

A Quick Look at Two Images of Casework and Two Approaches to Leadership, Management, and Supervision

Leadership is aimed at ensuring that the right things are done. Management is aimed at ensuring that things are done right.

Supervision combines both leadership and management, aiming to develop practice competence and, in turn, good outcomes for clients and for the agency. Supervisors thus are key linkage agents, key connectors, between front line caseworkers and top agency leaders.

Leadership, management and supervision hinge fundamentally on expectations, standards and requirements for appropriate, effective, and successful casework. As indicated in a companion planning tool, ideally practice is clear, coherent, consensual, research-supported, and collaborative. Its aim is to change people—to help them—and not merely to process them and deliver services without referencing improved results.

Two Images of Casework

In the people-changing approach, front-line practice involves tailoring services to each client system. Each child, parent, and family is viewed as somewhat unique. Caseworkers simply must get to know each client system, in their respective contexts, all the time looking for uniqueness, similarities, and commonalties with other cases. Thus, people-changing practice is complex and uncertain; there's always something new and unique. And, the caseworker is the closest person to the client system; he or she has expertise that others aren't likely to have.

The other image involves people-processing. Here, front-line practice is basically about moving people through systems, providing services as needed, and, importantly, completing required paperwork properly and on time. In contrast to people-changing work, this second kind of casework is more predictable and routine. Proper procedure is a key success criterion, and supervision and management are geared to evaluating, enforcing, and rewarding it.

Guidelines for Each Image

One branch of the management and leadership literature offers twin guidelines. Each has one of the two above images of casework embedded in it. Each has in impact on the agency's climate and culture; and caseworkers' sense of professionalism.

The First Guideline. When work tasks such as casework are certain, predictable, and linear, management and supervision can be centralized and top-down; and, both management and supervision can be compliance oriented;

This first guideline is based on the assumption that the essence of casework is *people-processing*. Here, efficiently and effectively moving children, parents, and entire

families through the system is the priority. Thorough paperwork, completed in a timely fashion, and case closures-without reference to the most desirable outcomes, are the success measures. Incentive and reward systems are geared toward compliance with proper procedure and performance expectations associated with it.

The Second Guideline. When work tasks are complex, novel, ambiguous, and non-linear, management and supervision must devolve to the lowest level possible. Workers need lots of discretion and flexibility. And, both management and supervision must be flexible and oriented toward sustaining workers' commitments as they strive to obtain results.

This second guideline is based on the assumption that the essence of casework is *people-changing work*. This people changing work requires helping professionals who are able to assess client needs and individualize services. They seek professional discretion and some autonomy, and they are capable of accepting the responsibilities and accountabilities associated with this kind of work. Here, both supervision and management devolve; they support and reinforce workers' professionalism.

One Implication: An Important Tension

A major, important tension derives from interviews with individual caseworkers, supervisors, managers, and commissioners. Some of the design teams also implicate this tension.

Commissioners and top level leaders worry about the workers' competencies, commitments, and practices, and they are especially worried about a child death or a comparable case problem that brings criticism to the agency. They are prone to adopt compliance-oriented management and supervision strategies. These strategies include "tighten the screws" supervision, management, and accountability practices, which are aimed to preventing problems and improving performance.

Unfortunately, top-down, compliance-oriented, "tighten the screws" management and supervision strategies are objectionable to committed, competent workers who are dedicated to people-changing work; and who want and need standards of professionalism in their work. (These standards of professionalism are identified in a companion brief, and they are accompanied by organizational assessment questions for each standard.) While these standards are especially germane to the employment and retention of professional social workers, they also are applicable to child welfare professionals who have degrees in other fields.

Thus, this tension between compliance-oriented leadership, management, and supervision strategies and workers' standards of professionalism merits attention. Questions of appropriate, effective, and successful casework practice are at the heart of this tension. And, all such questions have an influence on retention and effectiveness.