

# Counselling supervision in organisations: are you ready to expand your horizons?

**Sue Copeland** demonstrates how supervision can add value to organisations beyond counselling

**W**e live in an ever-changing world. Technological innovation is moving swiftly and no one can afford to be left out of the communication loop. Emails, voicemail, online conversations, perhaps with a webcam, mean that we can link up with others around the globe instantly. We embrace this change and see it as innovative, enhancing our working environment. As someone who is slow to accept these new technologies, I have needed to change my thinking in order to be open to new processes. It's been hard work but rewarding when I have seen the advantages of sharing thoughts and actions with others almost instantly. I did resist at first, protesting that I did not need to join this new technological age. But now I am glad that I have. New thinking about supervision in organisations meets similar resistance. Nevertheless, I hope by the end of this article you will be equipped with a new awareness of the need to work within a multidisciplinary team, an understanding of the ethical and professional dilemmas that arise as a result of working organisationally, and the extended skills to work with organisational change.

In every profession multidisciplinary teams pool their expertise. A hospital recently gave me a leaflet that explained the exact roles of each member of the multidisciplinary team and how they would contribute to my care. Similarly, project teams in organisations work together to achieve a particular aim. Yet counsellors and supervisors working within organisations often work alone. They hold personal information about clients and their contribution to the organisation's healthy functioning. This is not divulged to anyone outside the supervisory dyad. This needs to change, but within confidential boundaries.

There is a need for supervisors, counsellors and their line manager to work together proactively<sup>1</sup>. Yet supervisors are often invisible within the organisation. A very small proportion of them are employed directly by the supervisee's line manager, but more often the supervisor is paid by, but has

no direct contact with, the organisation except through their supervisee. The question needs to be asked: which organisation would employ a person to fulfil a role yet have no contract, no reporting-back mechanisms and no expectations that they would contribute in any way to the organisation's development? Clearly some managers are afraid of the affective dimension of their work but supervisors have knowledge and skills that organisations need. A small start would be for supervisors to be formally employed by the organisation, with a written contract. This needs to outline the supervisor's responsibilities to the organisation while also acknowledging the supervisor's role. There is also a requirement to outline the limits of confidentiality, enabling the supervisee's line manager to be part of the communication loop, sharing information that is agreed by client, counsellor and supervisor. This triad can then decide, within ethical boundaries, if anyone else needs to be part of a wider multidisciplinary meeting. In this way the client's distress is held but the organisation can take responsibility for its contribution to that distress, where necessary. It can also provide other professional help, either internal or external, to aid the client's psychological recovery. However, being part of a multidisciplinary team brings with it more complex issues that are influenced by the supervisor's internal or external role within the organisation.

A supervisor is either internal, with a dual or triple role within the organisation, or external with no other role. The internal supervisor will be subject to the prevailing influences of the organisational culture more readily than the external supervisor. When the organisation is changing rapidly they will be part of that change process and may not always have sufficient distance to clearly identify organisational transference issues. Alternatively, external supervisors, formally contracted for their work with the organisation, will be able to identify and subsequently work with organisational

transference issues because they have sufficient distance from them. This distance is important. Yet to work with them effectively, the supervisor will also need to have communication, via tripartite meetings with the supervisee and their line manager, in order to work through issues that have implications for organisational change. For example, when several clients from the same department are talking about the stress they experience when working under one manager, there will be the need for both supervisor, supervisee and their line manager to discuss the way forward with this issue while keeping the client's personal material confidential. The supervisor and supervisee have a responsibility to work organisationally, rather than individually in cases such as these as illustrated in Table 1 below.

### The role of education

Education is a key factor in helping the supervisee's line manager to understand the counselling and supervision culture and the dilemmas that arise when there is a clash with the organisational culture. Morgan<sup>2</sup> notes: 'when groups with very different occupational attitudes are placed in a relation of dependence, organisations are often plagued with a kind of cultural warfare'. Therefore, it is especially important for counsellors and their supervisors to be aware that language is one of the most powerful ways in which organisational and professional culture is transmitted. So, for example within a health service setting, they will need to lay aside their own modes of communication within the counselling profession and learn to speak the language of illness and cure, patient management and waiting lists. Speaking the language of emotion and long-term therapy will not bridge the divide between cultures. Similarly, in work place settings not only is there a need to talk the same language but there is also a need to be aware that some models of counselling will be more effective in

time-limited work. A cognitive behavioural model will empower clients to change their thought patterns and become less stressed by the working environment. Alternatively, it will allow them to develop new personal goals so they could, if necessary, find more suitable employment elsewhere. Therefore, theoretical rigidity on the part of the counsellor and supervisor will inevitably fail the employee and their organisation.

Dilemmas occur for supervisors and supervisees when there is a clash of cultures. These are embodied in the questions in Table 2 (p4) that need to be asked and the responsibilities that counsellors and supervisors have in addressing them.

Counsellors and supervisors, working within clear boundaries, can enhance their work for the benefit of the client and the organisation. Yet they will also need additional skills to work organisationally rather than individually.

Carroll<sup>3</sup> maintains that the skills of organisational counsellors include the ability to hold in tension and in some relief, polarities that emerge from:

- the needs of the individual versus the needs of the organisation
- the values of counselling versus the values of business
- the role of counselling versus taking on other roles
- the need to look after individuals and the needs of groups.

In an organisational context a supervisee and their supervisor need to develop additional skills that will enable them to communicate and work effectively with line manager and colleagues in a multidisciplinary team. If they are to be a fully functioning member of a team within an organisation they will need to engage in:

- negotiating
- asserting themselves
- mediating

Supervisee responsibility	Supervisor responsibility	Line manager responsibility
Expanding attitudinal mindset to include organisational dimension of work	Ensuring that tasks and functions of supervisory process includes organisational context	Listening to feedback from both counsellor and supervisor
Acquiring extra skills to work effectively in organisation	Acquiring extra skills to work effectively in organisation	Acting on the feedback to the best of their ability
Maintaining ethical practice while communicating more widely with interdisciplinary teams	Ensuring that they understand organisational culture and its impact on the counselling process	Being open to the educative process in order to learn more about counselling and supervision culture

Table 1: Responsibilities of supervisee, supervisor and line manager

Questions to be asked; how can counsellors and supervisors:	Counsellors' and supervisors' joint responsibilities
educate managers within the organisations about the culture of counselling and supervision?	To ensure that the counsellor's line manager fully understands the culture of counselling and supervision and how it differs from the organisational culture. This will mean tripartite meetings are essential so that perceptions can be shared in a non-threatening way, where both cultures are understood and accepted.
work at the interface of two diametrically opposed cultures without creating cultural warfare?	Both counsellor and supervisor work with the line manager to handle the dynamic between potentially diametrically opposed cultures.
keep their own personal and own sources of power within contravening ethical codes?	To keep their own source of personal power when organisational culture threatens to engulf their position and demean it. Counsellors and supervisors need to support and challenge one another and ensure that they encourage one another to speak out in the organisation when appropriate.
seek to influence organisational culture and change processes without breaking the boundaries of confidentiality?	Be aware of organisational change processes and how they affect the client work. Feeding such information back to line managers ethically is not always easy and will need the client's permission if the information is likely to break their confidentiality. However, this process is essential for effective cultural fit.
maintain professional autonomy while influencing organisational processes?	To meet regularly with the line manager to ensure that any collective information can influence organisational policies while still maintaining ethical practice and the credibility of the counselling service.
give added value to an organisation with a learning and development culture?	Maintaining clear, open and ethical communication systems.

Table 2: The 'fit' for counsellors and supervisors within organisations

- managing group dynamics
- mentoring
- coaching.

Some counsellors will already have these skills, transferred from previous work situations. Others will need to acquire them through the supervision process. In addition, counsellors and supervisors need to have an attitudinal mindset that sees the organisation as an exciting place to work. Working organisationally will not appeal to all supervisors. Yet they have a responsibility to ensure that the client is held at the centre of the supervisory process. This cannot be done without considering the influence of the organisational culture on the client's psychological health.

Supervisors face a new challenge when daring to come out of the safety and anonymity of the supervisory dyad to work organisationally. They will need to ensure that they have a clear working contract with their supervisee's employing organisation that includes a system of communication with management. Additionally, they will need to

be prepared to take part in tripartite meetings to discuss the impact of organisational culture on the client and supervisory processes. Supervisors have skills that organisations need. They can be utilised in the supervisory process to empower their supervisee and also within multidisciplinary team meetings. The counsellor and their supervisor will then be a formidable team in their own right, influencing organisational change processes. ■

**References**

- 1 Copeland S. Counselling supervision in organisations: professional and ethical dilemmas explored. London: Routledge; 2005.
- 2 Morgan G. Images of organisations. London: Sage; 1986.
- 3 Carroll M. Supervision in and for organisations. In: Carroll M, Tholstrup M (eds). Integrative approaches to supervision. London: Jessica Kingsley; 2001.

*Sue's book* Counselling supervision in organisations: professional and ethical dilemmas explored was recently published by Routledge (2005) and reviewed in the last issue of Counselling at Work.