



Supervision is based on a relationship of trust between the clinical supervisor and the student. Trust is earned and forms the basis of all human relationships (De Villers, 2007; Oboulo.com, 2009).

A trusting relationship involves a rapport between two people who feel that they can rely on each other. It also involves believing that the other person will support us and will not take advantage of our weaknesses (Hart & Johnson, cited in Ferron, 2004).

The relationship that is built between two parties is complex and its quality depends on several factors, including: the attributes of the supervisor, the values of the supervisor and the student, the student's motivation and skills, communication, culture and power games.

All of these factors need to be considered in the context of supervision to ensure that the supervisor student relationship promotes learning (Lewicki & Bucker, cited in Féron, 2004).



The qualities of a good clinical supervisor

A clinical supervisor should reflect on their own personal attributes and their impact on the relationship of trust with the student. Every supervisor obviously has qualities that are uniquely his own, but students seek out some qualities more than others.

Studies reveal that the main characteristics that students are looking for in their supervisors include, in order of importance:

- ◆ Openness to discussion
- ◆ Availability
- ◆ Ability to offer support
- ◆ Understanding
- ◆ Ability to provide meaningful feedback
- ◆ Expertise
- ◆ Flexibility
- ◆ Empathy
- ◆ An ethical practice

(Knights, cited in Baird, 2002; Martino, cited in Haynes et al., 2003).

Haynes et al. (2003) also reported the ten “faults” that, in the opinion of students, have a negative impact on the quality of clinical supervision. In order of importance, they are:

- ◆ Lack of interest
- ◆ Lack of availability
- ◆ Rigid approach
- ◆ Lack of knowledge and experience
- ◆ Lack of reliability
- ◆ Irregular feedback
- ◆ Overly critical approach
- ◆ Lack of empathy
- ◆ Lack of organization (no structure)
- ◆ Lack of professional ethics

Power games

Crèvecoeur (2000, p. 19) stated that power games seem to be everywhere in our lives and that is why it is so difficult to avoid them.

A power game is behaviour by which you make someone do something you want them to do (Crèvecoeur, 2000). In other words, it is psychological pressure applied by one person on another but unconsciously. The pressure translates into a feeling of uneasiness by the person who “is submitted to” the pressure. In this case, the supervisor no longer feels free to give the student instructions or to express dissatisfaction to the student.

Here are a few ways this pressure can be applied:

- ◆ Flattery: used so that the person is in a good mood and agrees to do or to think what we want. e.g.: “You really are the best supervisor!”
- ◆ Pity: increases the pressure associated with the request by ramping up the consequences. We want the person to feel guilty if he refuses to help us. e.g.: “I am beginning to worry that I will not get finished in time!”
- ◆ Self deprecation: we want the person to take pity on us and help us. e.g.: “I am so stupid!”
- ◆ Playing the victim: we want the other person to get involved in our problem; we force them to help us. e.g.: “I am going to fail if you do not help me. . .”
- ◆ Emotional blackmail: we want the other person to feel responsible and to intervene on our behalf. e.g.: “The poor patient will not get good care if I am the one giving it.”
- ◆ Involving the other person in our problem: in this case, we force the other person to find a solution to our problem. e.g.: “What could we do?”

Important clarification

Power games cannot be played unless there are two parties involved.

Repetition (or exaggeration) of the behaviour is a reliable indication that a power game is being played.

Why are power games played in the context of supervision?

Why would a supervisor or a student need to play power games, consciously or unconsciously?

The supervisor and the student may resort to a power game because they:

- ◆ Need approval: The supervisor lacks self-confidence and is seeking the student's approval. The student needs reassurance, to hear that he is competent.
- ◆ Have a strong need to be liked: The supervisor does not want to give negative feedback to the student for fear that the student will no longer like him. The supervisor may be tempted to set aside his authority in order to act as a friend or colleague. The student wants to be told he is appreciated. He attempts to redefine the purpose of the supervision by changing the supervision relationship. He tries, consciously or not, to make the relationship into a friendship or to "steer" the relationship.
- ◆ Feel threatened: The supervisor may feel threatened by a student who is highly skilled. The supervisor may also feel that the student is pushing him to change his "old" ways of doing things. The student does not enjoy being in a subordinate position. He feels that his independence is threatened. He therefore tries to show his "superiority" by referring to recent theories, making himself feel like he is controlling the situation.

The supervisor may also be tempted to play a power game if he:

- ◆ Does not like using his authority: The supervisor is not used to assuming an authority figure role and may not be comfortable in that role.

And the student may also play power games to:

- ◆ Cut his losses to a minimum: By shifting the attention, the supervisor becomes less demanding. The student tries to control the situation in order to be successful in his clinical placement by:
 - asking the supervisor all the questions
 - acknowledging all his mistakes
 - always asking “What would you do in my place”
 - demonstrating resentful obedience, being argumentative, reporting only insignificant things

How to stop power games?

- ◆ The first step is to search your own conscience: analyse your own behaviour as a supervisor. Then, take the time to carefully observe and analyse the student’s conduct. Is it really a power game?
- ◆ Try to understand why as a supervisor you would get involved in the game (e.g. lack of self confidence? fear of being judged? fear of disappointing someone?). Ask yourself why the student is acting as he is. Try to identify the underlying motivation for his behaviour.
- ◆ Do not let yourself be manipulated: The most important thing is to stop contributing to the game. The power game will only stop if the supervisor “refuses to play”.

The following sites offer other useful information about the qualities of a supervisor, motivation and skills, the principles of learning, communication, cultural diversity, and power games: www.mcgill.ca/hssaccess/two/supervision, www.practiceeducation.ca and www.preceptor.ca.