HIRED for GOOD

Quality Human Services Through Innovative Human Resource Management

Using a Competency Model to Increase Frontline Supervisor Effectiveness in Child Welfare Agencies
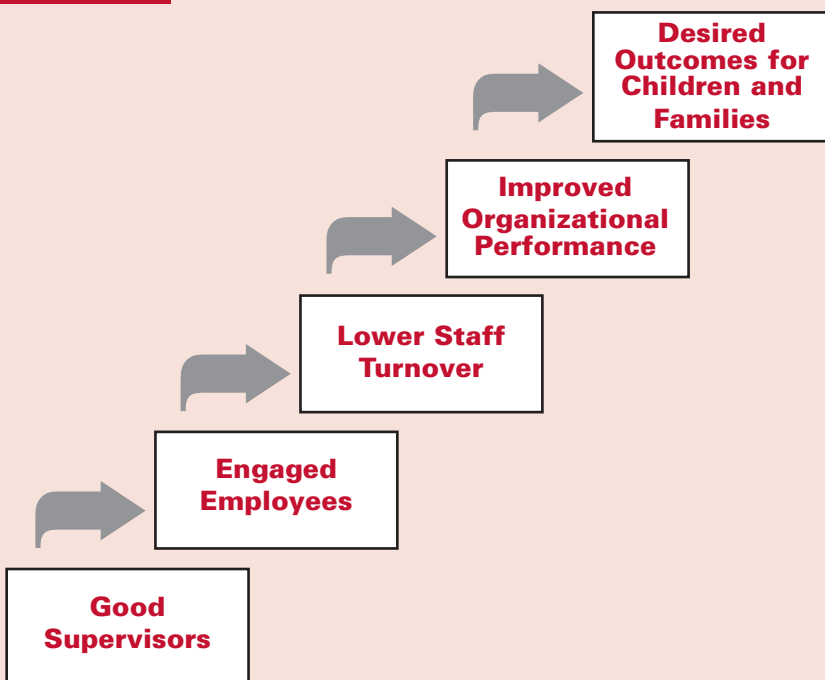
The job of the frontline child welfare supervisor is critically important – perhaps the most demanding and difficult in the entire agency. There is a direct connection between the quality of supervision and important employee measures such as staff turnover rates, morale, and job performance and commitment. Many in child welfare understand the relationship illustrated in Exhibit 1: Good supervisors produce engaged employees which results in lower staff turnover rates and improved organizational performance, ultimately producing desired outcomes for children and families. A major challenge for many child welfare agencies, however, is how to find the right people for these critical jobs and how to maximize their effectiveness in the agency once they've been hired or promoted.

In this issue:

Exhibit 1

Good Supervisors → Engaged Employees → Lower Staff Turnover → Improved Organizational Performance → Desired Outcomes for Children and Families

Many agencies promote frontline staff with the best technical skills under the assumption that they will make the best supervisors. Others promote their longest tenured caseworkers on the theory that experience equates to leadership. When looking outside the agency, much the same thinking is used to hire people into supervisory positions. Strategies such as these, however, often fail to achieve the desired result – putting the right person in the job.

Ask caseworkers to describe their best supervisors and they will invariably respond with phrases such as "*a great communicator*," "*a wonderful mentor and coach*," "*a real team builder*," and "*someone I could trust*." Agency leadership usually describe their best frontline supervisors with phrases similar to, "able to build great partnerships both within and outside the agency," "able to make the tough decisions," "able to set clear expectations for staff," and "able to develop staff to their greatest potential." Not surprisingly, by the time caseworkers and agency leaders complete their respective lists of attributes of an ideal supervisor, the two lists usually look very much alike.

Education, experience, and professional and technical skills are important ingredients, but an ability to communicate, make tough decisions, and set clear performance expectations are the skills that allow supervisors to be most effective. These behavioral attributes differentiate the excellent supervisor from the average and marginal ones. Human resource management (HRM) professionals refer to these behavioral attributes as "competencies." Competencies can be defined as the *knowledge, skills, behaviors, personal attributes, or other characteristics that are associated with or predictive of superior job performance*.

