# A FACILITATED PEER GROUP SUPERVISION MODEL FOR PRACTITIONERS

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This chapter discusses a facilitated peer group supervision model for practitioners in the family violence field. The model was developed and implemented successfully over the last four years in three offices in the Community Probation Service. We will firstly overview the practice setting and the nature and purpose of supervision in this setting. Before explaining the issues and challenges experienced in implementing the model and a thorough discussion of the model itself. The chapter concludes with an evaluation of the model's effectiveness and a discussion of its future application.

## Probation practice, family violence and supervision

Dale (1997) asserts that family violence is a key practice area in the Community Probation field. He describes probation officers as frontline workers in the family violence field involved in the assessment and case management of people convicted by the courts of family violence offences. Probation officers draw their mandate from the State and are expected to reduce reoffending and ensure that offenders comply with the conditions of their sentence (Campbell et al 2001; Dale 1997; O'Donoghue 1999). This mandate involves probation officers in monitoring the offender's risk of recidivism; their attendance at programmes as well as supporting the offender's progress towards a non-violent lifestyle. The challenging nature of the probation officer's work with family violence offenders, along with the expectations of the State, the public, the service and victims of family violence, highlights the need for their practice to be supervised.

Traditionally, supervision in the probation service has been described in functional terms with the managerial and professional aspects being

combined and the supervisory role undertaken by a line-manager (O'Donoghue 1999). In 1997 the Community Probation Service introduced a new supervision policy. This policy changed traditional supervision arrangements; separating managerial and professional supervision instead of combining them in one role. Managerial supervision was to be provided by the service manager and professional supervision by either probation officers in a peer arrangement, or externally contracted supervisors. Professional supervision was defined in this policy as (Community Corrections Service 1998:3):

> Synonymous with Clinical Supervision. It encompasses accountable practice, professional development, personal support, and mediation and advocacy.

The General Manager of the Community Probation Service introduced the policy by stating that, "Professional Supervision is crucial to effective interaction with offenders to achieve the reduction in re-offending" (Community Corrections Service 1997:2).

Essentially, professional supervision provides process accountability for practitioners through the creation of a forum that facilitates critical reflective conversations about practitioners' knowing, decision-making and action in the course of their practice with offenders and significant others (O'Donoghue 1999). The purpose and *raison d'être* for supervision is to facilitate the best possible practice and the best possible outcomes (O'Donoghue 2001). Dale (1997:48) illustrates what this means in practice through the following six practice principles, which he argues should guide both practice and supervision with family violence offenders:

- A clear philosophical framework which guides intervention
- Written policy guidelines for practice consistency
- Standardised intervention actions
- Regular monitoring of practice to ensure the practitioner avoids collusion
- Protection of the victim is central to any intervention
- Ongoing evaluation of victim safety and the achievement of intervention goals .

## Issues and challenges

Two intertwined themes recur through this chapter as a subtext and create a dynamic particular to probation work that is also relevant to the field of family violence. These themes emerge from the social care and social

control dilemma and become evident in the duality of role and purpose in probation work. This duality is based in the tension between the legalistic and surveillance role and the helping, therapeutic and problem solver role (Trotter 1999). The first theme relates to the nature of the client group, while the second theme relates to a professional social work culture.

In relation to the first theme, the clients of the community probation service are involuntary and mandated to be clients by virtue of a court sentence or parole conditions (Dale 1997; Campbell et al 2001). Arguably, their motivation for change in a lot of cases falls between pre-contemplation and contemplation stages in the Prochaska & DiClemente (1984) stage model of change. Clients either do not desire to change but their circumstances (i.e. being subject to a court order) cause them to consider it, or they are engaged in weighing up the pros and cons of changing or not changing as a result of their circumstances. In other words the clients are resistant to change. In the case of family violence offenders there is the further challenge of their immersion in a culture of violence and being stuck with patterns that they have learned over a long time (Dale 1997; McMaster 1992). This creates issues and challenges for probation officers concerning community and victim safety, the reduction of reoffending and their focus of sentence and behavioural compliance by the client. The context in which these challenges are framed is one of social and political pressure based in societal expectation and attitudes to perpetrators of violence (Newbold 1992). The effect is that the probation officers emphasise their legalistic or surveillance role and take the stance that the clients are resistant and unwilling to change and that the probation officers' role is purely one of ensuring compliance (Trotter 1993).

The second theme, that of a professional social work culture, is:
- concerned with ethical and professional practice standards
- based in an informed, intentional and integrated knowledge and skill base
- committed to the personal and professional development of the worker
- aims to achieve the rehabilitation of the offender through participation in appropriate treatment.

This theme creates challenges for probation officers in relation to their professional identity, role, practice philosophy and use of power and authority. The effect of this theme is that probation officers emphasise their helping, therapeutic or problem-solving role.

