Supportive Supervision: A Tool for Creating Healthy Work Environment for Nurses

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Abstract: Supportive supervision is a process that uses dialogue and constructive feedback to help staff, volunteers or entire organizations improve their performance in pursuit of the organization's mission, while also setting goals for growth and development. It focuses on monitoring performance towards goals, and using data for decision-making, and depends upon regular follow-up with staff to ensure that new tasks are being implemented correctly. It can also be described as a relationship between senior and junior member of a profession that is evaluative, extends over time, serves to enhance the skills of the junior person, monitors the quality of the services offered by the junior person and acts as gate keeping to the profession. By employing supportive supervision, managers can not only create a healthy work environment, but can improve and sustain the performance and satisfaction of the people in their organization by preventing job-related stress. It provides opportunities to discuss—and sometimes even provide—the additional skills and training that will enhance staff's ability to do their work. Identifying training needs is important, as is following up after trainings to ensure that staff members have opportunities to apply the skills in their work and to share with colleagues. Integrating supportive supervision throughout organization's structure will result in a stronger organization, with more efficient and satisfied people working to achieve organization's mission.

Keywords: Supervision, Healthy Work Environment, Performance, Quality of Care, Improvement

Objectives of the paper

This paper aims at:

- Defining supportive supervision and show how it can improve nursing practice.
- Identifying the needs for supportive supervision in nursing practice
- Comparing the traditional with supportive supervision approaches.
- Highlighting the characteristics of supportive supervision
- Outlining major steps/phases that should be considered when introducing and implementing supportive supervision in nursing practice.

Introduction

Supportive supervision is a process of helping staff to improve their own work performance continuously. It is carried out in a respectful and non-authoritarian way with a focus on using supervisory visits as an opportunity to improve knowledge and skills of health staff. Supportive supervision encourages open, two-way communication, and building team approaches that facilitate problem-solving and it deals with technical issues, e.g. skills and knowledge (World Health Organization, 2015a). It focuses on monitoring performance towards goals, and using data for decision-making, and depends upon regular follow-up with staff to ensure that new tasks are being implemented correctly. Furthermore, supervisors need support and authority from the central to implement supervision or make changes to improve services at a health facility (Program for Appropriate Technology in Health, 2013). Moving from traditional, hierarchical supervision systems to more supportive ones requires innovative thinking, national buy-in, and time to change attitudes, perceptions, and practices. Supportive supervision can begin as soon as a person is recruited to work for the organization. It promotes continuous improvements in the quality of care through leadership and support for quality improvement processes (Indian Nursing Council, 2015).

In a supportive supervision model, supervision happens continuously as part of a team effort implemented by multiple parties, and focuses on problem-solving to assure quality and meet client needs (Marquez & Kean, 2012). Supportive supervision encounters typically include: performance observation and comparison of actual practices with standards; facilitative feedback on performance; provision of guidelines or technical updates; use of client input and data to ascertain opportunities for improvement; problem solving as a

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team, and; follow-up of previously noted problems (Marquez & Kean, 2012). In a supportive supervision model, staff typically employs job aids such as checklists and assessment forms to facilitate supportive supervision (Marquez & Kean, 2012).

Supportive supervision is a process that promotes quality at all levels of the health system by strengthening relationships within the system, focusing on the identification and resolution of problems, optimizing the allocation of resources, promoting high standards, team work and better two-way communication. Further, supportive supervision guidelines similarly describe supportive supervision as a "process which promotes quality outcomes by strengthening communication, identifying and solving problem, facilitating team work, and providing leadership and support to empower health providers to monitor and improve their own performance." Supportive supervision involves directing and supporting health care workers in order to enhance their skills, knowledge and abilities with the goal of improving health outcomes for the patients they manage. It is an ongoing relationship between health care workers and their supervisors. Some of the benefits of supportive include: helping service providers to achieve work objectives by improving their performance, ensuring uniformity to set standards, identifying problems and solving them in a timely manner, making a follow-up on decisions reached during previous supervision visit, identifying staff needs and providing opportunities for personal development and reinforcing administrative and technical link between high and lower levels (UK Essays, 2016)

McGilton, Profetto-McGrawth and Robinson (2013) discovered from their study that effective supervisory skills among registered nurses are crucial for improving the quality of care also nurses are receptive to interventions that will enhance their roles as supervisors. As identified also in a study, supportive supervision is a feasible and practicable tool in improving knowledge and practice of patients' care among heath workers (Bello, Hassan, Afolaranmi, Tagurum, Chirdan, and Zoakah, (2013).

