



# ‘Recognising the Blind Spot’: An Edge for Growth and Transformation Through Strengths Based Supervision.

**Gerard Moloney** (Centacare NQ) and **Abraham Francis**<sup>1</sup>, James Cook University

The “blind spot” may be regarded as a paradox for strengths. However, in this article the “blind spot” specifically refers not to typical deficits of supervisees, but to supervisees’ unawareness of their strengths that, given the right circumstances, can be recognised, facilitated and developed. When this awareness occurs there is transformation within the supervisee as their strengths grow and develop. So rather than conceptualising “recognising of blind spots” as a *disabling or deficit concept*, this article sees it is an *enabling strategy* that can assist in identifying strengths and skills, and in the supervision of practitioners and their interventions with clients.



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### **The context**

This paper is based on a discussion between a practitioner and an academic (former practitioner) who met in June, 2013. While discussing the various activities that we were involved in we happened to focus our major attention on the aspect of supervision. Gerard Moloney is a trained professional supervisor and Abraham Francis is a senior lecturer in social work who has been involved with strengths based social work practice. Hence, we discussed the relevance of understanding the process of supervision, especially in clinical settings and to examine the underlying philosophy together with an aim to publish. In this process we also agreed to examine the challenges a social worker faces in the context of delivering services to clients including the interactions of personal and professional values and beliefs and the dilemmas that they create in their lives. These interactions are explored through the use of case studies. These case studies showcase the issues that can be identified in supervision and how a supervisee could be supported to address these matters. In sharing these case studies, together we have explored the concept of strengths based practice. The questions that we asked ourselves were: what made this employee enter in to an in-depth interaction with their supervisor? What motivated them to choose to make such drastic changes to their professional lives? And how did a change of view occur in the midst of these struggles and problems? In order to protect the identity and keep the privacy of the individuals, only the relevant points have been mentioned in the case studies and it is to be understood in the context of the topics under discussion. We believe that theory emanates from the practice context through critical reflection on our combined experience. This paper is born out of such an exploration of the ideas that underpinned our practice.

### **What is supervision?**

If ‘vision’ implies seeing, the word ‘supervision’ can be read as over-seeing, looking over someone’s shoulder to check on them. This sense of supervision as surveillance is not the primary meaning we are using in this chapter. Rather we focus on the use of ‘super’ in the sense



of outstanding or special, helping someone to extend their professional skills and understanding. Here 'supervision' is focused on taking a bigger or higher perspective; looking at a person's work from the highest perspective to see all the elements that are in play for the worker and the client. For the purpose of this paper, we discuss supervision in terms of how it enhances ongoing professional learning and performance, especially in the context of social work practice.

The Australian Association of Social Workers states "supervision is one of the core elements in the development and maintenance of high standards of social work practice" (AASW, 2010, p. 8) and it goes beyond the concept of line management (AASW, 2010, p. 1). Every organisation has some specific way of offering support, mentoring and supervision to its employees. Within Queensland Health social workers have access to a number of different types of supervision like 'practice supervision, peer supervision, informal supervision, operational supervision and mentoring' (Mowat & Denman, 2010, p. 7). However, in this chapter we are only referring to 'practice supervision' which is provided by the employer, or an external service, which primarily focuses on practice issues, skills training and ways to support the employee to perform better in their clinical practice. In practice situations the employee can be a trainee (termed 'trainee supervision' where there is some form of assessment and a creative tension between learning and assessment) or an experienced employee (termed 'consultative supervision' as there is a collegial relationship). Our focus is on the latter.

There are other ways of viewing supervision. Supervision is a cluster of functions - administrative, educational and supportive (Kadushin, 1992) - performed within the context of a positive relationship by an appropriately experienced professional who has been delegated authority to direct, coordinate, enhance and evaluate the on-the-job performance of the supervisee(s). The ultimate objective of supervision is to deliver to clients the best possible service, in accordance with agency policies and procedures. Inextricably tied to this objective is a second objective of professional development and growth of the supervisee (Kadushin, 1992). Supervision is a regular, protected time for facilitated, in-depth reflection on practice (Bond & Holland, 1998). Supervision is a working alliance (relationship) between two professionals where supervisees offer an account of their work, reflect on it, receive feedback and receive guidance, if appropriate. The object of this alliance is to enable the supervisee to gain in ethical competency, confidence, and creativity - extending the supervisee's thinking - so as to give the best possible service to clients (Inskipp & Proctor, 1993).