At an organisational level, the dynamic between these two themes is borne on the one hand by the organisation's structures, procedures and practices which promote accountability through the department to society and are based in the managerial model rather than the professional model. On the other hand, the practice expectations among the field staff are derived from a social work history and carry with them a concern for social as well as individual transformation (O'Donoghue 1999; Leibrich 1993).

The concept of parallel process is helpful in explaining the effect of these dynamics and their presence in supervision. Parallel process is the idea that patterns of interaction or dynamics can be replicated at different levels of a system (Kadushin 1993). Generally, in the supervision literature it has been discussed in terms of the dynamic between client and worker being replicated in the supervisor/supervisee interaction (Shulman 1993). An example in the family violence setting would be a client who, in a session with a probation officer, blames others, evades responsibility, denies and minimises his or her actions and this leads to the probation officer replicating those dynamics in supervision. This traditional conception of parallel process has been based in linear causality, i.e. what happens in the client/worker relationship influences what happens in the worker/ supervisor relationship. It is our experience and argument that parallel process is better understood as a reflexive process based in circular causality (Dallos et al 2000). Figure 1 below shows the transmission of parallel process through the work system.

The diagram shows that the parallel process influence in the system is shaped by a wide range of relationships and processes and that the replication of the dynamics in any particular dyad relationship may be

**Figure 1. Parallel process through the work system**
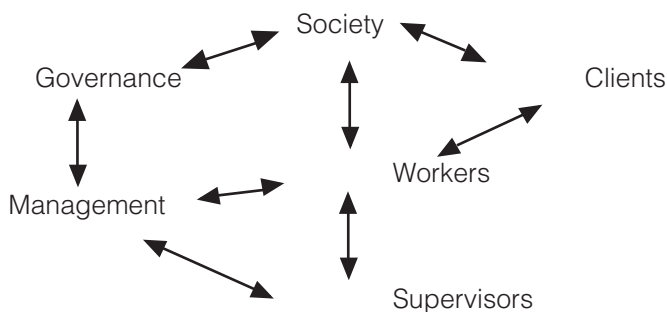
representative of social, organisational, and managerial dynamics as well as those from direct practice. The following comment attributed to Griff Page, a former manager of the Children and Young Persons Service by the Manawatu Evening Standard (24 November 1995), summarises the effect of parallel process in an organisation:

> [He] described morale as variable and said the service mirrored the dysfunctional nature of its clients to an alarming extent.

Concerning the supervision of probation officers in New Zealand, two studies have found that the societal and organisational context influences and shapes the practice of supervision (Bracey 1981; O'Donoghue 1999). Both studies also found that the probation service did not have a strong supervision culture and that it replicated its individualist case-management model as a dominant supervision model. The effect was that the managerial model predominated over social work professional practice and resulted in the development of the new supervision policy in 1997 (O'Donoghue 1999). The facilitated peer group model was piloted in one of the sixteen probation areas with the aim of developing the professional practice and supervision culture. It was also an innovative way of meeting a lack of internal peer supervisors in that area in order to implement the Service's supervision policy. Initially the main purpose of the programme was to:

- establish a culture of professional supervision
- develop trust and mutual respect between team members
- set group groundrules
- help individuals identify areas for professional development
- identify probation officers who would be suitable peer supervisors.

## The initial setting

A further challenge was posed by the initial setting into which the group supervision was introduced. The Community Probation Service in 1998 was an organisation with a low trust culture in the middle of considerable change (O'Donoghue 1999). This setting was characterised by:

- fiscal restraint and budget dominance
- constant change
- high stress for both staff and managers
- high staff turnover
- low staff morale
- experienced and competent staff showing signs of burnout.

This setting meant that the supervision programme needed to address

the immediate needs of participants by allowing them to express feelings about working conditions, changes and experiences of stress. Expressing these feelings, together with constructive problem-solving that emphasised proactivity and responsibility, assisted them through the changes with minimal disruption to their professional practice. This response of providing a forum to ventilate participants' personal and professional stress was not the sole purpose of the supervision programme. It was, rather, an innovative response to the need for professional supervision within the confines of a limited budget and at a time when the teams were unable to adequately resource themselves for professional supervision. At a systemic level the group programme promoted change towards collective team responsibility for service provision and prepared individuals in the teams for the future role of peer supervisor. In fact the process allowed all group members to benefit from the practice wisdom of other staff and 'coat-tail' on learning through issues raised by other team members.

## Facilitated and peer group model

The idea of a facilitated peer group supervision model evolved from ideas drawn from strengths-based supervision, group supervision theory, change theory and family systems theory. The literature on strengths model of practice emphasises the importance of group supervision in supporting direct service delivery. According to Rapp (1998:181) the strengths-based form of group supervision is designed to accomplish three purposes:

- Support and affirmation
- Ideas
- Learning.

