

CHAPTER 4

Building the Foundation for Effective Unit Performance

Supervisors are the leaders of their child protective services (CPS) units. They are responsible for ensuring that the mission, outcomes, and goals of the unit are achieved in an effective and efficient manner. In this regard, they must create the structures for the successful operation of the unit. Supervisors also must promote a positive work climate where staff feel their needs are being met, set standards of practice, and ensure clarity regarding performance standards and expectations. Thus, the supervisor is the guardian of the agency's mission and the outcomes and goals of CPS. This foundation creates the promise of success.

CREATING AND COMMUNICATING A VISION FOR THE UNIT

Visions for CPS staff and supervisors are compelling statements about how the unit intends to ensure that children are safe and achieve permanency within the shortest possible time. The vision that supervisors create for the unit must focus on children and families and express how the unit's actions contribute to them. A vision also forces the unit to become accountable for actions that may not be congruent with that vision.⁵

Supervisors also should establish a vision of high standards for the unit. Naturally, the vision will have more meaning to the staff if they help to create it. In working toward a vision, it is important for CPS units to:

- Begin with the clients. Achieving the agency's mission and goal is dependent on how well the clients are served. Some examples of vision statements about what success looks like when focusing on children and families include:

“The ladder of success is measured in small steps.”

“The bridge to better families is built with fairness, respect, and dignity.”

“Envision the future, help them find theirs.”

“Children are like trees, they need to be protected and have roots.”

- Pay attention to the way staff treat each other. It is the clearest indication of how they treat their clients. Some examples of vision statements about what success looks like when focusing on staff include:

“We relentlessly pursue quality in all that we do.”

“We cherish diversity of people and ideas.”⁶

It is important for new supervisors wanting to establish a vision for a unit to assess if the staff have agreed with or followed a collective vision. If one has existed, supervisors should evaluate if it needs to be adapted, re-shaped, or enhanced.

ESTABLISHING A POSITIVE WORK CLIMATE

The organizational climate is the perceptual filter through which staff experience the workplace. Climate is closely linked to job satisfaction and organizational commitment. If caseworkers feel their basic needs are being met, they will view work more positively. Supervisors have the most influence on how their staff experience the workplace through their responses to the day-to-day needs of individuals in their unit.

Climate also shapes staff performance by reflecting the caseworkers' perceptions of the positive and negative consequences of their actions and by influencing motivation. When caseworkers feel their needs are likely to be met, they are more likely to take constructive action.

A number of factors influence the climate of a unit or agency, including history, organizational structure, interpersonal qualities of members of the group, and management and supervisory behavior. Of these factors, management and supervisory behavior explain most of the variance in caseworkers' perception of work climate and their willingness to stay. The level of competence, support, and empathy shown by supervisors has a direct impact on staff retention.

There are a number of components of climate, and each relates to the underlying needs of caseworkers and the behaviors of supervisors. When supervisors respond positively to caseworkers' underlying needs and provide appropriate feedback, the climate improves. When underlying needs are frustrated, the climate deteriorates. Exhibit 4-1 describes climate components and the related supervisory practices.

Exhibit 4-1
Work Climate Components and Supervisory Practices

Climate Component	Supervisory Practices
Clarity —Goals, expectations, and the mission are clearly defined.	Communicate expectations and share information.
Warmth —Sensitivity, support, and empathy are demonstrated toward the needs of caseworkers.	Share information and empathize with the caseworker.
Openness —Caseworkers feel free to express thoughts and opinions without fear of reprisal.	Share information and empathize with the caseworker.
Autonomy —Caseworkers feel free to achieve goals according to strategies they define.	Communicate expectations, share information, and focus on monitoring results rather than process.
Excellence —High performance standards are expected.	Emphasize results and set clear expectations.
Accountability —Caseworkers feel they are responsible for performance.	Monitor results and clarify expectations.
Leadership —Caseworkers feel the authority system is competent to meet the agency's needs.	Demonstrate comfort with the role, clarify expectations, and monitor results.

CREATING THE STRUCTURE FOR THE SUCCESSFUL OPERATION OF THE UNIT

One of the key aspects of the job of supervisors is to create the structure through which the unit achieves the goals and outcomes for which it is responsible. The structure enables staff to perform productively and allows supervisors to focus on the essential activities of the unit and the processes that facilitate the achievement of client and program outcomes.