Introducing a competency model in an agency begins and ends with leadership vision and commitment. Agencies wishing to make a significant change in their strategic directions, goals, and objectives will be more successful if they clearly articulate the competencies for the key jobs critical to the change effort. A competency model approach can have a profound impact on agency performance and outcomes as everyone gains an understanding of what is valued and what the agency considers important for successful performance.

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The critical nature of the frontline supervisor makes it an excellent starting point for phasing in an agency-wide competency model philosophy. But, a word of caution. All positions must be aligned with the vision and values of the agency. To focus only on the frontline supervisor position will diminish the potential success that can be achieved by introducing the integrated competency model throughout the agency. The process described here can be effectively used to introduce the competency model for all classifications and organizational levels within the agency.

By effectively establishing a competency model for frontline supervisors:

- Frontline workers will better understand what to expect from their supervisors, as well as identify what behaviors are important for their own potential promotions.

- Supervisors will know what is expected of them, what competencies are associated with successful performance, and how to reach their fullest potential.

- Middle managers will have a consistent and understandable basis for holding supervisors accountable and know how to contribute to their further development.

Identifying the competencies critical to successful performance as a frontline child welfare supervisor is the essential first step in strengthening this role and improving supervisor performance and effectiveness in any child welfare agency. The second step is integrating these competencies with all aspects of the HRM process that support good supervision, including selection, professional development, and performance management. By integrating the competency model throughout all of its HRM processes, the child welfare agency consistently reinforces the competencies associated with superior job performance.

Getting Started: Identifying the Critical Competencies for Frontline Supervisors

Exhibit 2 displays a menu of 17 competencies that are appropriate for frontline child welfare supervisors[1] and from which an agency can select the ten to twelve most appropriate to their organizational culture. While some might assert

Building Trust

Interacts with others in a way that gives them confidence in one's motives and representations and those of the organization.

Coaching

Provides timely guidance and feedback to help others strengthen specific knowledge/skill areas needed to accomplish a task or solve a problem.

Collaboration

Identifies and understands available resources; understands and appreciates different views and perspectives of other individuals and systems; advocates for clients in creative ways; participates in work groups and activities to improve program functioning; and supports coworkers and relates effectively with administration.

Communication

Clearly receives and conveys information and ideas through a variety of media to individuals or groups in a manner that engages the listener, helps them understand and retain the message, and invites response and feedback from the listener.

Continuous Learning and Professional Development

Is committed to developing professionally, attends professional conferences focused on best practices, values cutting-edge practices and approaches, takes advantage of a variety of learning activities, and introduces newly gained knowledge and skills on the job.

Cultural Competence

Cultivates opportunities through diverse people; is able to respect and relate well to people from varied backgrounds, to understand diverse world views, and is sensitive to group differences; sees diversity as an opportunity; and challenges bias and intolerance.

Customer/Client Focus

Makes customers/clients and their needs a primary focus of one's actions; develops and sustains productive relationships with internal and external customers (including one's own staff); and gains customer trust and respect.

Decisionmaking

Identifies and understands issues, problems, and opportunities; compares data from different sources to draw conclusions; uses effective approaches for choosing a course of action or developing appropriate solutions; and takes action that is consistent with available facts, constraints, and probable consequences.

Delegating Responsibility

Comfortably delegates responsibilities, tasks, and decisions; appropriately trusts others to perform; provides support without removing responsibility.

Facilitating Change

Encourages others to seek opportunities for different and innovative approaches to addressing problems and opportunities and facilitates implementation and acceptance of change within the workplace.

Follow up

Monitors the work of direct reports to ensure quality standards and thoroughness and considers the knowledge, experience and skill of staff members when determining extent of review.

Guiding and Developing Staff

Focuses and guides others in accomplishing work objectives; rewards and recognizes others, both formally and informally, in ways that motivate them; sets high performance expectations for team members; sets clear expectations and objectives; holds others accountable for achieving results; successfully finds resources, training, tools, etc. to support staff needs; works with staff to create developmental opportunities to expand knowledge and skill levels; and provides effective feedback and guidance for career development.

