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Supervision in learning organizations

Supervision is a necessary support of organizations engaged in social work and their professional employees.

Summary

Supervision or qualitative coaching is described as one of the prerequisites for organizations of social work. It enables them to accept the necessity of alteration, thus being capable of fulfilling the varying and changing demands.

Supervision often provides the only space in which the self-reflection of an organization is possible.

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Supervision

When talking to potential clients about supervision, one is often confronted with ideas for which supervisors are quite responsible themselves. Supervision is regarded as one of many possible methods of solving the problems with regard to themselves, their clients or to the conditions of their organization, which social workers find difficult to manage. In these cases, supervision serves as a "workshop" for those, "who need mending." What they also need is psycho-hygiene in a setting, in which one can talk about everything without fearing any consequences. Supervision is also recommended in all those cases, in which the symptoms of inner conflicts manifest themselves mainly in a person's professional life.

It's true: supervision is a useful approach of dealing with these and similar subjects. Such a supervision adds to the acquisition and preservation of the competence of individual social workers and their teams. Alterna-

tive methods are further training, therapy, self-awareness and others.

When we extend the meaning of supervision and say: "Supervision is a service for organizations," we enter the sphere of the connection of supervision and organization - in this case of organizations of social work. I would even add one more word to the definition: "**Supervision is a necessary service for organizations!**"

The imperfectness of organizations

Organizations in social work are inadequate by nature. Beyond this inherent inadequacy, we find organizations (not only) in social work, which are ineptly managed and insufficiently structured, so that they are hardly able to master their actual tasks and to deal with the special characteristics of their clients.

I should explain this. Let me begin with my assertion of the inadequacy natu-

ral or inherent to the system of organizations.

The natural or systemic inadequacy

Acting in social work and in all spheres of work which are related to the complex inner and outer dynamics of persons, always takes place in a field of tension and in an open process with temporary certainties. In other words: though the problems, which have to be solved, show structural similarities, any help always remains an individual support and is determined by numerous dynamic factors. Good social work includes the awareness of the fact that it generates help in a field of tension, which, being an open system, is not just the subject of a taken step, but, at the same time, via the social workers, interacts with the organization and challenges it. These are small micro-processes, yet in the sum total keep challenging the organization's certainty and rigidity, causing it to find new orientations.

In direct support, persons, who simultaneously are officials, associate with the recipients of the service. These recipients with their specific problems meet the supporting persons in the setting of the organization which provides the suitable external conditions. At best, this complexity leads to successful social work. One necessary prerequisite is that the organization sees itself as a learning organization, thus understanding that the certainty of its structure, its culture and its offers is a temporary and insufficient certainty, which necessarily considers itself being in a state of development through reflecting and assimilating experience.

Such processes need a space within the organization, in which experience can be reflected and assimilated. Supervision provides this space.

If organizations saw themselves as learning organizations and structured themselves in a corresponding way, we could be happy and enjoy the resulting high quality of social work. Yet, not only in Lithuania we are miles away from this paradise.

The self made inadequacy

Organizations appear to be rigid, inflexible, and usually act in a very dysfunctional way with regard to their real tasks. They are managed poorly. Internal communication is prevented instead of being encouraged. Taboos, conflicts, secretiveness, fear and power force the operatively acting social workers to adjust themselves to these conditions and make them try to provide help in direct contact to their clients and with limited and sub-optimal means. Yet, the limitations which they experience are not assimilated by the organization in a learning way. Consequently, social workers and related professions are often quite skeptical about their own organization. They take the organization's inadequacy, which becomes evident in their interaction with the clients, as their personal fault which they try to compensate for. It is obvious that such processes burden social workers, thus endangering their contentment and their health.

Are all these observations anti-institutional clichés? No, they are observations summed up to fit into a short lecture. They were made by an elder consultant who, during his long professional life, observed and learned to understand the mechanisms of organizations. It is true: reality is more differentiated and admits many intermediate forms. And there is often a learning and a rigid resistance against experience in one and the same organization, yet in different areas.

The specific qualities of Lithuania

My experience is based on my work in Germany. Yet here in Lithuania, I am talking to Lithuanian colleagues. Hence, the question arises: Is there any specific proposal for social work in Lithuania?

For more than 10 years, I have been accompanying the training, development and institutionalization of supervision in Kaunas. During the consultation of cases in the supervision of supervisors, I got some insight into the problems of social work, the social workers and the organizations of social work in this country. Let me illustrate this by a couple of observations.

Social work often develops in subsidized projects. In many cases, the organization then only develops in the operative social work. Thus, the organization is less attached to tradition and has not yet taken on a life of its own. Such organizations with a limited degree of structure serve one task and are as temporary as the projects they support. This leads to minimally structured functional forms of organization, which are directed by the immediate social work. This again has led to a unique competence of social work. Social workers are not only competent interveners in social complexes of problems, but are also creative developers of forms of organizations which serve their function. Here, they are not directed, but they direct themselves. This competence might well become a unique characteristic for an international scientific cooperation. Emergent nations with a social work and its forms of organization that still have to be developed, could learn from them. Last year, we discussed such prospects in this department.