The first author, a practitioner, describes supervision as "a relationship that takes place in a shared, supportive, safe, space in order to facilitate curiosity and openness through reflection and



conversation so that learning can occur, in order to inform and enhance client practice and professional development” (Moloney, 2012). Supervision is important for all social workers irrespective of their years of experience, knowledge or exposure to international realities. In Australia, the practice standards are some guidelines that one could refer to in examining the real strength and need of supervision in social work practice. While each of us is at different points in our professional journey, what matters is the openness to embrace the spirit of supervision which can be challenging and demanding at times. We are hence interested in exploring dimensions or facts that would foster such a meaningful and professional supervision process in social work practice. “Recent graduates have a particularly high need for supervision” (AASW, 2010, p. 7), while “experienced social workers also need and have a right to expect an opportunity to formally use social work colleagues as a ‘sounding board’ for consultation and reflection upon their own practice” (AASW, 2010, p. 7). But it needs to be emphasised here that recognition of such a need is a beginning point in supervision. “Supervision is most effective when it is *valued by both the supervisor and supervisee*, when both parties are motivated and able to give it a high priority, and where there is recognition of the rights and needs of the supervisee as an adult learner.”(AASW, 2010, p. 3)

### **Rationale behind professional supervision**

Professional supervision is increasingly being carried out as an aspect of personal and professional development in organisations. Supervision has been defined as an exchange between practising professionals to enable the development of professional skills within the context of primary care. Burton and Launer (2003) describe supervision as facilitated learning in relation to live practical issues. However, Clark et al. (2006) suggest a wide definition that includes a variety of one-to-one professional encounters including mentoring and coaching. The main focus in professional supervision is how to assist the supervisee to reflect on their practice so that they are able to best support the client. The supervisor is able to work with the supervisee to support them as they identify their blind spots, and then explore together other ways the work could have been done.

Safety is the first element of supervision. If people do not feel safe they will hide their work as well as their reactions to difficult experiences and situations. It is the role of the supervisor to create a safe space so the supervisee can be curious about their work. Carroll (2012) talks about the importance of not using ‘F’ and ‘B’ words, that is, fault and blame. There is a need to put aside judgment and fixed positions in order to explore the supervisee’s experience with curiosity



and an open mind. It is important for both the supervisor and the supervisee to approach supervision sessions with this mindset.

The focus of supervision is on practice and what is happening for the supervisee as they conduct their work. Supervision assists the learning of the supervisee and it is the supervisor's job to facilitate this process. Reflection is the process of mulling over, questioning and reviewing one's work and in supervision this is done in partnership with the supervisor. For reflective practice to develop in supervision the supervisor requires a level of presence. They need to be present with and be attentive to the supervisee. This requires preparation by the supervisor and the ability to put aside their issues to attend to the supervisee. Then within this safe place the supervisee can reflect on their work. Rapport building, developing trust, identifying the strengths of the supervisee, being consistent in approach and presence, being honest in communication, understanding the supervisee's learning style, supporting growth and avoiding collusion are all aspects of this safe space. It is this relationship that allows for experiential learning for the supervisee which is at the heart of supervision practice (Kolb, 1984). It opens up opportunities for transformational learning for both supervisee and the supervisor.

Carroll (2012) suggests that feedback and coaching are the best ways to learn. However, some people don't want to or are unable to see, hear or take on feedback. It is too dangerous. They block it out because they perceive it as threatening, that is, too challenging or confronting for their personal frameworks or their social frameworks do not allow them to learn. Feedback in this context is often associated with pain, shame and humiliation. There is no support personally or socially. The challenge for the supervisor is to make feedback a learning experience, to hold people safe and be honest with them. Hawkins and Shohet (2006) call it 'fearless compassion'. Since learning is as much an emotional experience as a rational one, people are most open to learning when they are disorientated or uncertain. Here is an opportunity for transformative growth. Emotional intelligence enables both supervisor and supervisee to identify links between their experiences and their emotional responses and so begin the transformation process. However if people are threatened or overloaded with fear and anxiety this process cannot occur. In this state they are in survival mode where learning is not possible and they lose access to their competencies. Thus the key to all learning and growth is self-awareness and openness to look at circumstances with a different lens. Reflective practice is the tool which enables us to look at our work with a new lens and assists the development of self-awareness (Carroll, 2012).

