor and seeing themselves in an educational role. Once they make the shift, however, they offer rich experiences to their supervisees. They have much knowledge to share, and their clinical skills make them acute observers of the supervisory relationship, as well as the counseling relationship.

Those who have extensive teaching experience seem to have the least difficulty with learning to think like a supervisor. They already have learned how to focus on others as learners and to create learning environments. There is a tendency, however, to give minilectures and ask leading questions that apparently have "right" answers. They seem to have less difficulty assuming the evaluative responsibilities of the supervisor, but may take on an authority role and overstructure supervision sessions.

Some of these observations were recently corroborated in a multiple-case-study of the behaviors and cognitions of four supervisors (Borders, in press-a). The most clinically-experienced supervisor focused more often on the client and treatment planning. He was the most directive and active of the four, and his most frequent intention was to give information to his counselor. He also referred to his intern as "client" several times while reviewing the videotaped supervision session. In contrast, the supervisor who had the most teaching experience reported

more intentions of educating or instructing the counselor and gave relatively little attention to the client. Instead, she focused on the counselor's in-session behavior and her own interventions.

This study provided some indications that "clinicians" and "educators" do approach supervision differently. Further research is needed, however, to clarify how supervisors make the role transition from counselor to supervisor, what interventions facilitate this change in perspective, and what effects this change has on supervision outcomes.

Finally, for doctoral and master's-level students, learning to think like a supervisor can be a pivotal experience in their development. Taking on responsibility for another counselor often propels them toward a higher level of professionalism. They realize how much they know and have to share about counseling. As they integrate their counseling, teaching, and consulting skills in this new role, they begin to identify an individual style that pervades all their helping roles. Learning to think like a supervisor seems to help them solidify a new professional identity.

CONCLUSION

Beginning to think like a supervisor is only the first step toward a larger goal of developing a cognitive map or conceptual framework for conducting supervision (Borders, in press-b). Those who have not made the first "conceptual leap" have not yet identified "assumptions, goals, or behaviors that are unique to supervision" (Bernard & Goodyear, in press). In contrast, supervisors who have such a framework are aware of what they are doing and why. At their best, they have a repertoire of supervisory roles and interventions, and a scheme for matching interventions with the learning needs of a particular counselor. They are systematic, intentional, and proactive, yet also are flexible and able to individualize their supervision.

Interventions that encourage one to think like a supervisor probably also need to be individualized or adapted to the particular supervisor, counselor, and setting. The main points of this paper, however, are that this cognitive shift should be a conscious goal of supervision training, and that trainers should devise deliberate learning strategies that help supervisors develop this perspective. When trainers think like supervisor educators, their trainees will learn to think and behave like effective supervisors.

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