Managing Conflict

Uses appropriate interpersonal styles and techniques to reduce tension and/or conflict between two or more people; is able to size up situations quickly; is able to identify common interests; and facilitates conflict resolution.

Organizational Ability

Shows ability to plan, schedule, direct work of self and others; balances task requirements and individual abilities; organizes materials to accomplish tasks; sets challenging yet achievable goals for self and others; and sets work schedules and caseload/workload standards.

Stress Tolerance

Maintains stable performance under pressure or opposition (such as time pressure or job ambiguity) and handles stress in a manner that is acceptable to others and to the organization.

Team Leadership

Communicates a vision and inspires motivation; engages with others in a team process to solve problems; works to find a win/win resolution of differences; is aware of how management style impacts staff productivity and development; modifies leadership style to meet situational requirements; stays focused on major goals while managing within a context of multiple directives; and uses knowledge of the system to identify long-term opportunities and problems.

Technical/Professional Knowledge and Skills

Possesses, acquires, and maintains the technical/professional expertise required to do the job effectively and to create customer solutions. Technical/professional expertise is demonstrated through problem solving, applying technical knowledge, and product and service management for the functional area in which one operates.

that all the competencies in the menu are relevant, most HRM experts would agree that identifying a long list of competencies for a job is unwieldy. Identifying more than ten to twelve competencies detracts from their usefulness because it is difficult to provide appropriate performance feedback, and the frontline supervisor cannot effectively focus on making improvements in too many areas at one time.

There are a number of approaches for identifying the competencies most critical to a position. They all represent vehicles for effective partnerships between program staff and human resource management. Some methods require analyzing policies and procedures and developing a structured survey instrument to identify the breadth and depth of the position's responsibilities.[2] This approach can be very accurate but time consuming and expensive. Another approach begins with a defined set, or menu, of competencies given the basic nature of the work and seeks to develop consensus on the core competencies to be selected from the menu. A set of competencies can be identified by drawing from child welfare and management literature. Focus groups can be a successful and economical approach to both refine the set and build consensus for the competencies to be included in a model for the agency. The following discussion highlights the steps in this second approach.

1 To obtain input from all the appropriate stakeholders in the process, use several focus groups of eight to twelve participants each. One focus group should consist of "high-performing" frontline supervisors, another of their direct reports (child welfare caseworkers), and a third group of upper-level management. Larger agencies may want to use more focus groups – perhaps two or three from each organizational level. Begin and end with agency leadership. Use the first focus group of agency leadership to identify the agency's vision and strategic direction. Come back to them at the end with the results.

2 A facilitator drawn from the agency's human resource management sets the stage for the focus group by leading a discussion of the role of the frontline supervisor job, its duties, responsibilities, challenges, and other key issues. Participants are asked to reflect on the qualities of the best frontline supervisor they can think of and a recorder/facilitator can list them on a flipchart. After eliciting these reflections, the facilitator distributes a copy of Exhibit 2 to each participant asking them to independently rank their choices of the top ten competencies in order of impor-

tance. After ranking and scoring the competencies, the facilitator shares the results and leads a discussion to reach consensus.

3 Finally, the competency rankings should be reviewed by the agency's top management group. This last step is critically important because it provides the leadership team an opportunity to determine if the competencies that have been identified are consistent with the strategic direction of the agency. For example, many child welfare agencies are engaged in reform efforts either through their federally required Program Improvement Plans (PIPs), federal court orders, or legislative or executive directives. The competencies suggested in Exhibit 2 and those elevated by focus groups need to be evaluated in light of these plans and directions to ensure there is alignment with where the agency is headed.

Creating A Competency Model: Integrating Competencies into Human Resource Management

Table 1 illustrates how a set of identified competencies can be integrated into the major HRM processes that support effective supervision. The 12 competencies identified in Table 1 were selected from the list of 17 in Exhibit 2 by a child welfare agency using the steps described. The discussion following Table 1 explains how the competencies are integrated into the HRM processes of selection, performance management, and professional development.

