

CLS Support Email Bulletin (Quality Mark no. 14): getting the most out of supervision and appraisal

1 Introduction

- 1.1 This bulletin highlights some good practice points when operating supervision and appraisal systems and is an amended excerpt from the forthcoming CLS Support briefing: "Specialist Quality Mark: Getting the most out of it"¹.
- 1.2 It is applicable to organisations holding the Specialist Quality Mark (SQM) although the good practice points raised may also be of interest to organisations working at other Quality Mark levels.
- 1.3 The briefing itself discusses good practice in meeting all of the key areas contained within the SQM Standard and also provides useful guidance on reviewing how systems and procedures work so that organisations can maximise the benefits they may gain from compliance with the SQM.

2 Good Practice in Supervision and Appraisal

- 2.1 There are a number of requirements within the SQM directly relating to people management, all of which are found in section D. These range from generic requirements applicable to all staff, such as the need for recruitment, induction and appraisal procedures, to requirements that are particular to staff who perform casework, such as supervision and competence requirements.
- 2.2 There are considerable similarities between these particular requirements and those in other organisational standards that focus on people management, such as Investors in People (IIP).
- 2.3 The fundamental reason standards and requirements like these exist is to recognise that if we become too task orientated – if all the emphasis is on just completing the task or getting the output – we can lose sight of the individual needs (eg professional development or job satisfaction) of those actually performing or completing the task and, in turn, of the benefits the organisation may gain from meeting those needs.
- 2.4 In order to explore this in a little more detail, we will now look at two of the key areas of people management contained within the SQM: supervision and appraisal.
- 2.5 Please note that people management is also discussed in CLS Support Quality Mark briefing no. 6: "People Management and Sample Procedures".

¹ To be published in October 2004.

3 Supervision

3.1 A definition of supervision:

“Supervision is an **active process** that **enables** another who is **accountable** to you to achieve the **required standard(s)**”²

3.2 The words in bold, in this definition, highlight the key aspects of operating the supervisory role effectively. The fact is that supervision should be an active process. You should not just assume all is going okay if those being supervised do not raise problems.

3.3 A key part of the SQM in relation to supervision is that the supervisor – who has acquired sufficient technical, legal and supervisory skills – should take a coaching role to the person(s) being supervised whilst maintaining control over the quality of work that is being produced. The emphasis in supervision is mainly on enabling, not evaluation (compare this with the objectives of appraisal at paragraph 4.2).

3.4 This is about an organisation recognising that in order to get the best from staff it has a responsibility to facilitate, to the best of its ability and within resource constraints, an individual's attempts to perform any function or task they have been set.

3.5 One way to look at the supervisory role within the SQM would be to see it as pivotal between the needs of the organisation and the needs of those individuals being supervised (including the supervisor themselves). It is likely to be fundamental to the success of the organisation delivering its service and, arguably, of the SQM itself.

3.6 It places the supervisor in the position of having to address organisational priorities (such as those that arise out of the business planning process, or meeting target hours for contracted caseworkers) whilst also ensuring that everyday operational issues are addressed, staff are supervised, tasks are performed, and the quality of work being produced is satisfactory.

Systems of supervision

3.7 If we focus on the operation of the supervisory role – what a supervisor actually should do in order to supervise someone – the SQM requires that you have in place a “system of supervision” that is tailored to staff being supervised and is responsive to the support needs of each of those staff.

3.8 There is an implication here that whatever system you impose the fact that it is responsive means that it will change as the needs and competency of the individual being supervised change.

3.9 A system of supervision, whilst sounding quite grand, is actually just a number of separate activities that a supervisor undertakes that together

² Taken from the CLS Support training course: “Monitoring Performance: An Introduction to Supervision File Review and Appraisal”.

ensure that the job gets done, to a satisfactory quality, and that the development and support needs of the person doing the job are met.

- 3.10 It does not mean that the whole of the supervisor's professional life should be taken up thinking solely about those being supervised – the system of supervision should mean that a supervisor can be confident that the job gets done without excessive impact on either supervisor or supervisee's time. Remember, over-supervising someone can be as detrimental as not supervising at all, as it may actually curb development and could indicate a lack of trust. So how might all this work in practice?