**Reflective practice:**



Reflective practice asks us to suspend our judgements and look with curiosity at our work and the context within which it occurs. We look at it from the highest or biggest vantage point. Carroll (2007) uses the questions of the After Action Review developed by the American military. After each operation the soldiers were gathered in small groups to review their work. This reflective practice tool has six questions:

What did I/we set out to do?	Past – as it happened
What happened?	
What went well?	Present – evaluation
What went badly?	
What have I/we learned?	Future - key learning
What will I/we do differently?	

Awareness is the first step in the process of change. We step back and look over our work. We observe ourselves in action; what is happening in the client; and the context in which it is carried out. We inquire into our practice; we become alert to things; we wake up from the familiar patterns of our comfort zone and explore with renewed interest. We look for shifts. We notice things we did not see before. Carroll (2012) uses the example of Leonardo de Vinci who asked his students go and paint a scene. When they came back he would ask them to go and look again; paint what you see. He repeated this over and over teaching his students to be observers, to go back and look again and again. This is the reflective practice of supervision too, where both the supervisor and supervisee engage this process together. Out of this process shifts begin to occur. The supervisee sees things in a different way and now notices shifts in the client or approaches the next session looking for shifts that have occurred for the client. Through this process a strengths-based personal development plan (SPDP) can be made (Engelbrecht, 2010).

### **Seven eyes model of supervision**

Hawkins and Shohet (2006) use the seven eye model of supervision. These eyes are the possible areas for focus in supervision. Using this model helps to identify the areas a supervisor or supervisee are comfortable to explore in supervision as well as the areas that lack comfort where there may be blind spots for one or both parties. Identifying the areas of reflection and discussion provides a framework for regular reviews of supervision sessions. Plans and strategies can then be discussed about how to balance the session focus so that each of the seven eyes receives some attention. It is rare for a topic to be limited to just one eye. Instead most topics cover several eyes and many cover all seven eyes if the time is available to explore all the links and impacts for clients, supervisee and supervisor.



The first eye is the client. What is the client perspective? How do they present? What is happening for them? The second eye focuses on the relationship between the client and the supervisee. What is happening consciously and unconsciously in the relationship between the client and the supervisee? What is the supervisee aware of? What are they blind to? The third eye is the interventions. What were the interventions the supervisee chose to make, when and why? The fourth eye is the supervisee's reactions. What is happening for the supervisee? How are they engaging and responding? And how are they affected by their work both consciously and unconsciously? The fifth eye is the relationship between the supervisee and the supervisor – the supervisory relationship. Here parallel process can be seen. What are the dynamics in the supervisory relationship and what might this suggest about the relationship between the client and supervisee? The sixth eye is the supervisor. The supervisor focuses on their own processes; their reactions, intuitions feelings, thoughts and images. What does their experience and reflective self-awareness tell them about the situation the supervisee is describing? The seventh eye is the systems involved (organisations, families, teams, location). This eye expands the focus away from the client-worker dynamic so that the wider social context in which the client, the supervisee, the supervisor and the organisation operate is explored and examined. What can be learned from these systems and processes? What is the impact of the strengths and limitations of these structural interactions for all parties involved?

### **Strengths based practice defined**

Strengths-based practice is a term that has gained momentum in social work literature and teaching in the past decade. In essence strengths-based practice is defined by the idea that social work is principally about enabling people to function autonomously within society, by collaborating with individuals to identify the resources they have available to them to make the changes they would like to make.