Definition
Supervision—The process of fostering and reviewing staff performance according to the defined standards of the organization (National Program on Immunization Connect, 2011).

Supportive Supervision—A process that uses dialogue and constructive feedback to help staff, volunteers or entire organizations improve their performance in pursuit of the organization's mission, while also setting goals for growth and development. Marquez and Kean (2012) also defined it as a way of strengthening relationships within the system, focusing on the identification and resolution of problems, and helping to optimize the allocation of resources, promoting high standards, teamwork, and better two-way communication.

Supportive supervision is a facilitative approach to supervision that promotes mentorship, joint problem-solving and communication between supervisors and supervisees (Marshal and Fehringer, 2015).

It can also be described as a relationship between senior and junior member of a profession that is evaluative, extends over time, serves to enhance the skills of the junior person, monitors the quality of the services offered by the junior person and acts as gate keeping to the profession (Bernard and Goodyear, 2015). A cornerstone of supportive supervision is working with health staff to establish goals, monitor performance, identify and correct problems, and proactively improve the quality of service.

Goals of supportive supervision
- To receive information and another perspective concerning one's work
- To receive both content and process feedback
- To be validated and supported both as a person and as a worker
- To ensure that as a person and as a worker one is not left to carry unnecessarily difficulties, problems and projections alone
- To ensure quality of work (Hawkins and Shohet, 2015)

Need for supportive supervision
Supervision is an excellent opportunity to provide follow-up training, improve performance, and solve other problems that contribute to poor performance. Health workers often receive little guidance or mentoring on how to improve their performance. The primary goal is to improve morale and job satisfaction by preventing job-related stress (Kadushin, 2015). Supervisors often lack the technical, managerial, or supervisory skills needed to effectively evaluate health facilities across the many sectors for which they are responsible. Supervisors at all levels are expected to monitor services, evaluate management. Nurse managers can play a key role in making their junior staff feel supported and motivated and, as a result, more productive. Particularly in challenging environments where resources are scarce and the needs of clients are vast, making employees feel valued and supported is essential. By employing supportive supervision, managers can not only create a healthy work

environment, but can improve and sustain the performance and satisfaction of the people in their organization. Using a few key skills and tools—and with a little practice— managers can create a dynamic relationship with staff to help them grow (NPI Connect, 2011). In a study carried out by Chambesrgn and Long, (2016) they discovered that a facilitative approach to clinical supervision is therapeutic and self-propelling for both supervisor and supervisee.

Comparison between supervision approaches (WHO, 2015b)

Control approach	Supporting approach
Focus on finding faults with individuals.	Focus on improving performance and building relationships.
Supervisor is like a policeman.	More like a teacher, coach, mentor.
Episodic problem-solving.	Use local data to monitor performance and solve problems.
Little or no follow-up.	Follow up regularly.
Punitive actions intended.	Only support provided.

Characteristics of supportive supervision
- Supervision is said to be supportive when it is carried out in a cooperative manner between the supervisor and the members of the organization in such a manner that allows for synergy between the two sides.
- It creates enabling environment for the staff to develop professionally
- It also enhances the performance of staff irrespective of their current level of expertise since the supervisor is there for support.
- It results into realization of organizational objectives without acrimony
- The staff is supported to accomplish their personal and professional development goals making it a win-win scenario (Kadushin, 2015)

