GROUP SUPERVISION: COMMON CHALLENGES WITH STRENGTHS MODEL

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Group supervision was implemented in the very first Strengths Model demonstration project nearly 30 years ago. The reason this approach was chosen at the time was for efficiency. Within four months, it was clear that it was not only efficient, but more effective. Besides feeling more energized about the process, workers found that they received more specific ideas about the clients they were serving and more support in their efforts. This positive experience with group supervision has continued with our current Strengths Model implementation projects in the past seven years. Once practitioners experience a well run group supervision, it is difficult for them to imagine going back to more traditional approaches.

There are multiple purposes to group supervision. The primary purpose is the generation of highly individualized ideas and strategies to help a client achieve a specific goal. A practitioner decides to present a person for discussion because he/she desires an increased number of options toward achieving the goal or he/she is "stuck" in terms of generating movement toward the goal. If the client under discussion does not have a specific goal, the task might revolve around generating ideas to help the practitioner better engage with the client so they find a goal on which they can align. The second purpose is to facilitate learning for the entire team. While only between 2 and 4 clients might be discussed at particular group supervision, practitioners have the opportunity to learn things that might apply to similar situations. Over the course of a year, practitioners will have been exposed to a multitude of diverse client situations and generated countless number of different ideas and use of resources. A third purpose is support and affirmation of the team. Strengths Model practice is a demanding job that requires high levels of skills and energy while dealing with challenging situations to achieve ambitious ends. Furthermore, much of the work practitioners do is performed alone. Group supervision is a mechanism for practitioners to feel connected to a group which shares a common vision and set of values. It is the place for workers to get energized.

Group supervision is one of the foundational components of the Strengths Model. When we assist sites with Strengths Model implementation, the establishment of the group supervision process is one of the initial steps. Weekly instruction, modeling and feedback is given for at least the first two months of implementation to ensure that the group supervision process is structured properly and functions according to its intended purposes. While most current Strengths Model project sites rate at high fidelity on the group supervision item of the Strengths Model fidelity scale, some common challenges have arisen that contribute to teams not getting the maximum value out of the group supervision process. These challenges will be discussed below along with recommendations for overcoming these barriers.

Common Challenge #1
Not preparing for group supervision beforehand

While the group supervision process is easy to implement and follow, a few steps taken before group supervision begins can enhance the overall experience and ensure the practitioner is getting the specific help he/she is requesting. A common mistake some supervisors make is waiting until group supervision starts before knowing who will be presenting. Sometimes supervisors will know who will be presenting, but will not know which client is being presented or what type of help the staff person will be requesting. Our recommendation is for the supervisor to ask for requests to present at the next group supervision at least a few days in advance. It is also a good idea to meet briefly with the presenting staff person to find out what the client's goal is and what type of help they will be requesting. Having the staff person be precise in regard to what the client's goal is and what they want help with, assists the team to stay focused and saves time. In some circumstances, a staff person just wants ideas on a specific community resource (e.g. where can I find an apartment that has all utilities paid, where can I find some inexpensive furniture, what are some options for helping my client get some dental work done, etc.). While these are appropriate topics to bring to the group, they do not require a full group supervision presentation in order for the practitioner to get this information. Questions like this can be reserved for the end of group supervision, where staff can have the opportunity to inquire about specific community resources. Formal group supervision presentations should be reserved for coming up with engagement strategies, identifying meaningful goals so staff can better align their interventions, and brainstorming naturally occurring resources to assist client's in achieving their goals.

Common Challenge #2
Not starting the presentation with the clients goal

Another common mistake some teams make is not including a statement of the client's goal at the beginning of the presentation or by stating a goal that holds very little meaning or value for the person being discussed. While supervisors can avoid this problem by helping staff refine their presentation prior to group supervision, staff can also be encouraged to constantly assess what people want and where they are headed on their recovery journey as that is often the fuel that drives goal achievement. A statement of the client's goal is not as simple as looking at a Strengths Assessment and reading what the priorities are. Instead, staff should consider what the client would say their most important goal is at the present time and why it is important to them. Supervisors can prompt this kind of statement by asking the following question: "If the client joined us for group supervision, what would they say is their most important goal and why"? Starting with the client's goal is a way of positioning them as the director of the helping relationship. When the goal is one that holds meaning and value for the client, there is a greater likelihood that brainstorming will result in suggestions that both the client and staff will find helpful. Finally, what the staff person needs from the group should always relate back to what the client is hoping to achieve.

Common Challenge #3
Lack of penetration in the questioning phase (getting to understanding of the client's perspective vs. surface facts)

When teams first start using the group supervision process, there is a tendency to want to ask many clarifying questions which often have nothing to do with the client's goal, what the staff person is asking for, or with further clarifying information on the Strengths Assessment. When questions stray away from what the client is hoping to achieve and what the staff person wants help with, this bogs down the process which can lead to lengthy and sometimes deficit- oriented conversations about clients. This type of questioning limits creativity when it comes to the brainstorming process as well as the number of presentations the team is able to get through in one meeting. The supervisor can avoid this problem by reminding staff during the questioning phase to keep questions limited to the client's goal and/or what the staff person is seeking help with. If the questions begin to stray from the client's goal or clarifying information on the Strengths Assessment to help the staff person and the client achieve the goal, then the supervisor can pause and redirect the process by reminding the team what the client's goal was and with what the staff person is asking help.