According to the Brisbane Institute of Strength Based Practice

Strengths Based Practices (SBPs) concentrate on the inherent strengths of individuals, families, groups and organisations deploying peoples' personal strengths to aid their recovery and empowerment. SBPs are empowering alternatives to traditional methods with individuals, group or organisational work. SBPs refrain from allowing crippling, labelling and stigmatised language. Descriptions and pathology owned by persons groups and organisations that suggest acceptance of their condition as hopeless or helpless to change are constructively challenged through SBPs. Strengths based strategies build and foster hope from within by focusing and working with precedent successes. SBP





strategies facilitate change by assisting to look at what has worked? What does not work? And what might work presently making it important for facilitators and those desiring change to be integral to this process of change (2011, p. 1)

And

Everyone has strengths. We have experiences, abilities and knowledge that assist us in our lives. If we are lucky, we also have a variety of people around us who act as a support network for us. A strengths based approach allows people to identify and build on their strengths so that they can reach their goals, and retain or regain independence in their daily lives (Pulla & Francis, 2013, in press)

And again

The strengths approach as a philosophy of practice draws one away from an emphasis on procedures, techniques and knowledge as the keys to change. It reminds us that every person, family, group and community holds the key to their own transformation and meaningful change process. The real challenge is and always has been whether we are willing to fully embrace this way of approaching or working with people. If we do, then the change starts with us, not with those we serve (Hammond, 2010, p. 7).

Rapp (1998) postulates that the strengths perspective is not a theory: it is merely a practice perspective in social work and does not consist of a definite process of facilitation (Weick & Saleebey, 1998). Therefore the strengths perspective is simply ‘...a way of thinking about what you do and with whom you do it. It provides a distinctive lens for examining the world of practice’ (Saleebey, 2002, p. 20). Gray (2002) produced specific examples from practice to show that the strengths perspective is more than mere positive thinking. While stressing the importance of strengths based practice at a conference in Perth, Australia, Steven Onkan (2012) stated “when you change the way you look at things, the things that you look at change” and this is particularly true with the supervision process as both the supervisor and supervisee enters in to a dialogue where one is supported and assisted to see a new perspective.

### **What is strengths based supervision?**

Strengths based supervision here refers to a perspective that has “transformational potential” (Engelbrecht, 2010, p. 1). A strengths perspective, defined as a theory of social work practice by authors such as Healy (2005), with a focus on strengths, competencies, capacities, capabilities and resilience instead of on problems and pathology, is a challenge posed to social service providers (Cohen, 1999).





Cohen (1999) regards a strengths perspective on supervision of social workers as particularly relevant as strengths-based supervision, similar to strengths-based practices, is consistent with the mission of social work (Hare, 2004). The recent research by Engelbrecht (2010) reveals that the depiction of these supervision *functions tends to present supervisees as being in deficit despite organisations' social development approach*, which may be regarded as contradicting clinical intervention and correlating supervision practices. This arises from the fact that the functions of supervision as expounded by Kadushin (1976) are intrinsically based on a traditional problem-oriented paradigm (Perlman, 1957) of social work practice. In this connection, Cohen (1999) advised that problem-solving supervision may undermine strengths-based practices considering the parallels that exist between the process of supervision and the process of practice. He specifically postulates that

. . . problem-centred supervision would render strengths-based practice very difficult indeed and could result in the strengths-oriented supervisee developing either a powerful resistance to the supervision or a grand confusion in his or her work with clients (Cohen, 1999, p. 462).

Indeed, this problem-centred framework is '... a kind of cultural discourse' (Saleebey, 2002, p. 273) and needs to be redefined with fundamental principles constituting a strengths perspective on social work supervision. The following synthesis of fundamental principles regarding the scope of supervision, role of the supervisor and theoretical undergirding of supervision may contribute to building a strengths perspective on social work supervision: the scope of supervision should not be crisis-driven as this would suggest a problem orientation; the supervisor needs to assume a facilitation role by adopting a strengths vocabulary; and the theoretical undergirding of supervision should be based on competencies and outcomes (Engelbrecht, 2004). These fundamental principles ought not to be regarded as a denial of the supervisee's learning needs, but should rather be regarded as a conscious choice and effort to focus on talents, skills and competencies as opposed to spending supervision time and energy on deficits. Following are some strength based questions that can be used in the supervision

- What do you think would need to happen?
- Has there been a situation like this before?
- What would you like to happen/what do you want?