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[1] These competencies were identified by the staff at CPS Human Resource Systems through years of direct, hands-on public sector human resource management experience. A similar set of 19 competencies was developed by the Maine Child Welfare Training Institute in the early nineties as the foundation for its Child Welfare Supervisor competency model. The development and application of the Maine model is reported on in *A Competency Model for Child Welfare Supervisors* by Freda D. Bernotavicz and Dolores Bartley, published in September 1996 by the Center for Public Sector Innovation, Edmund S. Muskie Institute of Public Affairs, University of Southern Maine, Portland, ME.

[2] See *Hired for Good*, Volume 2, Number 1, Spring 2004 at http://www.cssp.org/uploadFiles/10071_HiredforGood_fnl.pdf, p 3.

Table 1: Integrating Competencies into Major HRM Processes: An Example

Competency	Selection	Performance Management	Professional Development
Guiding and Developing Staff		Required	1 & 2
Coaching		Optional	1 & 2
Communication	Interview*	Required	1 & 2
Cultural Competence	X	Optional	1 & 2
Customer/Client Focus	X	Optional	1 & 2
Decisionmaking	X	Optional	2
Facilitating Change	X	Required	1 & 2
Collaboration	X	Required	2
Organizational Ability	X	Optional	2
Stress Tolerance	X	Optional	2
Team Leadership		Optional	1 & 2
Technical/Professional Knowledge & Skills.	Reference Check	Optional	1 & 2

*The Communications competency can be evaluated based on the verbal communications skills exhibited during the interview and any written documents and/or exercises used during the application process.
1 = Training in these competencies is required for all new supervisors
2 = Training in these competencies is available as appropriate to the needs identified in Individual Development Plans (IDPs)

Integrating the Competency Model into Selection

Traditional hiring systems often center on the technical qualifications for the job, with most applicant screening and selection elements focused on educational background and the length and type of prior employment experience. Job inter-views often focus on "stock" questions such as "What are your strengths and weaknesses?" and "What makes you the best candidate for this job?" Hiring decisions are often based on the answers to such questions, and the "emotional attraction" of the applicant to the interviewer. Although formal education andjob experience are important considerations, an applicant's attitudes, motivations, and behavioral characteristics are more predictive of superior performance.

Using the competency model, most of the applicant assessment is geared toward finding out as much as possible about how the applicant can be expected to perform in the critical competency areas.

It is not practical to include as many as 12 competencies in the interview process. Experienced interviewers find that asking two or three questions for each competency, along with probing follow-up questions, is necessary to adequately assess an applicant's strengths in each competency area. Therefore, it is best to focus the interview on the six to eight competencies (shown in column 2 of Table 1) that are most difficult to develop through training and on-the-job experience. Hiring someone who naturally works well under pressure, for example, is likely to be more successful than attempting to change

someone's behavior through stress management training.

Many HRM professionals have found that using a "behavioral" interviewing format provides the best technique for evaluating competencies. Behavioral interviews focus on past behaviors and ask candidates how they have handled certain situations in the past. Abundant research has shown the effectiveness of behavioral interviewing, which is based on findings that past behavior is a good predictor of future behavior. In order to maximize the effectiveness of behavioral interviewing, the interviewer must require the applicant to give specific, concrete examples of experiences that are responsive to the question. For example, using the "Decision-making" competency, the interviewer may ask, "Can you tell me about a really difficult decision

you had to make at work, recently?" Once the applicant describes the situation, the interviewer can ask probing follow-up questions to find out how the decision was made, what alternatives were considered, and how the situation turned out.[3]

Although the probing follow-up questions will be unique (rather than standard) for each candidate, behavioral interviews promote equal opportunity because they reduce the likelihood of bias due to superficial and personal characteristics. Candidates are evaluated on what they have actually done rather than on how they look or how personable they are.

Integrating the Competency Model into Performance Management

Well-designed performance management systems typically include three components:

1 Identifying and evaluating major work objectives.

2 Evaluating the competencies that are associated with superior job performance.

3 Creating Individual Development Plans (IDPs) intended to enhance employee strengths and close performance gaps as determined by the competency evaluation.