Examples of essential activities for which supervisors must create structure include:

- Receipt of referrals;
- Initial contacts with the family (i.e., immediate or within 24 hours);
- Initial assessments of safety;
- Assessments of risk of maltreatment;
- Development of case and safety plans;
- Family group conferences;
- Parent-child visits.

The following are examples of common structures for some of the essential activities listed above.

- Initial contact—Some States and agencies have specific criteria to guide the determination of the urgency of the response (e.g., age of child, severity of injury).
- Initial safety assessment—Some States, such as Illinois and New York, have a model that provides specific criteria to consider in determining the safety of the child.
- Family group conferences—Agencies use or adapt the structure of several models, such as the Family Unity model and the Family Group Conferencing model.

Examples of processes for which supervisors typically must create structure include:

- Coverage (e.g., use of leave – annual, holiday);
- Case assignments;
- Individual case conferences;
- Unit meetings;
- Performance evaluations;
- Use of cars and other agency equipment (e.g., pagers, cell phones, and laptop computers).

The following are examples of common structures for some of the processes activities listed above.

- Case assignments—The goal of a supervisor is to achieve equitable caseloads. There are a variety of structures used to accomplish this. For example, cases may be assigned on a rotation basis, a case-weighting system based on the complexity of the case, a geographical system, or a match between the needs of the family and the strengths of the caseworker. These methods do not guarantee an equitable distribution among caseworkers because cases often become more difficult and time-consuming than originally anticipated, plus the flow of referrals cannot be regulated. Therefore, supervisors must consistently monitor caseload and flow and make adjustments accordingly.
- Coverage and use of cars—The lack of agency cars can create a great deal of conflict. Some agencies assign one car per unit. For example, each caseworker has the car assigned to them 1 day per week, and if they need to reschedule, the staff negotiate among themselves.

DEVELOPING AN EFFECTIVE WORK TEAM

The ultimate goal of every supervisor is to develop a work group or team that is motivated to achieve the mission and goals of the agency as a means of satisfying personal needs and goals. Some conditions

for team functioning are not inherently present in a CPS unit. First, caseworkers work primarily toward individual achievements (i.e., their assigned cases). Second, the outcome of their cases depends less on the contributions of other unit members than on other units or persons outside the agency. Third, what the unit as a whole seeks to achieve may be unclear.

Other conditions for team development, however, may be met within the CPS unit. Caseworkers may feel a sense of cohesion with other unit members. They may view their unit as distinct from other units in the agency and offer support to each other with difficult cases. Whether the unit becomes a team depends on the extent to which supervisors emphasize group and agency goals as well as individual goals, define tasks that require interdependence among unit members, and encourage group participation in defining unit problems and selecting solutions.

In order for a group to function effectively, it has to be cohesive. Supervisors who want to improve the performance and quality of a group first must work to develop cohesiveness. Activity to improve cohesion at the unit or team level, however, should not be done to the detriment of agency cohesion. Therefore, another good way to strengthen a group is to direct attention to how the unit can help the agency achieve its mission. This technique means arousing within the unit and the individuals a desire for group success. It requires agreement about some fundamental components of the unit, such as purpose, goals, procedures, values, norms, policies, standards, and practices. This approach also requires feedback about both the group's and the individual's progress, thereby determining unit trends and progress over time.

The level of group cohesion is indicated by:

- Attendance;
- Whether members arrive to work or group meetings on time;
- The level of trust and support among group members;

- The commitment to the group's goals;
- Staff that readily accepts assigned tasks and roles;
- The amount of individuality accepted in the group;
- How much fun members have.

The benefits of having a cohesive work group are:

- High productivity;
- High morale;
- Low turnover;
- High-quality work;
- Achievement of outcomes for children and families;
- Lower stress in the supervisor's job.⁷

Positive peer relationships are strongly linked to staff retention. In addition, a cohesive work group can offset many of the other common problems in an organization because staff needs are being met in the work group.

