



CYBER SUPERVISION

ANNE STOKES

THE 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?

In the last edition this column was concerned with online workplace supervision, and at the end I posed a dilemma and asked for your thoughts. I have amalgamated the responses under several headings.

WHAT ARE THE ISSUES?

A key response was that Jo and the supervisor needed to go back to basics and consider the Ethical Principles in the BACP's Framework. Even if the organisation was not a member, it was assumed that Jo and her* supervisor were. There were no responses from online practitioners working to other Frameworks, but the same guideline would apply here – what would your

Responses to a Dilemma in Online Workplace Supervision

professional organisation's stance be?

The principle which came up most was Non-maleficence – the basic commitment to avoiding harm to the client. If a counsellor was expected to work with a drop-in client at the same time as monitoring the chat room, there was a likelihood that neither setting had the counsellor's full attention, and so there was a danger of inadvertently failing the online employees. This was reinforced by the consideration of Justice, where several people stressed that this practice did not constitute fair treatment or the provision of an adequate service.

So there was no disagreement that something had to be done! But what and how?

CONTRACTS

First of all, what is Jo's contract with the organisation? Is she fully employed by them, or is it part of her independent practice? A number of responses examined the difference that this might make in determining Jo's options. If this is her sole employment, she is likely to have closer ties with management and other counsellors in the organisation. There would hopefully be a platform for raising issues informally, and this was seen to be the best starting place.

There were different responses if Jo was in independent practice. It was felt that she might have more difficulty in raising the matter - as she worked from home, she may have little contact with

others in the organisation. On the other hand, one person thought that this actually gave her a stronger position from which to challenge the practice, having less to lose - presumably having other clients / contracts - so as a last resort, she could walk away.

Second, what is the supervisor's contract with the organisation? Indeed, is there one? A couple of people pointed out that in their experience working online, the organisations for which their supervisees worked, had no formal contract with them as supervisors. Indeed, they did not know if the organisations knew who they were. Again, one person said that they felt this was a difference between their practice f2f and online. In f2f practice they would always

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make sure they were known to the organisation, which was usually a local one, whereas online, the workplace felt more remote and this hadn't happened.

WHAT HAS JO DONE SO FAR?

All respondents said that this needed to be clarified before they could go much further as supervisors. What does 'pressure is being put on counsellors' actually mean? Is Jo someone who wants to please and therefore finds it difficult to express concerns until it is almost too late? Or is this genuinely management being heavy handed?

It was hoped that Jo had brought this issue to supervision more than once, and wasn't just bringing it when a crisis had been reached. One person said

that he noticed a difference between synchronous and asynchronous online supervision in terms of what he knew about how his supervisees' workplaces operated in general terms – management styles, awareness of counselling issues in general etc. Where the supervision was synchronous, he thought he had a better global sense of the organisation.

The important questions for Jo were around whether she had already raised the matter with her manager informally (or formally) and if so, what the response had been. It might also be useful to sound out other counsellors working for that organisation, if there are any. Putting her concerns in writing was seen as important, and that this is an advantage of working online, as this is likely to be the medium through

which Jo had contact with her manager. It was stressed that an email needed to be written in non-emotive language, and simply state the facts as Jo saw them, including reference to ethics and professional bodies. Running an email by the supervisor was suggested as a support for Jo.

GOING FORWARD

If Jo has already tried raising the matter and got nowhere, what should she do next? She might take the matter to a higher management level. If she could think of ways in which the situation could be managed so that there was a win-win, rather than an impasse, that could be beneficial. One suggestion was to acknowledge that there are rarely drop-ins, but that perhaps a second counsellor could be 'on-call' and paid a small retainer to be at home with their computer on, ready to pick up a drop-in client if one did appear. Another was to limit the times when the drop-in service was available and have a second counsellor on duty then. It was wondered if a



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trainee online counsellor might be responsible for the chat room (thereby not incurring cost for the workplace!), while the online counsellor simply took the drop-ins, and was also available at beginning and end of sessions to support the trainee.

There were people for and against the supervisor taking a pro-active role and contacting the organisation herself to express her concern. This might feel supportive to her supervisee and add weight to the seriousness of the practice; however it might also undermine the supervisee, and make the organisational position more entrenched. It probably comes down to what the relationship is between both the supervisor and supervisee, and also between the supervisor and the organisation.

It was recognised that in the final instance, if the matter was not resolved, both supervisor and supervisee could end their relationship with the organisation, but this was seen as a last resort, and not very productive.

THAT WONDERFUL THING, HINDSIGHT!

So what could have been different? The importance of contracts was again underlined. Have the terms of Jo's work with the employees been spelled out clearly, and was this a departure from those terms? It would be helpful to have outlined the steps to be taken in case of a dilemma. Again a plus point of working online is that so much takes place through the written word, therefore these things can be agreed at the contracting stage, to refer back to later. In most cases, it was suggested that the supervisor should, as a minimum, be known by name and email address to the organisation, and better still, to have an agreement in place that outlines the relationship and contact points between her and the organisation.

A final point was made that as in f2f supervision, the supervisor needs to have as clear an overall sense of the

organisation as possible. That is partly down to her to research, and partly down to the dialogue between supervisor and supervisee about the organisation, not solely about individual employee clients.

I haven't been able to include all the points made in response to the dilemma, and I am very grateful to those who contacted me. It is obvious that there are no absolutes in terms of rights and wrongs in seeking ways forward, but that it makes the situation slightly less overwhelming if both supervisor and supervisee have thought about some of the implications of working as an online workplace counsellor at the start of the contract.

** Interestingly, everyone assumed that both Jo and the supervisor were female, though Jo could have been Joseph, Jonathan, or Jonah, just as easily as Joanne or Josephine! I wonder if the responses would have been different in any way if either party had been male.*