Evaluating major work objectives is an assessment of results, and evaluating competencies is an assessment of the behavioral characteristics that impact results. If a frontline supervisor fails to meet certain performance targets, the competency evaluation will typically reveal the reasons why. Evaluating supervisors on the critical competencies for the position does

much more than that, however. Supervisors can meet their performance targets, yet be rude to families and peers, be culturally insensitive, and fail to keep commitments with staff. Providing supervisors with performance feedback on the competencies identified as being critical to superior job performance gives them the information they need to be successful.

Although all of the competencies are important, it is only reasonable to evaluate supervisors on seven or eight competencies during each evaluation period. The agency may wish to emphasize its strategic direction by identifying four or five competencies where all supervisors will be evaluated. These competencies are the ones the agency believes are most important to achieving its strategic objectives. Using the example in Table 1, the third column shows which competencies the agency evaluates in all supervisors and which are optional.

Although the "optional" competencies are important, proficiency in these competencies will differ from one supervisor to another. Supervisors and their managers should identify the two or three "optional" competencies on which they will concentrate during the performance evaluation period.

Integrating the Competency Model into Professional Development

Integrating competencies into training and development provides a valuable support system for supervisors to improve in areas where they have developmental needs and to enhance those areas where they have strengths. Once the agency has identified the competencies necessary for superior performance, supervisors will have a better understanding of the behaviors

the agency values, and they can begin to work on strengthening them. Many successful organizations require all employees to have an Individual Development Plan (IDP) based on the competencies critical for successful job performance. Although the same competencies will apply to everyone doing the same kind of work, individual supervisors will have different developmental needs depending on their own strengths and weaknesses. Some may benefit from training in managing stress, while others have a greater need for training in time management and organizational skills. Supervisors may also have very different learning styles. Some do well with formal classroom training, while others do far better with self-paced methods such as online courses, books, and videos. Developing IDPs with supervisors based on their unique needs and learning styles results in a productive, efficient, and cost-effective approach to professional development.

The development of the IDP is a natural outgrowth of the performance management process. Organizations that view the performance evaluation as a tool to provide feedback and identify growth opportunities find it very easy to construct IDPs based on the competency evaluation. Just as the performance evaluation conference can be used to identify the performance objectives for the coming year, it can also be used to identify the learning and development objectives.

Conclusion

Selecting the right supervisors, effectively managing their performance, and developing them to their greatest potential is critically important to the ability of a child welfare agency to achieve its strategic

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[3] See *Hired for Good*, Volume 2, Number 1, Spring 2004 at http://www.cssp.org/uploadFiles/10071_HiredforGood_fnl.pdf, p 4.

outcomes. Identifying the competencies associated with exemplary supervisory performance is a fundamental and critical first step. Once identified, they must be communicated to all staff and fully integrated throughout the agency's human resources programs and processes. ■

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Taking a Closer Look at the Link Between Good Supervisors and Improved Outcomes for Children and Families: *Reflections and Research*

Exhibit 1 illustrates the link between good supervisors and achieving positive outcomes for children and families. Seasoned professionals recognize the link and research supports it. The following two pieces are adapted from articles previously appearing in *Safekeeping*, a periodic newsletter of the Community Partnerships for Protecting Children initiative.[1]

Reflections from Sarah B. Greenblatt, Director, The Casey Center for Effective Child Welfare Practice, Case Family Services

As an increasing number of communities and child welfare agencies are making a shift to more collaborative, family-centered, and community-based practice, they are learning that supervisors are essential to sustaining ongoing change.

Individuals selected to be supervisors need SUPER-vision to sensitively translate the mission of the agency and reform initiatives with their staff. This process involves a sensitive balance of multiple supervisory responsibilities aimed at enhancing professional growth, promoting competent practice, encouraging teamwork, and ultimately ensuring accountability.

Taking the time to find the right individuals for the job of supervisor is worth the effort. It is important to look for individuals who appreciate the differences and can build relationships with management, practitioners, and across systems within the community. It is equally important for supervisory candidates to value inclusiveness in their work styles with practitioners just as they value inclusiveness in the work with families.

