A Focus on Educational Supervision: What's the Learning Culture in your Unit?

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Have you ever tried to juggle? Maybe after seeing a circus clown juggling bowling pins or after watching the person on XFactor juggling flaming, razor sharp knives?

Last year, after watching my father's feeble attempt to juggle eggs, all of which fell onto the floor, I wanted to be a juggler. Youtube videos say to start small; I therefore chose to juggle tennis balls. My thought was that they couldn't cause a lot of harm, and if I dropped one on my foot it wouldn't hurt. My plan was to work my way up to juggling knives, knowing that a sudden mistake could be serious and painful. Well, I never made it past tennis balls; apparently, I inherited my father's poor hand-eye coordination.

Why did I tell you about my failed attempt to become a juggler? No, not just to garner your sympathy because I will never appear on XFactor juggling knives, but to have you, child welfare supervisors, begin thinking about your "juggling" skills as it pertains to your job and its responsibilities.

Think about Alfred Kadushin's three functions of supervision as the flaming, razor-sharp knives we are attempting to juggle. Kadushin identified the three functions of supervision as administrative, supportive and educational, each serving a purpose to ensure positive outcomes for your unit, agency, and families and children you serve (Kadushin & Harkness, 2002). Like flaming knives, let one slip and the consequences can be significant.

__Click Here__ to read a past edition of The Forum to learn more about the three functions of supervision.

To be an effective supervisor, you need to learn how to juggle the three functions of supervision. To achieve the correct balance, it requires practice and recognition of each function's importance. As supervisors, you probably spend a large percentage of your time on administrative tasks like reviewing and approving work, analyzing data, and SACWIS entry; and ensuring that your workers feel supported in their work, and acting as a sounding board or listening ear. It's the third function, educational supervision, that is often the "knife" that gets dropped, and if it gets dropped on combustible material (like an unhealthy unit culture), there can be negative consequences for your staff and the families served. David Garvin, a noted Harvard professor, made the point that in high-stress, busy jobs, *the urgent often drives out the important*

Assess yourself by reviewing the __Supervisor Task and Behavior Checklist__ , a comprehensive list of tasks behaviors in each area of supervision.

(Garvin, 2005). I think this is particularly true in child welfare supervision; when it comes to understanding the importance of staff education and development, I've never met a supervisor who didn't feel it was crucial to the success of their staff and the agency. Many supervisors, however, confess that with so many competing priorities, their time to provide educational supervision suffers. They also confess that just because it's crucial it does not mean that it happens. *The urgent drives out the important.*

The Ohio Child Welfare Training Program and agency professional development staff are great partners in providing the knowledge and skill development your staff needs. However, it is supervision and the unit's culture of positivity and learning that will have the greatest impact on the development of your staff's skills and job satisfaction. A two-year study that was done showed that it was the supervisor who had the greatest impact on an employee's job satisfaction (Kay & Jordan-Evans, 2003). In addition, it was found that employees who feel challenged and that they are making meaningful contributions to work are the most satisfied and therefore more committed to the organization. A supervisor who creates a culture of learning will, by default, create a positive culture in which employees can contribute in meaningful ways. The supervisor is the lynch-pin in this relationship with the organization.

> *Supervisors, here is your challenge: Approach educational supervision as a mindset, an attitude. This may require a change in how you interact with and engage your staff.*

Now that we recognize the critical role of educational supervision and the need not to let *the urgent drive out the important,* supervisors, here is your challenge: Approach educational supervision as a mindset, an attitude. This may require a change in how you interact with and engage your staff.

> *A learning culture is simply a culture that **really** supports learning and doesn't just give lip service to it.*

Let me clarify: when we talk about learning we are *not* just talking about training. Learning occurs all day long in many ways and venues, and it is positively or negatively affected by the type of culture you create and maintain within your unit. Being an effective educational supervisor is about creating a culture of learning within your unit.   A learning culture is simply a culture that **really** supports learning and doesn't just give lip service to it. Some characteristics of a good learning culture include creating a safe space for staff to try new things, sending staff to the right training and later discussing what they learned, using teachable moments to develop staff, encouraging productive debate and discussion, and always striving and encouraging staff to be better through formal and informal learning opportunities.

How do your actions and communications positively or negatively affect your unit's learning culture? Ask yourself these questions (Adapted from Garvin, 2005):

How am I contributing POSITIVELY in leading the learning culture of my unit?

- Do I encourage differing points of view for discussion and debate?

- Do I encourage staff the think creatively?
- Do I encourage new ideas on how to get work done?
- Do I encourage my staff to utilize the knowledge and skills they learn in training?
- Do I encourage my staff to communicate what they have learned so all can benefit from the new knowledge or skills?
- Do I lead positively by example?

How am I contributing NEGATIVELY in leading the learning culture of my unit?

- Do I react to mistakes in a negative or punitive manner that inhibits learning?
- Do I stifle creativity because creativity takes time we don't have?
- Do I discourage out-of-the-box thinking?
- Do I find myself saying to staff when they come back from training, "We don't do it that way in our unit"?
- Do I lead negatively by example?

If we as leaders change our approach to learning and our daily work, those who are following us will do likewise. If not, we are simply not leading. As a supervisor, you are empowered to set the tone within your unit. You may say, "Well, that sounds good, but my agency doesn't have a good learning culture." Although that might be true, you have the ability to impact how you approach learning within your own unit. How you interact with and encourage your staff is up to you. Sure, there are some processes you might not be able to put into place without approval, but when thinking of how to create a more inclusive learning culture, it has to do with *your* attitude and mindset, and ability to provide effective educational supervision to your staff. It starts with you.

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Remember the importance of juggling the three supervisor functions. Don't let the *urgent drive out the important*. Your job is highly stressful and difficult, but if you are only dealing with the **urgent**, neglecting the **important** may be harmful in the long run.

At the link below you will find a survey that you can use to help determine where your unit rates in regard to its learning culture.

https://hbs.qualtrics.com/SE/?SID=SV_b7rYZGRxuMEyHRz

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