



Supervision

 Hanna, M.D., & Potter, C.C. (2012). The effective child welfare unit supervisor. *Administration in Social Work, 36*(4), 409-425.

WHAT IS THIS RESOURCE?

This article outlines a small, qualitative study aimed at determining supervisory effectiveness within a state child welfare system. A purposeful sample of supervisors having a reputation for being effective in their agencies were invited to participate in the study. Participants represented urban and rural county agencies, along with a range of small to larger counties, and various areas of practice within the child welfare system. The authors used a series of four focus groups with participants to discuss what they deemed to be effective supervision.

WHAT ARE THE CRITICAL FINDINGS?

-  The backbone of the organizational structure of child welfare agencies is *the child welfare unit*.
-  The supervisor position in a unit is often filled with a successful, seasoned frontline worker with minimal managerial training.
-  The unit supervisor often becomes a middle manager who *must delicately balance all three of the functional roles of the supervisor: administration, education, and support*.
-  An effective child welfare unit is often a reflection of an effective supervisor.

The following five themes emerged from the focus groups:

1. **Mission/Values:** All participants indicated it was their responsibility to support families and children with regard to safety and protection as outlined in their agency's overall mission.
2. **Diversity:** All participants expressed the need for diversity (racial, educational, experience, skill, and personality) within their units/teams.
3. **Constant Change:** All participants felt that the constant change that occurs at the agency level can contribute to varied workloads and tasks.
4. **Team Identity:** All indicated that team identity came from unit pride, interpersonal dynamics (peer support, motivation, communication), common work ethic and commitment to best practice.
5. **Community-Embedded:** All said their units functioned as part of a larger system and community, with resources flowing to/from the child welfare agency.

-  Additionally, supervisors in this study indicated that *effective teams* reflected effective internal communication, mutual trust and support, creation of a safe haven, positive energy, and unit pride.
-  People skills, respectful communication, diplomacy, organizational skills and time management, mutual respect and trust between supervisors and line staff, personality characteristics such as loyalty, integrity, honesty, openness, empathy, and humility, along with maintaining an appropriate set of boundaries, were identified as items that contribute to *effective supervisors*.
-  Finally, supervisors also noted that, in general, they have moved into their new positions from frontline worker roles, and find the shift to a middle management position to be a bit of a challenge.

WHAT ARE THE IMPLICATIONS FOR OUR WORK?

-  Effective, productive child welfare workers are often members of effective, productive child welfare units lead by an effective child welfare supervisor.
-  While supervisors are as diverse as the workers they supervise and the clients they serve in terms of personality, demographics, education, and work experience, there are common traits found among the most effective supervisors.