

Purpose of Group Supervision

Group supervision began for us 30 years ago with the very first strengths model demonstration project (Rapp & Chamberlain, 1985). The reason we chose this approach was for efficiency. We did not have the resources to adequately supervise four case managers using the traditional approach of supervision with its once-a week 90-minute meeting with each worker. Within four months, it was clear that it was not only efficient but more effective. All the workers delighted in the approach and could point to specific advantages. We have come to believe that group supervision is indispensable to effective strengths model practice. Group supervision is designed to accomplish three purposes: (1) support and affirmation; (2) ideas; and (3) learning.

Strengths model practice is a demanding job that requires high levels of skills and energy in the face of heretofore intractable situations to achieve ambitious ends. Furthermore, this work is often done alone. Group supervision is a mechanism for workers to feel connected to a group sharing the same mission and challenges. Its aim is to affirm workers: their efforts, their ingenuity, and their accomplishments. Group supervision is a good mechanism for exchanging feedback.

The central task of group supervision is the generation of promising ideas to more effectively work with clients. Even the most skilled strengths model practitioner will encounter a situation where “nothing seems to be working.” It is one order of business to know the perspectives and methods of the strengths model, and another to apply these to the myriad idiosyncratic client situations. Brainstorming is central to group supervision. Groups are more likely to generate the “right” answer or richer alternatives than people acting alone or in dyads. This is a major advantage of group supervision over individual supervision.

The third purpose of group supervision is to facilitate learning. By placing individual client situations “under the microscope,” workers have an opportunity to learn things that would apply to similar situations. In fact, an important task of the supervisor is to help the team generalize from idiosyncratic client situations to other client situations. Group supervision provides information on community resource alternatives that could be useful for other clients.

What Is Group Supervision?

The inverted hierarchy framework avers that the central purpose of supervision is to help frontline staff do their jobs on behalf of clients in an effective, efficient, and satisfying way. Group supervision has been found to be a principle mechanism for achieving these supervisory purposes.

In its most frequent form, group supervision involves a unit or team of strengths model practitioners (usually four) and their supervisor. At times, specialists (e.g., medical personnel, vocational staff, substance abuse experts) participate. Occasionally, family members or key actors (e.g., friend, minister, employer) may be invited. The group meetings vary in length and frequency. The recommended and most frequent scheduling is once a week for two hours.

During this two-hour period, two to four challenging client situations are intensely discussed. The selection of situations is usually delegated to workers with perhaps consultation by the supervisor. The selection is based on client situations in which the worker desires new ideas. Typically, these are clients who have had difficulty achieving or making progress toward their goals. Other situations particularly amenable to group supervision are:

1. Lack of progress in engaging with a person or developing a relationship
2. Situations where workers are having difficulty identifying client strengths or developing personal recovery plans
3. Difficulties with particular key actors in gaining access or accommodation
4. Client goals where identification of community resources has been lacking or where the “perfect niche” has not been found

Crisis situations are rarely appropriate for group supervision; instead, the worker should consult directly with the supervisor or specialist at the time of the crisis.

Each discussion of a client situation begins with the distribution of the client’s strengths assessment and most recent personal recovery plan(s) and a presentation of the particular situation by the worker. This presentation should include:

1. Specific mention of the client’s stated goal (if the client does not have a goal, or if the worker is unaware of one, this should be stated)
2. A statement of the specific type of help the worker would like from the group
3. A complete list of strategies and efforts already tried to help the client achieve the goal (or to engage the client if no goal has been identified by the person)

This is then followed by questions of clarification related to information on the client’s strengths assessment. Team members may need a few minutes to review the strengths assessment to formulate questions. Discipline is needed to keep the questioning phase from straying from the client’s goal or the worker’s specific request for help. It is also important not to jump directly to brainstorming without fully understanding the personal and environmental strengths of the client. This is needed to develop highly individualized strategies.

Following the questioning phase, the supervisor can direct the team to brainstorm strategies for helping the client achieve his or her goal, assisting the worker engage with the client, or align with the client around a goal. It is important that the presenting staff person remain quiet during the brainstorming phase to avoid premature evaluation of ideas or using the dreaded “yes, but” to curtail the flow of ideas. The presenting staff person is encouraged to write down every idea generated by the group (or have someone else designated to do this). Team members will often build off of one another’s ideas, adding specificity or alternatives to approaches. A good brainstorming session will generate between 20 and 40 ideas.