### **Supervising reflective practice**



For the supervisor to do this reflective work with a supervisee their own reflective practice and self-awareness needs to be keenly tuned. Self-knowledge is essential. Their awareness of the level of presence they bring to each session is critical. Their presence and attentiveness to the supervisee will impact on how they engage and work together. Clear human boundaries will facilitate interaction while cold rigid boundaries may block learning altogether.

### **Transformational change and supervision**

“As a proactive response to neoliberal global and local market demands a strengths perspective compels managers to employ strengths-based interpretative frameworks for assessments and personal development plans of those they supervise in order to develop a facilitative alternative management paradigm. This reveals true transformational leadership” (Engelbrecht, 2010, p. 10). In a strengths based supervision an environment of encouragement and support is created where one is able to see a new perspective which otherwise may have been hidden. Hence this not only promotes individual satisfaction, contributes more efficiently to the organisation but promotes transformational changes in one’s life.

In the following section, we are going to introduce 3 case studies. These case studies provide us with a bird’s eye view of the process involved in supervision and how each of the supervisees ( as mentioned in the case studies ) have been assisted to respond to their specific needs based on critical reflections, helping them to be present in the moment and supporting them to view the situation in a different way. It is how you look at things (Francis, 2013); it is understanding the lens one is using to see the reality. At the end of these case studies, the authors present some key learnings and discuss the issues that emerged out of the critical reflections which the authors themselves had engaged in.

### **Case illustrations**

The names and situation details used in these case studies have been changed and adapted for privacy purposes.

#### ***Case Study 1 - Karen - Helping an employee at a workplace***

*Karen is a worker involved in organising meetings and events in a busy community-focussed office. Karen is having some difficulties with her work and the impact of some of the stories she hears in her group sessions. After a chance meeting at a public event, where Karen was telling her story over lunch, we engaged in some informal supervision. The reflective interaction and affirmation and validation of her responses soon led Karen to see her experiences in a new light. She recognised that this was not a weakness but a strength she was until now unaware of. As a consequence Karen asked her manager if*



*she could have supervision with me. Her manager agreed and a contract was developed to provide a series of supervision sessions to Karen.*

*From our work together it became clear that events in the workplace were emotional triggers for Karen, which left her feeling in a state of 'crisis' as she described it. The trigger was being corrected for aspects of her work. Her feelings of 'crisis' meant that she was unable to function to make the suggested adjustments to her work. She could not understand what the corrections were about or the point of them. At times she forgot conversations or had no recollection they had even occurred. This was difficult for Karen and her managers because the work she was employed to do did not get done. She looked as if she was incompetent or did not have the conceptual skills and this led to performance management, which exacerbated Karen's triggers.*

*As we explored this dynamic in supervision, Karen realised that what she described as 'crisis' was in fact an experience of terror. Initially she did not link it with anything in her personal story but as our work progressed, she saw a link to the helplessness and terror she experienced as a child witnessing violence in her family.*

*Through identifying these factors Karen came to see how the complexity of her work was provoking this terror. She realised she needed to get assistance to work through her reactions. Karen also came to see that she did not currently possess the skills to carry out the job she was employed to do. Her job satisfaction was low and she did not like the conflict with her managers about her work. Through supervision, Karen took back some control in her life. The job was not worth the cost of having a miserable life. Why was she doing this to herself? She resigned and looked for other work that was less stressful. She developed a new understanding of her need to care for herself and sought help to manage the terror from her childhood. Karen valued supervision as a safe place where she could explore her work and all those things that affect it.*

While Karen was desperate to keep her job she was unable to see the impacts her job was having on her life and well-being. This was her blind spot. But when she felt listened to and validated she was able to see the impacts of her family history and how it was sabotaging her work. This learning became transformational for her as she made the connections and took appropriate steps to get assistance to change and grow. Karen was able to identify, own, and accept things about herself and her family. As she did this, her perspective shifted, and changed her way of seeing herself and her way of working. Her self-awareness had grown based on her courage to reflect on her work with another person in supervision.