There is an art to good supervision. Core practice skills of respect, genuineness, and empathy are critical with frontline practitioners and families alike. Good supervisors listen with appreciative inquiry and openness for the strengths and needs of their staff and provide individualized opportunities for professional development. Their ability to ask effective question helps build respectful professional relationships, maximize agency and community resources, and find solutions jointly. And, finally, the art of good supervision involves effective management skills with a careful use of authority to hold practitioners, partners, and families accountable for setting and achieving timely goals that keep children safe, enhance their well-being, and support family stability and permanency.

Child welfare practice, in my opinion, is the hardest social work practice there is, for we are charged with balancing the rights and needs of children with the rights, needs, and responsibilities of their families. Good supervision is essential to helping new and seasoned practitioners struggle with the dual charge of being helpful while also being concerned about children's safety. Learning how to accomplish this in partnership with families and colleagues is a challenging process in which skilled supervision is critical.

Research from Community Partnerships for Protecting Children

Research into the relationship between workers' perceptions of their work environment and child and family outcomes is not extensive, but the work that has been done offers valuable insights. The first major study in this area revealed that workers'

job experiences affect both the quality of services provided to families and the outcomes for children. Simply put, children in foster care are more likely to experience positive changes in well-being when their case workers have greater job satisfaction.[2]

In a more recent study that was part of the evaluation of the Community Partnerships for Protecting Children (CPPC), Chapin Hall Center for Children analyzed the results of survey responses from 572 frontline workers, supervisors, and some senior managers from public child protective service agencies in four diverse locations around the country.[3]

Those individuals who were surveyed were asked to "rate" how satisfied they were with seven aspects of their jobs including: 1) workload, 2) quality of supervision, 3) salary raises, 4) opportunities for advancement, 5) being valued, 6) agency cultural sensitivity, and 7) physical working conditions. When all aspects were combined into one measure, a generally mixed view of job satisfaction emerged.

Within this context, however, it is important to note that *"quality of supervision"* received the highest average rating among the seven aspects that can contribute to job satisfaction. While modest, this positive view does indicate that a supervisor can make a difference in how his/her staff feel about their work experience even when an extraordinarily difficult work environment beset with huge cutbacks contributes to fairly low job satisfaction overall.

In a closer examination of what contributes to or detracts from job satisfaction, two factors were particularly important for understanding the key role of supervisors.

1 *Supervisory support* of practice reform ideals such as the importance of assessing family strengths and involving families in case planning and decision making.

2 *Organizational culture*, specifically a culture that empowers workers by valuing openness, creativity, personal development, quality orientation, personal integrity, etc.

Combined, these two factors had a very large effect on the job satisfaction among the respondents. *Almost 20 percent of the variation among workers in ratings of job satisfaction can be explained by these two factors*. This means that people are likely to be more satisfied with their jobs if they have supervisors who support the practice ideals and if the culture of their supervisory team is open, supportive of professional development, empowering, and focused on quality.

Furthermore, these two factors remained important even when other possible factors were considered. Traditionally, an individual's job satisfaction is affected by how much he or she believes 1) job responsibilities and expectations are clear; 2) conflict between stated goals and regulations and actual practice is minimal; and 3) the workload is manageable. In the Chapin Hall analysis of the CPPC survey, supervisor support and organizational climate remain positive forces in job satisfaction even if these organizational climate factors are not the best.

Bottom line: Supervisors have the power to build effective teams and advance frontline practice by creating a supportive environment. ■

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1 See *Safekeeping*, Volume 7, Number 1, Winter 2003 at http://www.cssp.org/uploadFiles/safekeeping_winter03New.pdf

2 For a fuller description of the study and the factors considered, see Glisson, Charles and Hemmelgarn, Anthony, "The Effects of Organizational Climate and Interorganizational Coordination on the Quality and Outcomes of Children's Service Systems," *Child Abuse and Neglect*, vol. 22, no. 5, 1998.

3 This represented an overall response rate of 78 percent. The Community Partnership for Protecting Children initiative original communities are located in Cedar Rapids, IA; Jacksonville, FL; Louisville, KY; and St. Louis, MO.