Following brainstorming, the presenting staff person should review the ideas and indicate which ones they find most promising. They should also clearly state the specific next steps they will take (e.g., meet with client on Thursday and show him the list of ideas; call Ms. Harris at

Stonebridge Apartments and ask if they have any two-bedroom units available; begin a personal recovery plan on Carol's goal of starting a pet-sitting business).

While the length of each group supervision presentation will vary, typically each will take approximately 25-40 minutes, so that two to four clients can be discussed in a two-hour group supervision session. Figure 8.3 shows the six-step group supervision process.

Group Supervision: Process Description

Group supervision is the fuel that keeps Strengths Model practice alive and strong on a team level. The structure is designed to keep the team focused on generating creative strategies, rather than digressing into venting or rehashing of problems. For each client discussed, the process consists of six steps; each is distinct and critical to the success of the process.

Step 1: Hand out Strengths Assessments - The presenting staff person makes copies of a Strengths Assessment for every team member and hands them out. The process will NOT work unless each team member has his or her own copy of the Strengths Assessment for the person being presented. If Personal Recovery Plans have been started, these should be distributed as well.

Step 2: What is the client goal(s) and what help do I specifically need from the group? - For example, "Joe has a goal to go back to work. I would like some ideas on jobs that might match his interests," "Mary wants more friends in her life. I would like some ideas on where she might go to meet more people." The client's goal(s) takes center stage in this process. If the client does not have a specific goal, then the question to the group should revolve around how to engage with the person to find a goal that is passionate and meaningful to him or her. Being specific at this point in the process keeps the team focused on what is to be accomplished.

Step 3: What is the current situation and what has been already tried? - The presenting staff person gives a quick one to two-minute description of the current situation and what strategies have already been tried.

Step 4: What does the team need clarified from the Strengths Assessment? - At this point it might be good for the team to take a few minutes to look over the strengths assessment. Then, for five to ten minutes the team asks questions of the presenting staff person to further clarify anything that is written down or areas that have not been fully explored. For example, "It says here that the grandmother is supportive. Tell us more about her role in the person's life." No advice can be given in this section. The intent here is to understand as much about the person as possible so that creative and specific suggestions can be offered in the next step to help the person achieve their goal.

Step 5: Brainstorming - For ten to fifteen minutes the team brainstorms ideas. It is important that these ideas are related to the person's goal(s). The presenting staff person MUST write down every idea without speaking (i.e., no evaluation of the ideas or "yes, buts"). The intent here is to allow the team to get creative and solution-focused. Often some of the best ideas come toward

the end of brainstorming as the ideas begin to build. A good brainstorming will generate between 20 to 40 ideas.

Step 6: What will be my plan based upon the suggestions made? - The presenting staff person reviews the ideas and then states clearly what next steps they will take. For example, “I meet with Jean this Thursday. I will take this list with me and see if she wants to pursue any of these suggestions to help her get more involved in the community,” “I like the idea of taking Jim out to the zoo since he loves animals. While we are there I will use some of the motivational interviewing techniques to gauge where he is at in his goal of sobriety. I will also build on the strengths assessment to see what supports have been helpful to him in the past when he has been sober.

Figure 8.3 Group Supervision Process.

The Methods of Group Supervision

Group supervision is essential to strengths model practice. As such, the time set aside for it needs to be protected.

The session should start on time. Interruptions and distractions should be avoided whether from other staff entering the room, telephone calls, or nonurgent client demands. If interruptions cannot be totally eliminated, the *specific* situations warranting interruptions need to be written and all staff and perhaps clients notified.

The setting for the group supervision should be large enough for the members to arrange themselves comfortably in a circle. Some teams benefit from having a chalk board or flip chart present. Even though the location is most often a room within the agency, some group supervisions have occurred in a church or other community facilities or in the supervisor’s home. One team had their weekly group supervision in a gazebo located in a cemetery across from the mental health center. The supervisor said that it was quiet, there were no interruptions, it was convenient, and it modeled an outreach mode of service delivery.

