

Creating a Culture of Continuous Learning

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If it was possible for you to have a profound impact on the professional development of your staff, to motivate them to achieve excellence, and to expand the leadership skills for your entire unit, would you be interested in finding out more? If so, the following article is for you.

Supervisors are powerful learning agents in the workplace. Supervisors' actions and attitudes about learning greatly impact how their staff will respond to learning needs and opportunities.

Every supervisor has the opportunity to transform their unit into a culture of continuous learning: where supervisors encourage their staff and help them acquire and apply new knowledge and insights. In such a culture, people are learning how to learn together, and everyone is committed to continuously improve themselves (Potter and Brittain, 2009).

You're probably thinking *"This sounds like a great idea, but where do I start?"*

It starts with YOU. First and foremost, supervisors must be continuous learners themselves, as well as continuous teachers. Such supervisors find no satisfaction in mediocrity and no tolerance for accomplishing the bare minimum - from either their staff or themselves. They believe in, and trust their staff to possess the capacity to achieve the agency's mission and create the results that are truly desired.



Supervisors also create a culture of continuous learning by:

- Keeping their staff engaged by discovering and developing their talents and abilities
- Promoting staff development
- Hearing, welcoming and appreciating staff ideas and suggestions
- Nurturing new and expansive patterns of thinking
- Encouraging creativity and "risk" taking
- Making it safe for staff to make mistakes and learn from them
- Creating a climate of trust and openness
- Supporting staffs' attempts to develop competence, effectiveness, independence, and self-directedness in their work
- Focusing on continuous quality improvement
- Facilitating learning, professional growth and development

In a culture of continuous learning, staff succeed individually and collaboratively. They share in the learning, leadership, and change process. They see themselves as part of a system and understand that leadership is the responsibility of each person in the system.

To transform a unit into a culture of learning, supervisor planning is fundamental. This includes an assessment of the unit's current state, its readiness for change, and the implications of implementing change. Once that is done, Michael Marquardt (2002) suggests that supervisors take the following steps to create culture of continuous learning:

1. Commit to becoming a learning culture.

Make the decision that *today* is going to be the day you will prioritize staff development. This includes how you're going to more effectively balance your administrative tasks with your educational and supportive supervision. Use this [self-assessment tool](#) to determine how "balanced" you are.

2. Connect learning with unit operations.

Ensure all of the learning opportunities you and your staff participate in are connected to the work of your unit. Make time in every unit and individual meeting to talk about professional development. Look for opportunities to learn from mistakes. Use the ITNA and IDP as a tool to create a plan for your staff's individual professional development.

3. Form a powerful coalition for change by engaging unit staff in the effort.

Communicate the vision of a learning culture. Meet with your staff about what a culture of continuous learning looks like. Discuss what it may mean for the unit and individual staff, and what changes in attitude, values, and work processes may need to take place. Demonstrate enthusiasm and ask for their support in creating a learning culture.

4. Demonstrate and model a commitment to learning.

Let staff know that learning is important to you. Let them see that you've completed an ITNA and that you have your own learning plan. ATTEND TRAINING!! You cannot put off your own professional development. You have an ethical obligation to stay current with the field. Share what you learn in training and what you'd like to do to transfer your learning into practice.

5. Transform the culture of the unit to one of continuous learning and improvement.

Provide many opportunities for learning and sharing. Model what you want your staff to do. Demonstrate that it's okay, and natural to make some mistakes. These mistakes provide an additional opportunity to learn from mistakes. ([Read an article on how to take advantage of "teachable moments".](#)) Make it a habit for everyone to celebrate individual and unit accomplishments. Figure out what was done to ensure success. Also look at mistakes and/or times when things did not go as desired. Can anyone think of a way to do something different to ensure future success?

6. Establish strategies for learning.

Gather everyone in your unit together and explore ways to help each other continuously learn and develop. Write up the ideas and give each person a copy as a reminder of the unit's commitment.

7. Create short-term wins; celebrate successes.

Take "baby steps" in your unit's efforts to create this new learning culture. Every time the opportunity presents itself, have celebrations with each other. In doing so, you'll reinforce the good things that are happening and develop your unit as a team that supports each other in their professional growth. Be sure to point out when their efforts made a difference in the lives of the children and families they serve.

8. Adapt, improve, and continue learning.

Don't be content with the status quo or reduce the unit's effort to continued learning. Thinking the unit is too busy to sustain professional growth is just the beginning of going backwards. No one can afford to be too busy to not be the best caseworker or supervisor possible.

Finally, supervisors can energize and increase motivation and commitment of staff by conducting effective and interesting unit meetings that are considered worthwhile by staff. The following are strategies for implementing such a meeting:

- Include provocative or controversial practice topics for discussion.
- Share important developments affecting management of the agency. Keep staff informed about larger, statewide issues that affect the agency. Increase the capacity of the unit to function in the “big picture.”
- Encourage creative approaches to case situations or work processes.
- Share journal articles about evidence-based practices in child welfare.
- Check with unit staff periodically for feedback to ensure that meetings are considered worthwhile, foster growth in their work, and are a good use of staff time.

References

- Marquardt, M. J. (2002) Building the learning organization: Mastering the five elements for corporate learning. Palo Alto: Davies-Black Press.
- Potter, C.C., Brittain, C.R. (2009). Child welfare supervision: A practical guide for supervisors, managers, and administrators. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.