#### ***Case Study 2 – Julie – Generating self-awareness about impact of role***



*Julie was an experienced worker who took on an additional role in her team. This role was new for Julie and the team. In addition the responsibilities of the new role were still being specified. As a result, when Julie commenced this new role she began working with some of her existing clients in this new, not clearly defined space. She was exposed to additional channels of communication with unspecified boundaries. These clients were foster carers who had not been able to have children of their own. Julie began to receive constant phone demands and abusive emails from them that left her feeling overwhelmed. She began to doubt her ability to do her job; she dreaded hearing from these clients but because of her new role, felt unable to stop the intrusions by email or phone.*

*Julie reached a point where she could not continue with her work. Overwhelmed and upset, she now wondered if she had chosen the wrong career. She doubted everything about her work. She was in a state of crisis with no more to give. Along with several months work in supervision, Julie sought medical attention and she began work with a therapist through the employee assistance program (EAP). She took a look at what was going on within herself. Through supervision, Julie was able to reflect on her work and what was happening for her. She began to specify the roles and responsibilities of her new position and gained clarity on the criteria for clients to access her program. Clarifying roles and responsibilities in her team also relieved some of the tension.*

*Further, Julie's reflective practice identified links with client issues that were reminiscent of her family history. This led her to review family relationships and develop new strategies for managing them and their impact on her work. Julie is now doing well in her work. She has used this crisis to transform her approach to her work. Her attention to clients and her management of work boundaries has developed enormously. She has an awareness of self-care and knowledge of warning signs that she could never have envisaged before her crisis. Her understanding of the work/life balance continues to grow and she is able to allow others to be responsible for their issues without rescuing. From doubting her career choice, Julie is now a confident professional with greater self-knowledge and a keen awareness of the need to reflect continually on her work and life.*

Julie was thinking that she had made a terrible error to become a social worker. She was in a 'moment' of crisis that had no end in sight except to leave her profession. From this position Julie brought this crisis to supervision. It was a complex process, yet Julie took the courageous step of looking at her work and the impact it was having on her life. She connected with her strengths, some of which she had never identified before. She reflected, she took a critical eye to her work and through this increased awareness, she learned many things about herself and how this interacted with her work. As a result Julie saw this crisis as a part of her social work journey



rather than its demise. This was and continues to be transformational for Julie in her work and personal life.

***Case Study 3 – Sandy – Impacts of personal beliefs and one's family story***

*When Sandy came to supervision initially, the issues she raised concerned her dealings with other people, especially her manager and other team members. Simply, Sandy did not feel safe. Work in supervision concentrated on developing a safe, supportive relationship with Sandy. This took some time (over 12 months) as Sandy did not feel safe in the work context. She was also uncertain of her work with clients as she had recently begun full time professional work.*

*Over time, Sandy began to recognise that her beliefs about herself filtered her perceptions of what was going on around her and her capacity to manage the complexity of relationships with colleagues and clients. This self-awareness changed her perception from being doubtful that she had the skills to assist clients, to realising she was feeling a sense of inadequacy, something the clients were also feeling. Slowly over time, the regular reflective practice, the growing self-knowledge and her skills development, as well as changes within her work environment, enabled Sandy to move into a new and better space within herself and her work. She realised that her own family history and how she managed it, was impacting on her life at work.*

*Sandy embraced the hard work of honest reflective practice and how to care for herself as she managed change. She saw a private counsellor and found the support she needed in other areas of her life. As a result, Sandy felt safer and more confident in the work place and in her client work. She became very skilled at noticing her reactions and triggers, and in seeking help to manage them. This skill is also utilised in her client work and she is able to discuss difficult issues with clients in a more effective manner. Sandy's engagement with reflective practice in supervision has led to transformative learning in her life. She has adapted her personal beliefs and values to her professional life and has become very attuned to herself and others. Her self-awareness has enabled her to review some major events in her personal story. Doing this has helped her grow into a skilled and experienced worker who can attend to her clients and colleagues in a professional way.*

For Sandy the transformational learning came about as a result of feeling unsafe in her work for a sustained period. Sandy did not give up. She persisted and she brought her issues to supervision. She reflected on her work and her reactions to it. Sandy slowly began to look at things in new ways as she received validation for what she saw in herself and its impact on her work. While it was not a crisis like the other two case studies, Sandy recognised previously unknown strengths within herself including her courage. She found safety within herself as her



trust in herself and in her skills and knowledge grew and expanded. Her work with clients and colleagues brought job satisfaction and a very down to earth sense of confidence.