Lithuania is a nation with a long history, which, unfortunately, often was the history of foreign rule. In countries

which are ruled by an occupying power, organizations often mirror this form of power. I often came across a "system of two truths." There is a high degree of adjustment to the seemingly rigid rules of institutions and organizations and, at the same time, an inner independence and freedom untouched by these rules. These two states coexist without being communicated and still continue to be effective. Let me illustrate this by a small occurrence: Walking along the hall of the institute together with one of the female instructors, we met an American scientist who, without being asked, declared that he was the "inventor" of Lithuanian social work. When he was gone, I asked the Lithuanian scientist, whether that was correct. She answered: "We let him believe so!" It is self-evident that such an attitude does not serve the truth and that an inner independence which does not discuss conflicts with the institution, makes learning impossible or at least very difficult. Learning institutions are disputing institutions. Silent inner freedom and a seemingly perfect adjustment is a conflict-strategy which prevents both the organization from learning and learning within the organization.

Many Lithuanian organizations in the field of social work (though not only there) are **hierarchically structured and their improvement is impeded by a dysfunctional symbolism of power**. In discussions of supervisory cases, I often gained insight into unreasonable constructions of power. One constituent factor is a poorly developed sense of equal treatment of male and female employees. To be explicit: there are often inflexible male directors of organizations, and flexible, hard working female assistant directors, who support the institution. Enlightenment and a developing awareness of gender will help to dissolve these struc-

tures. Yet, this is only possible in an open discussion.

Supervision in a learning organization

This brings us to supervision. As I said: "Supervision is a necessary service for organizations!"

Supervision - and that means the male and female supervisors - are able to understand this necessary complexity, in which help is constituted and coordinated between the organization, the social workers and the clients. Supervisors are able to act as consultants and, in cooperation with all professional participants, to work out strategies of action.

You may argue that other services can also do that. I don't think so! Let's have a look at the consultation and **development of organizations**. This is often just aiming at an ideal functioning of this organization under economic aspects. Work routines and organizational structures are developed which do not fit the functions of the persons who work there and who should benefit from the service. A development of an organization which, in cooperation with its employees, intends to create an open, learning organization, uses supervision with regard to achieving a lasting improvement. It needs supervision, when the process of learning is to be continued. Then there is **coaching**. Ideally, this is an attitude of executive personnel, which can be achieved by supervision. As a form of consultation, it reduces the complexity to direct, effective action and only generates short-term effects. In the form of **"qualified coaching,"** it is part of the competence of male and female supervisors and underlines their orientation towards solutions. **Further training?** Yes. If the outcome of further training is to be integrated into the work routine, one needs supervision as a space in

which the general can be transferred into the concrete, designed to fit the respective person and structure.

Supervision is not a method, but a service which develops in dialog with the organization which ordered it. In this dialog, the forms, focal points and settings (that is the places, where the consultation takes place) are discussed, which fit the problems of the organization. Usually, supervision in organizations and with the participating persons is the first time that a space is created, in which a learning organization becomes possible. Only those who are able to think about themselves are able to develop and to learn. This also applies to organizations.

Supervision provides the space, which - in addition to the quick, lasting, immediate solution of problems - helps to develop the organization. This development takes place due to the fact that the questions and problems of the participants determine the subject matter of the supervision. These questions are considered components of the complexity of the organization, the participants and their functions, and the dynamics of the customers (the clients). Following the reflection and subsequent reduction of the complexity, the participants reach an agreement about the direction of further actions.

Supervision needs open discussion and productive arguing during the joint search for solutions. This creates a culture which is not natural in most organizations. Nevertheless, this culture is a prerequisite for quality.

Supervision helps to achieve solutions, to which all members of the organization make contributions. A learning organization is not guaranteed by a single, autocratic, leading figure, but requires gradual hierarchies and a broad inter-professional cooperation.

Supervision serves and is obliged to comprehension. Thus, communication is encouraged and protected by supervision.

In Lithuania

Meanwhile, there are a number of highly qualified male and female supervisors in Lithuania. Their qualification was not trained in short-time seminars, but was achieved in long and intense learning processes, which were guided by the basic principles of supervision. Over more than two years and repeatedly brushed up in master-supervisions, this qualification was acquired. Therefore, the mutual learning process can start or be continued between the organizations and institutions of social work and the Lithuanian colleagues.

I am glad that in the next days, we can plan a third, qualified training for male and female supervisors. And I thank you very much for your attention and for your patience with my poor English pronunciation.