A problem that confronts many supervisors is maintaining cohesion after a caseworker or team member has been dismissed. Regardless of whether the dismissed person was well-liked or was perceived as being difficult, remaining staff are likely to have unresolved or conflicting feelings about this. Supervisors need to develop a strategy for addressing the unit's needs while maintaining personnel confidentiality. Strategies include holding a group debriefing and elective one-on-one sessions.

Stages of Team Development

Supervisors play a critical role in setting the tone and pace of CPS team development. To become a cohesive team, groups usually progress through four stages of development. At first, a new group identifies and cultivates its power, purpose, and strategy. Second, conflicting values and preferences are

resolved or managed. Third, the group evolves norms that define acceptable behavior. Fourth, the group devotes more energy to job performance than to team development.

Typically, the unit already exists, which creates two problems for supervisors when focusing on team development. First, the unit has established norms, procedures, or goals that may not be congruent with the supervisors' or agency's vision for the unit. Second, new members must be incorporated into the unit.

In the first case, supervisors must counter the existing culture of the group, which may mean behaving in ways that violate existing group norms. For example, members of a group may have established a norm of not giving direct feedback to each other. Instead, concerns about other's behaviors are communicated directly to the supervisor. Supervisors might violate (i.e., change) this norm by expecting direct communication among the caseworkers.

In the second case, supervisors must facilitate new members' integration into the group. This process usually occurs more quickly when staff share responsibility for meeting the needs of new members. A common mistake of supervisors is to encourage new members to have their needs met exclusively through them. At the extreme, this approach undermines group development and keeps the new caseworker isolated from other group members. Over time, this dynamic creates a "hub and spoke" arrangement of communication (with supervisors at the center), rather than the "star" pattern more characteristic of effective group and team interaction.

Assessing Team Functioning

In assessing a team's level of functioning, the supervisor should examine the following:

- Commitment to group rather than individual goals;
- Participatory leadership;

- Helpfulness of members;
- Degree of trust and openness of communication;
- Identification with the unit;
- Resolution of conflict and attainment of consensus;
- Established approaches to problem solving and decision-making;
- Experimentation and creative approaches;
- Participation of each caseworker in group activities.

Both the evenness and extent of these conditions define the level of the group's functioning. Although a unit could be functioning well as a group, it might actually be achieving very little. For example, a unit may have a strong sense of camaraderie and yet have the most serious paperwork backlog in the agency. Good teamwork is a way to a goal, not a goal in and of itself.

Team Development Problems and Strategies for Overcoming Them

There are numerous problems encountered in developing and maintaining a cohesive work group. This section presents the most common problems encountered by supervisors:

- **High staff turnover.** This leads to loss of valued team members and constantly integrating new members into the unit.
- **Resistance to change.** There may be some members of the group who want to maintain the status quo and do not like change, while other members of the group are committed to creativity and innovation and want to search for new and improved methods.
- **Difficult individuals.** There may be a unit member who does not "hold his or her own weight," creates conflict with other members, prefers to work alone, or does not participate actively in the group.

Possible strategies to use for the above problems include:

- Provide members with opportunities to say goodbye and to grieve the loss of a team member. Supervisors should involve caseworkers in interviewing and selecting prospective team members. Supervisors can serve as positive role models and help staff identify strategies for integrating new members.
- Promote open discussions regarding staff preferences and help them see the values in creativity and innovation. Continually evaluate the operation of the unit and achievement of outcomes, which will show areas of strength and areas needing improvement. Appoint individuals who support creativity to take the lead in addressing a problem.
- Attempt to integrate difficult individuals into the work group by involving them based on their strengths. For example, if a new member was formerly a substance abuse counselor, the supervisor could team them with other caseworkers on cases involving difficult substance abuse factors. Be clear about team norms and functioning during the hiring process to help the prospective employee self-screen.

WORKER SAFETY

Another key to building an effective unit is promoting caseworker safety. Social service workers always have been at risk for violent victimization, although until recently there has been little recognition of the extent of the dangers they face. CPS caseworkers appear to encounter more anger, hostility, and resistance than any other worker in the child welfare system.⁸ The nature of CPS work involves evaluating the risks and needs of families, some of whom display hostility and violence.⁹ CPS caseworkers are responsible for investigating, “policing,” and labeling unacceptable behavior. Sometimes parents or caregivers react with hostility when their behavior is challenged. CPS caseworkers do not have the ability, training, and formal protection to protect themselves or respond in a manner similar to other professionals confronted with aggressive behavior, such as law enforcement officers.

Common strategies employed by States emphasizing caseworker safety include:

- Mandatory safety training for all casework staff;
- Use of communication technology (e.g., cell phones or pagers);
- Protocol and written agreements for involving law enforcement;
- Counseling and support for caseworkers who have been injured or threatened (and, as appropriate, for the families of those caseworkers).¹⁰

Exhibit 4-2 Tips for Supervisors to Maintain Caseworker Safety

- Ensure that caseworkers obtain the latest case information and familiarize themselves with the area they will be visiting before making home visits.
- Make sure that staff provide an up-to-date schedule of their visits. The schedule should contain the name of the family, location, the date and time of the visit, and the expected time of return.
- Remind caseworkers to observe everyone in and around the home visit area and watch for signs that indicate the potential for personal violence.
- Assist caseworkers in reviewing what is known about the client before making contact and consider the following issues:
 - Are the parents or caregivers hostile or violent?
 - Is domestic violence present?
 - Are the parents or caregivers mentally ill?
 - Are the parents or caregivers using alcohol or drugs?
 - Does the information note life-threatening or serious physical injury to the child?
 - Is there a high likelihood that the children will be removed on this visit?
 - Does the family live in a potentially dangerous location (e.g., high crime or drug activity)?
 - Does the family live in a rural or isolated location?
 - Does anyone in the home have a previous history of violence or multiple referrals?
 - Have there been previous removals?
- Encourage caseworkers to follow their instincts. For example, if they feel unsafe on a visit, there is probably a good reason, and they should take whatever action is needed to ensure their protection.
- Remind caseworkers to learn the layout of families homes, the immediate surroundings, and typical activities that occur there to provide a baseline from which to judge potential danger.
- Reinforce that caseworkers should avoid dangerous or unfamiliar neighborhoods at night without law enforcement protection, if possible, or at least taking another coworker along.
- Prompt caseworkers to be sensitive to the timing of their visits. For example, early morning is usually the best time to go to drug-ridden areas.
- Remind caseworkers to use the safest route to and from a family's home.
- Ensure that caseworkers maintain their or the agency's car in good working order and keep it filled with gas.
- Demonstrate to caseworkers how to decline tactfully offers of food or refreshments. If there is no agency policy prohibiting accepting refreshments, a caseworker should assess whether it is safe or not to accept them.

Exhibit 4-2 Tips for Supervisors to Maintain Caseworker Safety (*Continued*)

- Instruct caseworkers on how to maintain their personal safety during home visits. For example, they should ask who is at home and if they have any problems with the caseworker's presence. Caseworkers should not sit or stand with their back to a stairway or darkened room. Observe how the door is secured once it is closed.
- Teach caseworkers to respond effectively to client anger and hostility. For example, teach them to:
 - Assess anger and hostility quickly;
 - Remain calm;
 - Speak softly but firmly;
 - Keep statements simple and direct;
 - Not show anxiety, fear, anger, or defensiveness;
 - Distract the person from the source of his or her anger;
 - Allow time for venting, but recognize when it has turned from venting to outrage or anger;
 - Respect the client's need for silence;
 - Provide the client with adequate personal space;
 - Avoid touching the client;
 - Leave if the client's behavior becomes dangerous;
 - Carry a whistle or personal alarm and use it, if appropriate.¹¹

RELATIONSHIPS WITH THE PUBLIC AND THE MEDIA

Developing good relationships between the agency, the public, and the media is another key element of an effective unit. While the major responsibility for this rests with the agency's administration, it also may be part of the responsibility of supervisors to inform the public and the media about the complex issues of child abuse and neglect. Educating the public and the media can increase support for needed services to abused and neglected children and their families. CPS agencies have a responsibility to inform the public about the causes of child maltreatment, what constitutes a reportable incident, and how the agency is organized to serve children and families.¹²

One of the most fundamental reasons that agencies do not speak with the media about specific child abuse incidents is confidentiality concerns. One recommendation for dealing with this issue is to avoid the specifics of the case and to speak in general terms about the agency's response in a given scenario. Other tips include:

- Know how reporters work. Ask them to understand issues from a CPS perspective and take time to understand the demands and concerns of a reporter.
- Because reporters work on strict deadlines, return calls promptly and meet deadlines in advance of the final hour.
- Speak plainly without professional jargon. Give the basics in plain language. Ask if they understand what has been stated. Allow and expect questions.

- Do not push or suggest a particular story; instead, provide information. The press is suspicious of stories it does not find itself. Be available as a resource and a contact.
- Shape the information as a news story. The press is not intended to function as a public relations vehicle, but can serve as such if a story is presented holistically and truthfully.
- Always tell the truth to a reporter.
- When unable to comment on a story, provide a short explanation. For example, suggest that it may be possible to comment once the investigation has been completed.
- Ask the reporter questions. This is an opportunity to clarify some of the broader contextual issues and may provide insight into how the information will be framed.
- Ask for corrections immediately. The best chance of getting a correction is to be timely and succinct in working with the proper authority or the editor.¹³

PROTECTING THE AGENCY AGAINST LIABILITY

Even in the most effective unit, heartrending mistakes do happen. In addition to the serious and long-term effects on the children and families, there is another aspect that often is difficult for supervisors and agencies to discuss—liability. It is a serious issue for the agency and for the CPS supervisor. Agency liability exists primarily from negligence. Negligence occurs when a responsible party fails to follow prudent or accepted practice and harm occurs as a result. The occurrence of harm does not in itself immediately mean negligence. For negligence to exist, there must be a substantial deviation from accepted practice. If a caseworker is found negligent, it is likely that a supervisor also will be found negligent. Consequently, this is an important area of supervisory concern.

Negligence can occur in several ways. For example, a client might be injured during transportation or a caseworker may have failed to secure a child in a proper child restraint. Similarly, a child placed in a foster care facility might be injured while left unsupervised. A third example exists when the agency has failed to respond to a complaint within established agency time frames and the child is severely injured. Negligence might exist in these cases if the caseworker or foster parent failed to follow agency procedures or if the agency failed to inform the caseworker or foster parent of these procedures.

There are several actions supervisors can take to reduce potential liability, including:

- Ensure that all caseworkers are adequately informed of agency policies and procedures. Simply giving the caseworker a copy of the policy manual is not enough. Evidence of a review of appropriate policies directly with caseworkers is important, especially when policies exist to protect the child or client from potential harm (e.g., the use of safety restraints while transporting the child).
- Periodically review cases to ensure that policies are being followed. When agency policies are not followed, written feedback should be provided to caseworkers, corrective action noted, and follow-up provided to ensure that case procedures have been brought into compliance. Supervisors should establish a regular schedule for the review of case records. The review should focus on key points of agency policy, without excluding a summary of the actual casework with the client. Both policy and practice are important. Supervisors who sign off on case records without an adequate review significantly increase their own risk.
- Make sure all policies are current and in writing, which is typically a responsibility of the administrative or central agency office. Policies are frequently modified by court decisions, county letters from the commissioner, or by other revisions. Keeping staff informed about policy

changes and providing evidence of such efforts is critical to protect the agency and to ensure that best practices are in place throughout the agency.

One of the times of greatest liability is when the agency falters or fails, such as when a child in the CPS system is injured, re-abused, or dies. The agency and supervisor must determine if the situation is the result of caseworker error or of systemic inadequacies or failures. Unfortunately, there may be instances when it is difficult to delineate where the responsibility lies and fault may be found with both. A review team (e.g., a fatality, agency, or citizen review team) can evaluate the circumstances in which a child sustains serious injuries or dies to determine if the agency did all it could to protect the child and to prevent future injuries or death. While it may be difficult, it is

important that the supervisor and caseworker participate in the review process, including collecting information promptly, accurately, and consistently. The review findings summarize the circumstances, identify possible individual or systemic deficiencies, and provide recommendations to prevent future incidents. Additionally, the review may identify staff training needs, policies that need to be changed, problematic inter- and intra-agency relationships, and other needed changes. When the caseworker has erred, it should be assessed whether it was a one-time, unavoidable situation or if it was part of a pattern of poor practice. Decisions about what is needed and appropriate for rectifying the situation can range from providing the caseworker with additional training to dismissal and must be determined on a case-by-case basis.¹⁴