

When Questions are the Answers

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Providing good quality social services within a tight budget is a challenge. Directed by the government's specific requirements, managers have relied heavily upon the 'rational-objectivist' approach to achieving this goal. Numerous commentators, including many featured in *Professional Social Work*, have called into question the dominance of this approach. With an emphasis on the quantitative measurement of performance outcomes (within specific timescales), and their implementation by means of information and communication technologies, rational-objectivist management has been held responsible for reducing the autonomy of social workers, reducing their opportunity to 'think', and reducing the professional reward from their work. Over recent times, however, there has been growing interest in alternative approaches. In particular, supervision has been re-emphasised, and coaching is being considered as a method of encouraging high quality service provision. These conversational methods of management might be more welcome to practitioners due to their greater compatibility with social work values and the principles of professionalism.

Supervision and coaching

Eileen Munro recommended good quality supervision as a means of countering the rational-objectivist approach to the management of social work service and bolstering professionalism. Supervision enables practitioners to reflect on their performance in relation to organizational goals, but also their own developmental needs. In the light of this, the British Association of Social Work has promoted the practice of supervision by means of a national policy (see The Policy, Ethics and Human Rights Committee 2011). Prior to this, the now defunct Children's Workforce Development Council (CWDC) invested in improving the quality of supervision by means of the Support to Front Line Managers (SFLM) project. This project encouraged front line managers to incorporate reflective techniques in their supervision, for example, those associated with coaching. As part of this project, Local Authorities trained social work managers in coaching techniques. Although the SFLM project was time limited, and it came to an end at approximately the same time as the CWDC itself, some Local Authorities continue to invest in similar coaching courses today.

Although coaching might be seen as a modern approach to improving professional development and performance, it is said to have foundations in ancient Greece. As a modern interpretation of the Socratic dialogue, two people who share a trusting relationship, seek agreement through the pursuit of questions. Today, amongst coaching theorists, there appears to be a consensus that 'questions are the answers' (O'Connor and Lages (2004:75 cited in Holroyd and Field 2012: 47). That is, a problem is interrogated by questioning, and a solution or way forward emerges. The quality of the question posed is crucial. Supervision that has been influenced by coaching techniques is likely to incorporate a questioning approach. Rather than supervisors directing practitioners on a course of action, they might ask pertinent questions which facilitate critical reflection and the proposal of solutions. Practitioners may become more confident in 'thinking through' their dilemmas and applying this approach to their work in general.

In addition to drawing on coaching techniques as a means of enhancing supervision, there has also been a growing interest in the use of coaching as a specialist practice in its own right: it has also become a feature in some social work services. It is usually short term and consists of three parties – the organization, the coach and the coachee (who may be either a manager or a practitioner). The coach (usually working independently) is contracted by the organization on a short term basis to work with the coachee on specified goal: for example, to improve a specific aspect of performance such as making presentations in court, to facilitate the transition into a new role, or deal with organizational change. Despite the short term contracts, the aim is that beneficial shifts (which may be rapid or occur gradually over time), will have longer term positive implications for the functioning of the organization in general.

Values and outcomes

Coaching and coaching informed supervision, are in-keeping with the values of social work: both require the development of a trusting relationship and aim to produce positive outcomes by empowering rather than prescribing. By working with managers, supervisors and social workers, coaches aim to promote, not only high quality practice, but also the growth of professional confidence. But what do we know of the outcomes of coaching? A review of the evidence on coaching in social work has been commissioned by the Health and Social Care Board in Northern Ireland. The resulting review concluded that, although there are limitations in the available evidence, 'coaching is associated with positive outcomes for employees' (HSCB 2014: 36). The implications for service users have yet to be researched. Although no panacea, good quality questioning conversations held between coaches, supervisors and practitioners might help temper rational-objectivist management and continue the drive for professionalism and confidence that is currently underway.

References

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