### **General reflections on the case studies**

These three case studies highlight several of the points made earlier. First, for supervision to be effective there is a need to develop a trusting safe relationship over time. This is true for each of these case studies. Second, the supervisor finds the way that enables the supervisee to learn. It is the supervisor who adapts to the supervisee. Third, as the supervisee grows in trust and confidence in the supervisory relationship they feel safe to explore their work and personal responses. They become curious about their work in the absence of harsh judgement. Fourth, critical moments are an opportunity for growth not a problem to be feared. Supervisors need the ability to see crises, critical moments or problems as opportunities for growth and to encourage their supervisee to look with curiosity not judgement at what is happening. Fifth, there is a need for several prongs to strategies used to manage critical moments including referral to medical and psychological or counselling services. Sixth, these critical moments usually involve the development of a detailed understanding of how personal and professional values and beliefs impact on the supervisee and their relationship with clients. As this knowledge grows the supervisee can choose the way to bring this awareness into their work and workplace relationships. This includes the awareness of their strengths and limits; awareness of when their strengths can be a blind spot; the importance of clear roles, responsibilities and boundaries and how they are shared with managers and team members. Seventh, all this comes about through reflective practice which enables the supervisee to learn from their work and to develop the awareness of their own reactions and responses as well as those of others.

### **Lessons from the case studies**

The professional life of a worker does not exist in isolation from all the events of their lives and their family story. They bring this history to the therapeutic relationship just as clients do. For workers to be present with and attentive to the clients they work with, they need a well-developed self-awareness and self-knowledge. This includes knowing the trigger points in their lives and how to manage them within the therapeutic relationship and the other professional relationships they have within and across work places. Without this knowledge workers are at risk of exposure to workplace conflict and low job satisfaction. This can quickly turn into compassion fatigue and burnout. These conditions can have profound effects on workers and even bring them to leave their profession. "While compassion fatigue can develop quickly in response to the suffering of others, burnout builds gradually through continued exposure to



emotional and organizational demands. Burnout leads to mental and physical exhaustion in the professional” (Najjar et al. 2009; Figley, 2002 as cited in Forster, 2009, p. 1)

Trauma and abuse, illness and struggle may be injurious but they may also be sources of challenge and opportunity (Saleebey, 1999, p. 6). These can be opportunities for transformation, to see their practice in a new way and learn how it can have unintended consequences for themselves and the client.

### **Why did we call this strengths based supervision?**

We called this strengths based supervision because it requires openness to the supervisee. It is the supervisee who sets the agenda, who brings the topics to be explored. In the safety of the supervisory relationship they are allowed to critically reflect on their practice. The process of engagement with the supervisee is done in a climate of positivity. They are nurtured in order to identify and develop their strengths, to look at gaps and areas for growth including blind spots and to take responsibility for their professional lives. It is in this context that open, honest discussion can take place.

### **Some issues in professional supervision?**

A key issue in professional supervision is how to create the environment where the supervisee feels safe to bring their work and their reactions to their work and be open enough to reflect upon it. It is not all the work of the supervisee. This requires the supervisor to be flexible to adjust their approach to how each supervisee learns. There is no one size fits all approach to supervision. It needs to be personal and fit with the supervisee and their circumstances. The supervisor is the one who accommodates the supervisee. The supervisor does not do things to the supervisee; rather they assist the supervisee to see things with a different eye, to create a super-vision of their work (Carroll, 2009). They begin to see new things or old perceptions in a new light. From this viewpoint it becomes clear that in supervision the shift in the supervisee takes place in the supervision room and is then transferred to their work. Nothing has changed unless the supervisee is now doing things differently to what they were doing before the supervision session (Carroll, 2010).