Process/phases/steps of supportive supervision (Olise, 2011)
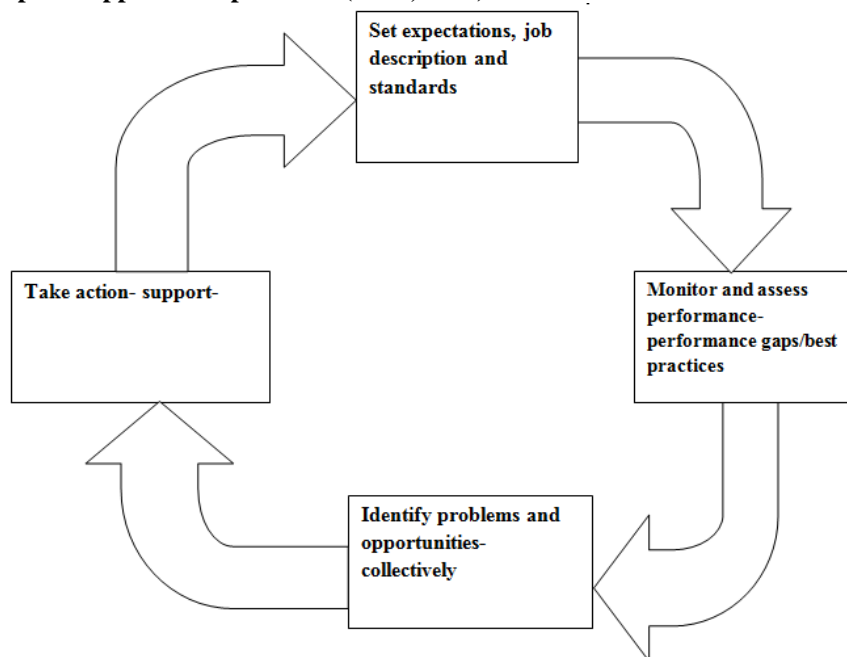
Guidelines to effectively provide supportive supervision
To effectively provide supportive supervision and help staff accomplish their goals, managers should consider the following guidelines:

Set clear expectations from the beginning:
Supportive supervision can begin as soon as a person is recruited to work for your organization. The first step is providing your new employee with a clear job description. This ensures that both the manager and the employee have a common understanding of the expectations and responsibilities of the position. As time goes on, the manager and employee should work together to periodically review and revise the job

description to develop "SMARTER" goals that align the employee's work with the organizational mission.

Provide regular feedback: Supportive supervision is not a once-a-year performance review; it involves continuous performance assessment. This means making time and space for the supervisor and employee to regularly communicate about job performance. Managers should employ active listening skills and provide feedback in an open and respectful manner to facilitate a dialogue about improving behavior and job performance over time. During supportive supervision sessions, both the manager and employee should have time to describe achievements in the period under review as well as challenges and areas for improvement. These discussions should be documented by the manager and shared with the employee to ensure that both agree on the outcomes of the discussions, and the employee's progress is tracked in the event of a change in management.

Provide opportunities to discuss challenges and suggestions: Supportive supervision should be two-way communication. Staff members are the ones doing the work on a day-to-day basis, so they have first-hand knowledge of what is and is not working. Often they also have ideas about how to address challenges or gaps; other times they will need advice and suggestions for problem solving.

Ensure staff get the tools, skills and resources necessary: A key part of supportive supervision is following up on any issues or challenges that are identified during discussions. If, for example, a staff member describes having a hard time completing his or her monthly site visits due to lack of transport, you may need to work with the finance manager to determine how the organization can allocate additional funds for fuel, or work with the program director to coordinate sharing the organization's vehicle.

Likewise, supportive supervision provides opportunities to discuss—and sometimes even provide—the additional skills and training that will enhance your staff's ability to do their work. Identifying training needs is important, as is following up after trainings to ensure that staff members have opportunities to apply the skills in their work and to share with colleagues.

Reward high performance through recognition, incentives and opportunities for advancement: Most people working in health and development are motivated by values and ideals to help people in need and strengthen communities. But intrinsic motivation

alone may not be enough to sustain performance for everyone over the long term. External recognition for excellent work will help your employees maintain their energy and commitment. Rewards can include public recognition (such as commendation during community events or write-ups in widely distributed publications) and incentives (such as small gifts or invitations to special events). Another critically important part of rewarding staff is ensuring that they have opportunities for advancement (such as trainings to enhance their knowledge and skills). (NPI Connect, 2011)

Setting of performance standards
- It must be measurable and can be derived from the job description
- The first step is providing the new employee with a clear job description.
- Both the manager and the employee have a common understanding of the expectations and responsibilities of the position.
- The manager and employee work together to periodically review and revise the job description to develop "SMARTER" goals that align the employee's work with the organizational mission.
- The checklist should be made available to staff ahead of their actual supervision session.
- This ensures that people see that they are being treated fairly and assessed objectively.

