



# CYBER SUPERVISION

ANNE STOKES

During the last few months I have been mulling over issues around online supervision of and in organisations. What are the differences from supervising a f2f practitioner? It is a multi-faceted role in many ways. Supervisors can add value to an organisation as they are often in a unique position 'on its edge', and yet have insight into what is going well and less well systemically. They often have information about how a particular part of the organisation is functioning and the impact of changes on employees' morale and stress levels. However, offering useful insight and feedback without breaking confidentiality is a delicate balance. This is so when a supervisor is employed in a f2f context, and I would maintain that working online

brings other practical issues as well.

Often supervisors begin to work in or with organisations by happenstance. Maybe they know someone in the organisation, or may be a supervisee has moved in to counselling within a business. So what are the types of supervision which you may be providing? You could be:

- An external online supervisor of a counsellor who provides online counselling as an employee of an organisation, with you being paid for by the counsellor or directly by the business.
- An external online supervisor of a counsellor who provides online

counselling for employees as an independent practitioner

- A supervisor directly employed by the organisation to provide online supervision for one or more of its online counsellors
- A supervisor in any of the versions above who is providing online supervision for one or more counsellors in an organisation which offers f2f counselling in a number of its businesses globally

Are you still with me? Or are you fazed already by all these possibilities - and I am sure there are more!

I would suggest that as an online practitioner, there needs

# Dilemmas in Online Workplace Supervision

to be even more awareness of the four -cornered contract (client, counsellor, supervisor and organisation) than f2f. What are your responsibilities or accountabilities towards the organisation? You may be thinking that you are an independent online supervisor, paid by the supervisee, so the client and the organisation don't know you even exist in any practical sense. While to me that is a fair enough argument with regard to clients, I don't think it holds water in terms of the organisation.

If you believe that the online counsellor is working unethically or to a low standard, what is your response? You obviously discuss it with your supervisee, but just suppose that they disagree or choose to ignore

you. What then? You could simply walk away from the supervision contract. Does that let you off the hook? I don't think so, as the employees of that organisation are potentially still being short changed at the very least. The organisation is paying this counsellor to provide a service, and you may be the only person in a position to whistle blow. Not something we like doing in our empathic profession!

Conversely, the issues that the supervisee is bringing to you are about the systems within the organisation and you both

agree that these are causing immense stress to a number of employees. How do you support the counsellor to take





# CYBER<sup>continued</sup>SUPERVISION

these back appropriately to HR or a manager? What happens if they are not heard or are ignored? Is there a role for you to step in and work directly with the organisation?

I don't think there are specific answers to the questions I am raising. It will vary according to the situation and the contract. What I would like to highlight is the fact that in online supervision, you may find it more difficult to decide what the best route really might be. You cannot physically walk in to the business and discuss the matter with anyone. You will have to take action by email or possibly through a conference meeting online.

As an independent online supervisor, do you, should you, have a contract with anyone in the organisation, regardless of who is paying you, so at least you do have a contact person and some sort of agreement for such eventualities? If you are employed directly by the organisation, you may be

in a slightly easier position. However, it is still likely that you have never met your contact, either f2f or online until an issue arises.

When I began to put together ideas for this column, I thought I could cover everything with ease in the allotted space. I can't, so what I am going to do is to set out a dilemma for the online supervisor below, and invite you to respond to my email address given below. In the January edition, I will pull together your thoughts and say a little more. Please do respond!

## DILEMMA

Your online supervisee, Jo, works from home, but is employed to provide online counselling and support for employees of a large organisation. A supervision issue has emerged concerning pressure on counsellors providing this service to be available to monitor and

support employees in the chat room at the same time as being available for drop in sessions with online clients. The organisation's stance is that often there are no drop-in clients, so it makes sense for the counsellor on duty to be also responsible for the chat room at this time. You both agree that there are both practical and ethical issues involved here. What suggestions do you have for the supervisor and the supervisee to take this forward? You are an external supervisor, paid for by Jo. Is there anything that with hindsight might have been done in the past to help now?

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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