The selection of the situations to be presented and the order should be established before the group supervision or within the first few minutes of beginning. The presenting staff person should have copies of the client’s strengths assessment and recent personal recovery plan(s) sufficient for each person in the group. Group supervision is about clients and the work with them. Discussion of policies, new procedures, or other agency topics should be rigorously avoided unless they directly pertain to the client situation under discussion. These topics need to be transmitted and often discussed but this should occur at some other opportunity.

Affirmation and Support

Group supervision is to be an uplifting experience, enjoyable if not fun. Supervisors and team members should laugh. Energy that workers expend on behalf of clients (whether they succeed or not), creative or particularly skillful methods that were employed (whether they succeeded or

not), and specific achievements (including small ones) should be recognized if not celebrated. When group supervision is really working, the exchange of “pats on the back” come from all team members, not just the supervisor.

The ambiance of group supervision should be characterized as positive and optimistic. This does not mean that frustrations are not permitted or acknowledged. But group supervision needs to help a particular worker get beyond that by reminding the person of how far the client has come, by recognizing the efforts made to date, by helping the worker “see the forest through the trees” and regaining a focus on client achievement, and by generating alternative ideas and strategies.

Ideas

There are certain conditions that facilitate creativity and idea generation, and obstacles. One facilitating condition is for everyone to be clear on the desired outcome. This is why the presenting staff person is required to tell the group what the client’s stated goal is and how the group can be helpful. At times, this requires the worker to do some thinking ahead of time. It’s often easier to say, “Joe isn’t following through on his treatment plan goal,” than to specify what Joe says his goal is and ask, “How can I better support Joe in achieving this goal?” or “How can I engage with Joe in a way that ensures I am aligned with him on a goal that is important and meaningful?”

At times, the presenting staff person’s original statement of needed help may need to be revised in order to allow the group to enter into creative brainstorming. For example, in one group supervision, the presenting staff person asked the group for help with “getting Beth to take her medication.” The supervisor immediately recognized that this would lead the group down a narrow path of generating solutions and quite possibly coercive strategies. The supervisor asked the worker why she thought it was important that Beth took her medications. The worker stated that when Beth stops taking her medications, she tends to isolate in her apartment and stops doing things she enjoys (i.e., playing cards with friends, going to church, going to the movies). After some discussion, the statement of help was reworded as “I would like the group to help me think of strategies to help Beth continue to do things in the community that keep her well.” This could include strategies to help Beth process her decision-making around medications, but it also opens the possibilities for additional options for Beth to meet her desired goals.

Another facilitating condition is for members to have the necessary information. Over the last 30 years, we have found three pieces of information to be critical. First, a clear statement of the client’s goal and/or any challenges to helping the client identify or make progress toward a specific goal. What a client wants in a particular situation is often forgotten and is critical to generating ideas and selecting ones to try. For example, a client who is viewed as being disruptive at their apartment complex might want to continue living there but needs help resolving a specific conflict or may prefer to live somewhere else. Second, information on the client’s personal and environmental strengths, efforts, and achievements reflected in the strengths assessment and personal recovery plans. Third, all the strategies already tried by the worker with some level of detail. This last set of information is important to reduce or eliminate some of the “yeah-but I already tried that.” “Yeah-buts” waste time and place a pall over

brainstorming. Other information, specific to the situation being examined, can be gathered during the questioning phase.

One particularly productive source of questions is the strengths model behaviors included at the end of chapters 4 through 7 or the strengths model fidelity scale presented later in this chapter. Often even the most skilled strengths model practitioner has not followed all the methods specified in the model (e.g., goals are not broken down enough; strategies of interpersonal influence have not been used or have been done inadequately; goals and steps are established that do not employ client strengths). Reviewing the fidelity items may prompt a series of questions that may later produce promising ideas.

Once the desired state has been precisely described and relevant information shared, only then does idea generation commence. The two stages of information gathering and idea generation should be kept separate when possible, otherwise time will be wasted prematurely generating ideas just to have them discounted because all the information was not taken into account.