This approach to supervision is optimistic about clients and sees the community as an oasis of resources. It also focuses the supervision on the best outcomes for the client.

Group supervision theory informed the model through the recognition of mutual aid processes of sharing information, engaging in debate and discussion from differing perspectives, providing a forum for conversation about sensitive issues, sharing experiences and feelings and supporting for each other in staff groups (Shulman 1993). It also informed the role of the supervisor, which was one of facilitative leadership and mediation. Change theory informed the model through recognition that the process of group supervision was seeking change in the individuals in the group through systemic change. Family systems theory was used as a framework

for conceptualising casework and to ensure that both people and their environments were considered.

## Establishing the group supervision

The first priority of the programme was to establish strong relationships with the individuals in the groups and to build trust. In the initial sessions time was spent developing an understanding of the process and purpose of supervision and the role of the group supervisor. The aim at this stage was to develop the group identity and purpose based on trust and mutual respect. The facilitator validated the participants' specialist knowledge of the field of practice that is Community Probation while also establishing their expertise in social work group process, dynamics and professional practice. This put many of the more experienced probation officers at ease as they were still regarded as the experts in their field of practice and became a resource for the rest of the group. Many of these people had been working together for a considerable time, sometimes in excess of twenty years. This is very unusual in public social service departments and testifies to the stability and depth of experience in this service. This history also held the potential for discord and animosity based on previous events and relationships, and required the facilitator to be sensitive and aware. Making an agreement between the group and the facilitator also assisted this. It included the group's guidelines and the facilitator's expectations of the group. Typically the guidelines would include:

- Confidentiality — what is said in the group remains in the group, especially personal issues and contributions
- Punctuality and keeping to time
- Commitment — keeping the supervision time clear of other appointments and being prepared for supervision
- Every member of the group deserves to be listened to properly
- Be sensitive and respectful of others' feelings and cultural needs
- Begin each session with a positive round/reflection on our own work and achievement

Alongside the group agreement, the group would also develop its own group supervision goals. Mirroring this process, each participant developed their own individual goals. Some typical group goals were to:

- Develop group rapport and emotional safety
- Identify and discuss common problems in our professional practice
- Support and guide each other in managing office politics

- Create a forum to discuss professional and ethical dilemmas and develop strategies
- Bring positive outcomes of our work as well as problems
- Develop and update knowledge and skill in working with particular client groups, e.g. sexual offenders
- Enjoy the sessions and be empowered by them.

## Development of the group

In the sessions the group members found each other a source of personal and professional support that had clear boundaries and focus. The work of the group and the process itself can be seen to parallel the work and processes engaged by workers and clients dealing with domestic violence offending. The open nature of the group programme encouraged the sharing of experience and opinions in a forum that allowed these to be discussed and challenged in a supportive way. Alternative ways of dealing with issues and problems emerged from the group using members' strengths, experience and personal attributes. The resources in the group ranged from extensive probation experience from senior workers through to specific knowledge of particular client issues from newer workers who came from fields relevant to this work, e.g. mental health, addictions and clinical psychology.

## The facilitator's role and the work of the group

The facilitator's role was one of assisting group process — ensuring that the group met its own goals and observed its own guidelines, rather than one of practice expert. The facilitator's own area of expertise, family systems therapy and mental health practice, was relevant and provided a contrasting and often useful perspective in the discussion and resolution of some issues. The external nature of the role meant that some of the facilitator's knowledge and experience was different to that usually available in the probation service. This exposed participants to concepts and ideas they would not otherwise have considered. There were also advantages in the external nature of the facilitator's role because it was not part of the management or organisation hierarchy of the service. This enabled free expression of feeling and opened the way for constructive action on organisational challenges the teams were facing. Sometimes this involved the group raising issues with management and offering their own solutions.

Group sessions generally included the discussion of client problems,

practice and ethical dilemmas, and the management of organisational and administrative requirements. In the discussion of any topic the focus was on empowering group members to support each other and to be proactive in resolving these issues. By working in this way the group was modelling empowering practice with clients who view themselves as powerless victims. In the discussion of client-related problems, not only was the combined expertise and experience of group members invaluable but also the client had often been on another worker's caseload previously. Much informal history and information could be exchanged, often aiding resolution of the issue.