3.11 Example

- (a) Sam is a caseworker and has been with The Advice Centre for three months. His formal induction stage has now been completed so he knows who everybody is and what he needs to do and has a good idea how to do it.
- (b) Cecilia, his supervisor, doesn't want to just leave Sam to it; after all, she has read section D of the SQM and is committed to developing a proper supervisory relationship.
- (c) Cecilia recognises her pivotal role and knows that the quality of the work must be satisfactory and that they must meet the targets and objectives they have been set by the manager; she also knows that she is in an ideal position to recognise Sam's development and support needs.
- (d) In order to address these various factors, Cecilia implements a system of supervision, which is made up of the following supervisory activities, all of which are explained to Sam:
 - She is available during office hours if Sam has any questions.
 - All outgoing letters that Sam writes are checked and wherever necessary feedback is given on the correctness of any legal advice given, style and tactical approach.
 - All incoming post is checked before passing to Sam – this allows Cecilia to keep an eye on how Sam's cases are progressing and whether there are any problems without her committing excessive amounts of time.
 - Cecilia keeps an eye on the diary and reminds Sam of the need to write in not only key dates and appointments but also to "z" out time for work he expects to do, such as this Friday afternoon when he needs to spend some time writing a submission – this allows Cecilia to make sure he isn't taking too much on too early and reinforces the positives of good work planning.
 - Cecilia works in the same office as Sam so is able to hear him when he contacts clients and third parties on the telephone – this allows her to give him feedback on his manner and negotiation skills as necessary.
 - Regular monthly supervision sessions are set up to discuss case progress, give guidance and direction, and discuss problems. Cecilia also finds it useful to review all open cases that Sam has at this session that seem to be taking too long or have been inactive for some time – being busy herself, it is an ideal opportunity to gain an

in-depth look at his work within a short time. Sam likes these sessions best as it makes him feel that he is taken seriously and that Cecilia gives him one-on-one time without outside distraction.

- 3.12 The list above isn't meant to be prescriptive or exhaustive but to give a general idea. As Sam's competence increases, Cecilia might drop some of the activities – eg checking all his letters before posting. The more Sam increases in ability and his quality of work improves, the less necessary it is to take so involved a role in his work.
- 3.13 This doesn't mean just cutting Sam loose. On the contrary, as he gets better at the job, Cecilia is likely to recognise other development opportunities available to him – eg encouraging him to deal with certain complex cases he is particularly interested in or provide training to new staff.
- 3.14 Ideally, these development opportunities would be objectives already set but perhaps unallocated (eg within the business plan) or considered by the organisation when the improvement in Sam's skills and abilities is observed – the aim here would be to recognise that it is possible for the organisation as well as Sam to gain from Sam's development.
- 3.15 If you have supervisory responsibility it might be useful for you to think about what system of supervision you have in place and how it came about: whether it is the same for all staff, how you address their individual development needs and whether it should change depending on the relative competency of staff members and the quality of work they are producing.
- 3.16 Questions to ask yourself could be: Are you getting the most out of your staff, and are they getting the most out of you? And if not, why not? Are you doing too much supervision or too little?

4 Appraisal

- 4.1 Whether you call them "joint progress reviews" or "performance review and feedback" (which is how they are titled in the SQM) or appraisal, people can have real problems with this type of one-on-one session and typically see it as just another supervision session.
- 4.2 However, there is a real distinction between supervision, where day-to-day operational issues including the quality of advice being delivered are the focus, and an appraisal session (which is the term we shall use here), which is just that: a periodic appraisal of the individual's performance against the expectations of the organisation. Here the emphasis is on evaluation, not enabling.
- 4.3 The problem can be particularly acute if the person conducting the appraisal of a member of staff also supervises the work of that individual. Here, the purpose and content of the appraisal session can become distorted and tend towards just dealing with ongoing casework issues rather than providing a forum to discuss the big picture: how someone is

doing, where they are going and how to develop them to get there if it is appropriate.