SMARTER Goals
- Specific and clear about what needs to happen and who needs to be involved
- Measurable, with clear targets against which progress can be measured
- Aligned with the organization's mission and vision
- Realistic and can be accomplished
- Timed so that there is an appropriate sense of urgency
- Evaluated periodically and, if necessary, adjusted
- Rewarded when accomplished (NPI Connect, 2011)

Monitoring and assessment of performance
- Staff performance is determined through record reviews and observations which are then matched against the set standard above.
- It involves continuous performance assessment.
- Managers should employ active listening skills and provide feedback in an open and respectful manner to facilitate a dialogue about improving behavior and job performance over time.
- Both the manager and employee should have time to describe achievements as well as challenges and areas for improvement.

- These should be documented and shared with the employees

Problems identification

Findings from the assessment are then put together to identify issues or otherwise affecting performance. These are then discussed with the employees as part of efforts geared towards problem solving. Supportive supervision should be two-way communication. Staff members have first-hand knowledge of what is and is not working. Often they also have ideas about how to address challenges or gaps; other times they will need advice and suggestions for problem solving.

Take action

Problems like shortage of supplies and deficiencies are corrected. Others are taken down as action points to be followed up at a later date. Follow-up on issues or challenges that are identified during discussions is done. Additional skills and training that will enhance staff's ability to do their work are provided. Follow-up after trainings is carried out to ensure that staff members have opportunities to apply the skills in their work and to share with colleagues. Motivation is provided through rewards, public recognition, incentives and trainings (advancement)

Rs' for an effective supportive supervision system

- **Right supervisors — a core set of supervisors, well trained on supportive** supervision techniques and with updated information and skills on client care issues.
- **Right tools — availability of training materials and job aids to update skills** of health workers during supervision visits, and checklists and forms for recording recommendations and following up.
- **Right resources — sufficient vehicles, per diems, time allocated for supervision** and follow-up (WHO, 2015b).

Challenges in providing supportive supervision

Some of the challenges included:
- Lack of a standardized approach to supportive supervision and mentoring,
- Lack of adequate and reliable financial resources,
- Lack of guidelines on mentoring,
- Shortage of human, financial and time resources,
- Lack of technical skills and work overload among Health Care Workers, and
- Vertical, uncoordinated intervention-specific supervisory activities
- Attributes of a Supervisor (UK Essays, 2016)

Benefits of supportive supervision

The continuous supervision and guidance would result in increased competence and sharply honed clinical skills, leading to improved performance. Supportive Supervision would help the nurses in identifying the gaps in their knowledge base and clinical skills and filling up of the same, simultaneously. It would also result in increased level of responsibility and accountability, on the part of the nurses, to put to use, the skills and knowledge. Supportive Supervision would provide, the nurses, with an opportunity to gain access to the wisdom of the professionals, in handling difficult patients and families and using it to enhance their skills.

Summary

Supportive supervision uses a practical system of objective measures to foster improvements in the procedures, personal interactions, and management of primary health care facilities. While many approaches have been proposed to improve the quality of health services (for example, quality assurance, continuous quality improvement, client-centered services, district team problem-solving, fully functional service delivery points), the supportive supervision approach improves services by focusing on meeting staff needs for management support, logistics, and training and continuing education

Conclusion

The central focus of supervision is the quality of practice offered by the supervisee to clients. Integrating supportive supervision throughout organization's structure will result in a stronger organization, with more efficient and satisfied people working to achieve organization's mission. The nurse leader must be transparent about the extent to which the supervision is about development or performance. Good supervision can contribute to job satisfaction and reflective practice, and can improve patient care. Supportive supervision fosters a collaborative approach to strengthen health worker performance. It has been an effective tool for improving performance. Creating a culture of supportive supervision will help staff, volunteers and the organization flourish.

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