The brainstorming phase of client situation discussions should be characterized by the free flow of ideas. Evaluation of the ideas should be left to the next phase. The aim is to generate as many different ideas by as many people as possible, not to evaluate or select the best. Often the most unconventional idea, if allowed to be shared, can provoke a similar but perhaps more feasible idea. Some teams even have an award as in the following example:

A case manager was having difficulty helping a person keep an apartment because she always said her apartment was covered in roaches. Even after multiple visits by an exterminator and several moves to apartments that seemed to be “roach-free,” the person would continue to complain of seeing roaches everywhere and would leave her apartment. The worker brought this situation to group supervision looking for ideas, since she had no idea of where to go next and was frustrated. After several minutes of brainstorming, one person on the team offered a very nontraditional idea. She stated that she heard that geckos kept roaches away. The worker took this idea to the person she was working with who stated she wanted to try this in her next apartment. In fact, she wanted to get two geckos. We’re still not sure if there is any truth to geckos keeping roaches away, but in this woman’s mind it worked and she never complained of roaches again. We started giving out “The Gecko Award” (a rubber gecko mounted on a piece of wood) to any team member who came up with a “wild and extremely non-traditional” idea that actually ended up working.

The worker is responsible for recording all the ideas generated. The use of a flip chart is often helpful because it allows everyone to keep track of ideas already generated. Brainstorming continues until the group has exhausted its ideas and the worker has at least three promising or “reasonable” ideas to try. The evaluation and selection of ideas are the worker’s and clients’ responsibility, although the group surely can comment and suggest. Options that require the least change by the client and resource, *if they are attractive to the client*, should be given extra consideration because they often have the most probability of both short- and long-term success (see the section on the perfect niche).

The discussion of a particular client situation concludes by the worker identifying the “best” ideas and specifying the first (next) discrete step they will take.

Learning

The group supervision format, with its difficult client-situation focus and group involvement, enhances professional learning beyond that allowed by the individual form of supervision. Learning can be further enhanced by the supervisor (or others) helping the group to generalize from the discussion of specific clients. The supervisor should point out similarities with other client situations or strategies used successfully by other staff.

Learning also occurs in terms of community resources. Except in the smallest of communities, will any worker be fully apprised of all the resources available? Often, a resource is identified in group supervision that is eventually rejected for that particular client situation but gets used for another client.

The Role of the Group Supervision Facilitator

The person who facilitates group supervision must be focused and able to stay on task. For many teams, the supervisor has the role of facilitating group supervision, but some teams decide to rotate responsibilities for facilitating group supervision discussions. It takes some discipline to facilitate quality group supervision, because for most people the group supervision process presented here is a departure from traditional formats. One supervisor stated that a facilitator has to be “a little obnoxious” to keep the various parts of the group supervision process separated and maximized to their fullest potential. While overseeing implementation of a high fidelity strengths model team in Kansas, it took almost two months of weekly group supervision, with copies of the process (see Figure 8.3) in front of each person before it finally became part of their regular routine. Without a facilitator helping maintain the discipline required, it will be easy for the team to revert to old ways of doing things.

The Power of Group Supervision

Group supervision is clients, clients, clients. Nothing else should be allowed to intrude. Rather than “talk about” cases, the team works together generating specific alternatives to be implemented. The overall effect is one of empowerment, not continued frustration. The alternatives may not work, but the team will learn from it and other alternatives will be produced.

The advantages of group supervision include the following twelve benefits:

1. More ideas regarding creative alternatives in working with challenging circumstances will be generated.
2. Ethnic and cultural diversity present in the group may help in understanding consumer behavior from a cultural perspective.
3. Support and affirmation is provided by colleagues who understand how challenging, frustrating, and disappointing the work can be.

4. Having others with whom you can share successful helping efforts and consumer success stories will add value.
5. This method of supervision can help with the “can’t see the forest for the trees” phenomenon. One may get a different perspective from a colleague who is not as intimately involved with the consumer.
6. When circumstances suggest difficult treatment decisions (e.g., petitioning for involuntary commitment), workers may feel a sense of sharing and consensus; in effect, the decision becomes a team decision rather than an individual one.
7. The method may be more efficient in terms of time allotted to supervision and communicating information and ideas to each team member.
8. The entire team becomes familiar with clients, and on-call crisis coverage may be shared and individualized response delivered.
9. Workers may gain support in the face of opposition from other providers or family regarding treatment decisions.
10. Team may enjoy sessions and have fun while helping each other.
11. There may be generalized learning — ideas or resources discussed for one consumer may have relevance for others.
12. Workers may feel a sense of respite — a time away from the telephone calls, consumer requests, other demands on their time.