- 4.4 There might also be other conflicts involved in being both supervisor and appraiser – eg trust, issues with ones manager and accountability.
- 4.5 Rather than lots of talk about negatives, let's look at some good practice. In the CLS Support training course "Monitoring Performance: An Introduction to Supervision File Review and Appraisal", we identify the key features of a workable appraisal system and how to get the most out of complying with this particular SQM requirement.
- 4.6 We will come on to these in a moment. First, the SQM points out that appraisal must occur at least annually for all members of staff (with certain exceptions if working under the Criminal Defence Service). In addition, whatever appraisal system you adopt, you need to be able to demonstrate that it accomplishes the following:
 - relates individual performance to the needs of the service;
 - provides a two-way communication process;
 - identifies training needs and development opportunities as well as setting objectives.
- 4.7 With this in mind, consider the following example and the reasoning behind the way in which this appraisal system has been structured.
- 4.8 Example

Before the session:

- Sam has been with The Advice Centre for some time now and his first appraisal is scheduled in two weeks' time.
- The manager, who is conducting the appraisal, has given Sam a form with some questions on it for him to think about and complete prior to the session.
- Sam is a little confused by the form and why the manager needs all this information – questions like "how do you think you are doing?" raise Sam's suspicions that he might be in trouble.
- Fortunately, the manager explains why it is important to complete this form: it will help Sam focus on the things that he thinks are important and wants to talk about. By spending a little time on advance preparation, Sam is also likely to provide the manager with more accurate and considered information at the session regarding his aspirations or problems he might be having.

During the session:

- Sam is a bit concerned that the manager doesn't know much about him or his work, so he is dubious that anything useful will come out of the session.
- However, the manager explains that he too has done some preparation. He has had a look through Sam's personnel file for any issues that might need to be addressed; spoken with Cecilia, Sam's supervisor, to gain her perspective on Sam's work and how he is

doing; checked the minutes of the supervision meetings Sam has been having with her; and noted any general trends from the file reviews that have been conducted.

- The session goes ahead and Sam feels it is very useful. The manager tells Sam how happy the organisation is with his performance (which cheers him up, hearing this from the boss). He also agrees a number of objectives with Sam for his future work and development. Sam has an opportunity to comment on these as well as contributing a couple of his own.
- One relates to an organisational objective that had come up in the business planning process: it had been decided that it was an organisational priority to provide targeted advice to the employees of a big local firm due to close down and make staff redundant in the summer.
- Sam wonders if any of what they agreed would conflict with the objectives that Cecilia has been setting for him on an ongoing basis; the manager explains that they will not, as he had already discussed with Cecilia the flexibility possible within Sam's future work plan.

After the session:

- Both Sam and the manager agree that the notes made during the session are a true record and both sign it – it is placed on Sam's personnel file with a copy given to Sam.
- The manager and Cecilia go through the work objectives that have been agreed and set with Sam – the manager is confident that Cecilia will carry on her supervisory role with Sam and enable him to meet these additional objectives.
- The manager knows that this one meeting each year satisfies the SQM requirement, but in order to gain maximum advantage the manager schedules an additional short meeting in six months' time to review Sam's progress. This will allow them to identify what is working and what is not at an earlier stage than the next appraisal meeting in a year's time, which will allow management input and adaptation if necessary.

5 Summary

5.1 The appraisal system described here isn't prescriptive and the one you have adopted might be very different. Whatever format you choose, when considering your own system you might want to think about the following:

- Is the preparation adequate on both sides and have any other individuals who might be affected by what is agreed been considered and/or consulted?
- In planning the session are there any organisational priorities, from the business plan or elsewhere that could tie in with Sam's development needs and so be seen as an opportunity for both parties?
- Who will support and supervise the person appraised in achieving the objectives set? If they have a supervisor it might make sense to get

this person up to speed with what is being proposed so that they ensure it gets done and proper support is given.

- How are you going to make sure that objectives set are completed – if you are the person conducting the appraisal will you rely on feedback from the person appraised, or his/her line manager or supervisor, at a short review meeting in a few months' time?
- If you are the one conducting the appraisal, then don't re-schedule an appraisal meeting unless you absolutely have to. It can send negative and counter-productive messages to the person who has been "re-scheduled", including that you did not consider this one-on-one session a priority.
- Try not to have surprises at the session – if you have serious concerns about someone's behaviour/work that are likely to lead to disciplinary action, then it would generally be better to raise these separately beforehand.

5.2 It should be evident here that whilst the appraisal meeting itself is very important, in order to gain real value from the process what happens before the meeting (in terms of preparation) and after (in terms of enabling that person and monitoring progress towards the objectives set) are just as important.