

Summary

This qualitative research assesses the impact of a new supervision policy at Wigan Social Services Department over the first year of phased implementation. Results of 40 staff interviews suggest that the major difficulties centred on the relationship between managerial and professional agendas and the nature of both vertical and horizontal communication within the organisation. With hindsight it is thought that some of the initial tensions were partly responses to the process of change itself.

Aim

To assess the phased implementation of a new supervision policy at Wigan Social Services Department over the first year of operation.

To produce a qualitative evaluation of the:

- impact on staff development, motivation and effectiveness;
- significance for management;
- impact on the whole organisation.

This report concentrates on the major pre-occupations of the respondents in these areas:

- mediation of managerial and professional issues;
- communication within the organization.

Methodology

An initial quantitative internal audit one year after policy implementation was undertaken. It was also decided that the policy should be assessed qualitatively.

A representative sample of 40 interviewees were identified. These included team managers and one or more members of each team, with 90% of all respondents being qualified social workers.

Fully confidential, semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions about organisational issues and personal development were conducted. Interviews lasted for one hour with fifteen minutes for feedback at a later date to allow for reflection and clarification.

Interviews were taped, transcribed, coded and analysed thematically.

Relevant internal documentation was examined, senior management group members were consulted and activities of the Supervision Policy Implementation Group observed (i.e. training days and monthly meetings).

Findings

Implementation

Negative comments:

- Implementation process perceived as top-down, reflecting hierarchy.
- Unclear how the process was going to achieve a two-way information flow.
- Sense of contradiction in having been 'done to' in an area where active ownership and creative collaboration was essential to success.
- Concerns about senior management intention and perception of need for tighter control.
- Scepticism that supervision was occurring in the upper tiers of the organisation.

Positive comments:

- Supervision support and training for a key group of first-line managers.
- Possibility of improvement in vertical communication implied by an active supervision chain.
- Commitment to an activity associated with the development of reflective professional practice.

Overall, the manner of implementation was closely scrutinised for clues about later developments, with each stage giving rise to polarised interpretations.

The reactions to the implementation process highlighted the following themes:

- relationship between managerial and professional agendas;
- nature of both vertical and horizontal communication within the organisation.

Dominant staff concerns

Staff preoccupations were predominantly about the perceived tension or reconciliation between managerial and professional issues and the impact of this on communication.

Team leaders preserved both management and practice supervision. The combining of roles gave rise to on-going contradictions.

Supervisory style and orientation could be broadly characterised as reflecting either professional or managerialist priorities. This was expressed in assumptions about the role of supervisor and had significant consequences for supervisory practice and its evaluation.

Satisfactory experiences were characterised by congruence between the preferred styles of the supervisor and the supervisee.

Conclusion

This initial policy evaluation revealed high levels of anxiety about the nature of the implementation process, which was not allayed by preparatory training and preparation. Significant tensions between professional and managerial agendas and shortcomings in organisational communication were exposed.

The supervision policy initially appeared to have the effect of intensifying the contradictions it was designed to negotiate and exposed a lack of unanimity over the direction of cultural change.

The evaluation of the policy impact at two year has become increasingly positive, with the enhanced dialogue between managers and practitioners providing a context in which areas of conflict and difficulty could be acknowledged.

With hindsight, some of the initial anxieties and tensions can be partly seen as a response to the pressures of change itself.