Even when the team does keep questions focused around the Strengths Assessment, they can get bogged down by merely clarifying surface facts rather than getting at the essence of what this might mean to the client. For example, if it says on the Strengths Assessment "went to college", a common question to ask is where did they go college or for how long. While these are not unimportant questions, getting more penetration into the meaning certain things hold for clients or mining for more specific strengths will provide fodder for more enriched brainstorming later on. Questions like, "What was Susan hoping to achieve when she went to college," "What got Susan so interested in pursuing art history in college," "What specific strengths did she draw upon to make it through two and half years of college."

Supervisors should pay close attention to the time during this phase and listen for transition opportunities to move the group into the brainstorming phase.

Common Challenge #4
Not leaving group supervision with a specific plan of action

Follow-through by staff may be poor if they do not verbalize what specific ideas resonated for them during the brainstorming phase and which ones they plan to use in their work with the client. A typical presentation may include twenty or more suggestions the staff person could use and narrowing those down to two or three helps gain commitment from the staff person to try what was suggested. These should be stated in behavioral terms (i.e. "I'm going to meet with Mike on Monday morning and explain WRAP to him and ask if he would like to try this as he prepares to go back to work." One strategy might be to have the client review the entire list of suggestions the group came up with to see which ones they would like to try. The important thing is that the staff person leaves with some concrete steps. Supervisors should write down the suggestions staff say they will try and ask for any progress that has been made during the following week.

Common Challenge #5
Not following through with staff after group supervision to assess progress and need for support

Along with making sure there is time during every group supervision session to follow up and celebrate with staff regarding progress made on suggestions from previous presentations, it is also important for supervisors to check in with staff individually. This can help staff remember to discuss the suggestions with the client and it gives them a chance to process the client's reactions regarding the suggestions made. The supervisor can offer further support if needed through other means such as field mentoring, using the Personal Recovery Plan, or other associated tools. By following up with staff individually, the supervisor is closing the loop on the group supervision process which helps staff see it as a means to an end.

Common Challenge #6
Spirit breaking comments that stifle creativity

Spirit breaking comments often come about when staff don't believe in the possibility of a client being successful with a particular goal, or when the staff person or entire group reacts negatively to a client's behaviors and/or a particular diagnosis. While the Strengths Model does not ignore that problems, barriers, or challenges may exist that might make goal achievement difficult, the team is responsible for staying creative so that these can be overcome. This requires that everyone participating makes a commitment to keeping their own language, behaviors, questions, and suggestions in check during the group supervision process. Even when a staff person is feeling extremely frustrated about their work with a client, it is important that they be able to set their feelings aside and try to appreciate the client's perspective. Helping the staff person get better aligned with the client's goal is one important outcome within many group supervision presentations. Managing spirit breaking comments and attitudes during group supervision is ultimately the responsibility of the supervisor but it is helpful to include the team in deciding on how they should be addressed. Managing spirit breaking comments does not have to be, nor should it be a punitive process. Many teams have agreed upon certain cues or prompts to help get the presenter or group back on track when negativity surfaces and once these are in place, over time, this should longer be a challenge for the team.

The following example demonstrates a group supervision presentation that ended successfully because many of the pitfalls mentioned above were avoided.

After being prompted by his supervisor to present on a client with whom the case manager was struggling to engage, the case manager came prepared for group supervision with copies of the current Strengths Assessment and passed them around to the team. The supervisor then asked the case manager what the client's goal was and what he wanted help with. The case manager stated that the client's only goal was to get off of his court order and that he was seeking ideas around how to effectively work with the client who was very angry about having been forced into treatment. The supervisor then asked the case manager for a brief description of what had already been tried. The case manager stated that he had been talking to the client about the importance of gaining insight into his illness, understanding why he was court ordered into services, and encouraging him to use wellness strategies, but the client remained angry and defensive about any suggestion he made. The supervisor then prompted the team to take a few minutes to look over the Strengths Assessment. When it was time to move into the questioning phase, the supervisor reminded the staff to limit their questions to clarifying what the client may hold meaningful and important versus exploring what the client's diagnosis was, discussing why he was on the court order, etc. A staff person then asked the presenting case manager about the client's job history as she noticed he had recently lost his job at a delivery company. The case manager responded by saying that the client had held a job on the maintenance crew at the company but was let go when he experienced a psychotic episode and "blew up" at his supervisor. He further clarified that the client had a strong desire to get his trucker's license and drive his own truck someday. Other questions about his talents, skills, and interests were pursued and then the supervisor moved the process into the brainstorming phase. Sixteen suggestions were made about how the case manager could build alliance with the client and the case manager wrote them all down. The supervisor then asked the case manager to review his list of ideas and tell the team if there were any suggestions made that he would definitely follow up with. The case manager thanked the team for their input and stated he would start talking to the client about what steps he would need to take to get his truckers license and offer to help with that. He also stated that he would try to work with the energy and motivation behind the client's resistance about being on the court order instead of talking to him about gaining insight and accepting his illness. Finally, instead of having the client always meet the case manager at the office, he stated he would meet the client in the community at a location of his own choosing.

A few days after the presentation, the supervisor followed up with the case manager during individual supervision and asked if he had tried any of the suggestions with the client. The case manager stated that he had and that the client showed strong interest in pursuing his trucker's license and they were going to use the Personal Recovery Plan to outline the necessary steps. Over a period of about six months the client obtained his trucker's license and got hired to work at a trucking company. His court order was discontinued as he realized that the medication helped him to perform his job which put it into a context that he could accept and most importantly, a context that held meaning for something that he wanted to achieve.

Conclusion

In conclusion, group supervision is a fairly straightforward process to implement and when supervisors and teams are able to recognize and address some of the common challenges, they will get better results out of the process. Group supervision should be a fun and energizing process for everyone who participates and staff should leave feeling supported, affirmed, and empowered with increased options to use in their work with clients.