As stated earlier, probation officers often work with persistent and violent offenders who are at great risk of reoffending. The group process offered a forum for support, advice, and for sharing the sense of responsibility that comes from working with these clients. The courses of action that emerged from group supervision carried a sense of shared accountability for the outcome that was a source of support for the worker concerned. It would sometimes happen that a worker was tending towards collusion with a violent offender and such is the subtlety of collusion that it occurs at a seemingly innocent level in the early stages before becoming an impediment to effective practice later (Dale 1997). In group supervision these subtle collusions were often picked up in the early stages or were brought to the group by the worker concerned as something that worried them because it didn't feel quite right. The equality of the peer relationships in the group and the external facilitation made these issues easy to raise. For example, one worker was being persuaded by a young client not to reveal what he had told her in confidence about a gun he had hidden. In the supervision, the group was able to let her explore and deal with her concerns, not only about the gun, but also about the effects of her actions on her relationship with the client. In the end she decided that she would work with the client to encourage him to report the gun to the police himself. She would also specify the consequences of not reporting the gun to the police for both of them, and a timeframe. In this outcome, the probation officer preserved her relationship with the client and took appropriate action. Airing this issue in the group setting confronted the secrecy and hidden agendas so typical of violent offending and enabled the worker not to become entangled in this web.

## Table 1. Participants' evaluation of group supervision

| Aspect | Finding | Participant comments |
|---|---|---|
| Attendance | 10 staff rated their attendance at 90% or better. 4 staff rated themselves in the 50-70% range. | Comments on low attendance referred to court servicing, crisis management, secondment and PD duties as reasons for absence. |
| Goals | Ten staff thought they had achieved or partly achieved their supervision goals as detailed in their contracts. Four staff identified goals that they had not achieved. Two of these responses related to CRIMPS. Examples of goals met through supervision:<br>• Developed and improved my knowledge base<br>• Discussed and resolved ethical issues. Supported through change.<br>• Developed casework practice skills<br>• Fostered team co-operation and communication. | Examples of comments:<br>• I have found the supervision/mentoring process invaluable.<br>• Group supervision has raised awareness of ethical/practice issues that may otherwise have been glossed over. It has created an open, safe environment for discussion.<br>• The need for team support in a small office is very important.<br>• Supervision sessions have given me insight into the importance of supporting colleagues in all areas. |
| Contribution | All staff with the exception of a very new staff member saw themselves as actively contributing to the supervision sessions. Some staff acknowledged that they do not always bring their own issues and cases and for one person this was because of not wanting to share in the group setting. | |
| Professional benefits | • A high number of staff (13) believed that supervision had helped them with casework issues or problems. | Comments included:<br>• I have found the benefits of supervision to be totally positive for myself and the department. |

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| Professional benefits (continued) | • 13 staff had an increased awareness of themselves in the work role.<br>• 9 staff had a better understanding of professional issues in the service and had new learning about practice methods.<br>• 8 staff felt better able to address interpersonal issues with clients, believed supervision had improved teamwork and relationships and felt able to express themselves freely about service and organisational issues.<br>• 4 staff had learnt about procedures and practice in the department. | • In group supervision it is good to hear/know that others have similar issues and problems. I am not on my own!<br>• It is the only forum for free expression of thought and to be positively challenged about that thinking.<br>• While we have not covered all the gaps in my knowledge, I am more aware that there are gaps!<br>• I have been able to have some issues resolved where the manuals have not been clear. |
| Facilitation | Comments were elicited on the facilitation. Since this was an open question a range of typical comments follows:<br>• An opportunity for everyone to express their views<br>• Differing opinions are valued<br>• Importance is given to non-interruption when speaking<br>• Teamwork in forming solutions<br>• Input from supervisor in solving problems<br>• Safe non-judgmental atmosphere. | A selection of comments:<br>• It gave me a forum to ask questions and see how experienced staff handled different situations<br>• Supervision has always been stimulating, challenging, occasionally tough, and always fun!<br>• I enjoy your style and the skills you bring. After all the years of poor, non-existent supervision that I have experienced, this is refreshing.<br>• [Sessions] develop increased team awareness and provide solutions where sometimes I thought there were none.<br>• I have found the professional supervision to be very positive and supportive. I have personally grown in all areas of my life through the assistance of group supervision. |

## Evaluation

An evaluation of the external supervision was recently conducted, with 14 of the 18 staff involved responding. Table 1 below summarises the findings. Generally the evaluation indicated enthusiasm for the style of supervision and an improvement in staff morale, relationships and professionalism. Staff who responded felt empowered to be proactive and productive with challenges they faced from organisation changes, in a way that to some extent met their concerns about the dangers of compromising professional standards.

## Future possibilities

The facilitated peer supervision model provides a range of future possibilities in terms of its application in the supervision of family violence practitioners both within and across agencies. In larger agencies it has the potential to:
- Foster a team approach to client issues that is strengths-based
- Develop a culture of supervision that takes account of the dynamic and conflicting demands between the organisation and professional practice in a way that does not put participants at risk and allows greater participation by staff in the organisation's development
- Challenge the one-to-one norm for supervision practice in a way that empowers workers, enhances team identity and cohesion, improves accountability, avoids collusion and focuses on the work rather than the worker
- Promote an awareness of a wider range of participants in the work with violent offenders than just the convicted client