The presence of the supervisor is also critical. It enables the supervisor to be with and attend to the supervisee as they review and reflect on their work. It helps to create the context where the supervisee is able to see things in a new light.

There are also accountability and administrative aspects to supervision. While these elements can interact with the learning aspects of supervision and provide opportunities for transformation they can also be points for conflict. This issue is part of the territory of supervision.





Organisations have a responsibility to meet accountability and administrative needs and to assist in the development and growth of staff so that clients get the best service and attention.

### **Practitioner's reflections on supervision**

Creating the conditions for critical reflection is not easy. It demands openness and “indifference” to where the outcome will lead. For those already committed to an existing outcome or destination, critical reflection can become impossible. This is a challenge for supervisors. If supervisors are not careful, they too can block and disable their own learning and the learning of others. They, too, need to reflect and become aware of their own pet habits and their blind spots. So supervisors must move beyond their own embarrassments and be able to admit their limitations, their not-knowing, their being lost, and, like supervisees, be transparent and honest (Carroll, 2010).

### **Conclusion**

Supervision is a collaborative practice and it cannot happen in a vacuum. Hence, there is a need to establish a sound relationship with the supervisee. Only then can a meaningful change happen in the professional service that is given. In this article, we have argued for a shift in the way we think about supervision and named the process as strengths based, valuing the strengths of the supervisee. This shift in the process has been examined by scholars in the field. The arguments in this article show that the strengths perspective, in Saleebey's (2002, p. xiv) words “... has been quietly fostering a small revolution in which the hegemony of deficit explanations is beginning to weaken, belief in resilience is rebounding and collaborative practice is growing”. While we have discussed the importance of embracing strengths philosophy in professional practice, we cannot do away with the demands placed on us from management and professional organisations to continue to engage in supervision. What we have argued in this paper is that creating a safe place for the supervisee to explore their work is of paramount importance in supervision and that this occurs when a strong professional relationship is built. This can happen when supervisors and supervisees appreciate the strengths that they bring in to practice and are ready to build on them further. This is indeed a challenge and opportunity for social workers engaged in professional practice and supervision.



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### ***Authors***

#### **Gerard Moloney**

Gerard Moloney is employed in a not for profit community services organisation in Townsville North Queensland where he has worked for 10 years. The organisation has over 160 staff in regional and rural locations in North Queensland. He is part of an internal professional (clinical) supervision team in the organisation. He has a Bachelor of Psychology (Hons) degree as well as a degree and qualifications in Theology, Philosophy and Management. He has a passionate interest in supervising clinical and support staff in community service organisations. One specific area of interest is assisting supervisees to know and understand the signs of and impacts of compassion fatigue. He has conducted research into the underlying factors that lead to compassion fatigue. As well as providing supervision internally he is involved in providing supervision to other agencies on a contract basis. Email: [gmoloney@centacarenq.org.au](mailto:gmoloney@centacarenq.org.au)

**Dr Abraham P. Francis** is a Senior lecturer at James Cook University in Australia. Combined with international exposure, extensive experience in community development and research activities, he has been instrumental in many developmental initiatives. Prior to migrating to Australia, he was a Social Work Lecturer in Delhi University in India. He has also worked as a Senior Mental Health Social Worker with the Country Health SA, Australia before moving to Townsville to join James Cook University. He has also worked as Assistant Director -Social work with Queensland Health, Australia. Dr Francis is associated with many voluntary organisations, associations, professional bodies and developmental projects both in Australia and India.

Dr Francis has established many international partnerships and research collaborations with various universities and non-government organizations in Asia. He is the convener of international consortium on strengths based social work practice in mental health. He is also the founding director of the DePaul International Centre for welling Centre, India. Dr Francis specialises in strengths-based practice with a critical approach. His current research interests are in the field of social work practice in mental health, community work, criminal justice social work, international social work and Gerontological social work.

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#### **<sup>i</sup> Gerard Moloney**

Gerard Moloney is employed in a not for profit community services organisation in Townsville North Queensland where he has worked for 10 years. The organisation has over



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