Transitioning into a Supervisory Position

- The scope of responsibility and work tasks for new supervisors may feel overwhelming.
- Adding to this is the fact that new supervisors are still in a process of transitioning into their new role.
- It is important for new supervisors to take time to consider issues involved in their transition, both for themselves and for those they supervise.

Common Transition Issues

**Issue #1: The new supervisor has someone different supervising or managing him/her.**

Strategies to facilitate the development of the new relationship:

- Establish a relationship of trust and credibility with the new supervisor.
- Work to gain the new supervisor’s confidence by being responsible in day-to-day duties, meeting deadlines, and being willing to step in to help when needed.
- Ask for help in making the mental shift in perspective that comes with being a new supervisor.
- Ask for an opportunity to discuss the supervisor’s expectations regarding what should be reported, making suggestions, etc.
- Demonstrate initiative by doing what needs to be done without waiting to be asked or told.
- Develop an insight and understanding of one another’s work and communication styles that are based on cultural differences.
- Request regular meetings with the immediate supervisor or manager. Keep a running list of questions or concerns that can be raised in these meetings. Do not, however, monopolize the supervisor’s time.
Notes:

**Issue #2:** Unit staff are experiencing anxiety and uncertainty about what the new supervisor will do, what changes will be made, etc.

**Strategies to reduce staff’s anxieties and uncertainties:**

- Work to build relationships, trust, and credibility with everyone in the unit.

- Acknowledge and validate the staff members’ feelings about having a new supervisor of the unit. Engage new staff, by having a positive approach, being an active listener, demonstrating genuine concern, etc.

- Consciously create an appropriate supervisor-worker relationship with each staff member. Be aware that some staff may be initially resistant based on their relationship with the previous supervisor, how the change occurred, how staff perceive the change in supervision will effect them personally, etc. Encourage open communication.

- To build trust and credibility, follow through on each and every commitment or promise made!

- Bridge the gap of “us” and “them” by focusing on the unit’s mission and expectations for unit work. Emphasize the common goals of everyone in the unit.

- Do not single out one caseworker as the source of information within the unit. Involve all staff on a personal level during the transition period.

- Do not disclose confidential information about the former supervisor. Model confidentiality and professionalism.

- Be cautious to exercise no more authority than needed in establishing the new role.

- Develop a relationship with administrative support staff assigned to the unit. Understand the benefits of having efficient, committed support staff, and show appreciation often.
• Demonstrate sensitivity when developing relationships with people having different cultural backgrounds.

• Invite staff to share constructive feedback: ways to improve the unit’s processes, procedures, etc. Focus questions to staff on improvements that can be made – not on problems.

• Avoid gossiping about anyone at any time from this point forward. What supervisors say will be communicated to others.

Notes:

Issue #3: Unit staff must continue with their regular assigned work even though the new supervisor may not know the background and progress of specific cases or work assignments.

Strategies:

• Acknowledge the difficulty for staff when a new supervisor is not yet familiar with specific work assignments. Ask staff to be patient in initial consultation and guidance on cases or work assignments.

• Become knowledgeable about the unit workload as soon as possible. Ask staff for issues needing immediate attention, and address those first.

• Use unit meetings as primary vehicles to gain understanding of current unit issues.

• Get in the trenches with the staff – observe, shadow, and partner with staff to gain first-hand knowledge about the work of the unit. Staff will appreciate a supervisor’s willingness to “get their hands dirty,” and they are far more likely to believe that their supervisor understands their jobs and the accompanying difficulties.

Notes:
**Issue #4:** Staff worry that the new supervisor will make quick, sweeping changes in unit processes and procedures that negatively affect their work, or that they will not like.

**Strategies:**

- Reassure staff that no sweeping changes will be made immediately, and no changes will be made at all without thorough consideration of the situation, facts, etc.

- Engage staff in completing an assessment of unit processes, strengths, and needs. Be transparent – convey a willingness to learn by actively listening.

- Involve unit staff as much as possible in planning and implementing changes.

**Notes:**

---

**Issue #5:** Other people in the unit also applied for the supervisory position.

**Strategy:**

- When there is opportunity to talk with staff, be open and honest about the circumstances around the promotion. Allow them to share their feelings. Enlist their assistance in making the transition smooth for unit staff. Make sure staff members who were not chosen for the promotion know that their work and expertise are valued.

**Notes:**

---

**Issue #6:** Unit staff are more experienced than the new supervisor. They are resistant to the new supervisor’s interpretation of the work. Also, the generational difference is a factor: the new supervisor is significantly younger than the staff in the unit, and staff are resistant about accepting the new supervisor’s authority.
Strategies:

- Demonstrate knowledge of current practice, but also be willing to hear ideas from staff.
- Be willing to admit what is known and not known about the work.
- Acknowledge personal learning needs and share the plan for developing competence in the work area. Determine, and share with staff, how the staff’s need for consultation and decision making will be met while their supervisor is learning.
- “Shadow” the staff to become familiar with their jobs.
- Acknowledge expertise of unit staff; let them be of help, but do not expect staff to train their supervisor in all aspects of the work – obtain this elsewhere.
- Accelerate personal learning

**Issue #7: Maintaining the same relationship with former peers in the unit is uncomfortable and leads to role conflict. Supervisees will want someone to lead, not be “one of them.”**

Strategies:

- Be aware of the tendency of new supervisors to over identify with previous peers and excessively nurture, but not guide and direct staff.
- Be open in conversations with friends that have become supervisees. Discuss the changing roles and possible areas of tension that could develop.
- Treat all staff in the unit fairly. If new supervisors were friends with some of the staff previously, other staff will watch to see whether they can expect fairness from the new leader. Supervisors cannot have “favorites.” The perception of inequality and unfairness will harm unit morale, and staff may question the supervisor’s decisions.
- Expect to be excluded from staff lunches and other outings. Former friends may stop talking when the new supervisor walks into a work area, or they may tease with comments like, “You’re management now.” Once someone becomes a supervisor, staff understand the accompanying power he/she has to discipline and reward.
• Be prepared for some friendships to cool. Supervising a friend can strain a friendship. Friendships may change.

Notes:

**Issue #8:** There is caution or even resentment about the new supervisor who was not promoted from within the unit (or agency). The new supervisor knows very little about the unit he/she is joining, and does not know the staff currently in the unit. Staff feel the new supervisor does not understand the unit (or agency) and how it works.

**Issue #9:** Staff acceptance of new leadership varies, depending on their perception of the previous supervisor of the unit. The new supervisor needs to “win over” staff who had loyalties to the previous supervisor. Conversely, the new supervisor needs to address negativity and distrust because some of the staff’s recent experience with supervision was not positive.

**Strategies for issues 8 and 9:**

• Be aware that unit staff may be very concerned about the change of leadership. They may be cautious about accepting an outsider as supervisor. Be judicious in referring to how things were done in a previous workplace, especially before relationships have been established with unit staff and their acceptance has been gained.

• Acknowledge areas where additional learning are required; share personal development plan with unit staff.

• Supervisors should consider obtaining a historical perspective from unit staff first, and then their own manager. If possible to talk with the previous supervisor, that would also be recommended. (Be cautious about the information from the previous supervisor. It may be affected by why or how the change was made. Consider the information, but be open to other perspectives.)

Notes: