

*Third Edition*

# The Supervisor's Guidebook

*Evidence-Based Strategies  
for Promoting Work Quality  
and Enjoyment  
Among Human Service Staff*

Dennis H. Reid, Marsha B. Parsons  
and Carolyn W. Green

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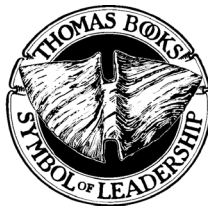
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**Evidence-Based Strategies for Promoting Work  
Quality and Enjoyment Among Human Service Staff**

*By*

**DENNIS H. REID  
MARSHA B. PARSONS  
CAROLYN W. GREEN**



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*This book is dedicated to our parents: Charles and Margaret Reid,  
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If not for their personal devotion and natural abilities to teach and  
supervise, we would not have been in a position to write this book.*





## PREFACE

The job of a supervisor of direct support staff in the human services is one of the most important yet unheralded professions. Supervisors are charged with ensuring support staff deliver quality services for people with disabilities whose quality of life is heavily dependent on how well those services are provided. Supervisors must ensure staff receive necessary training in their job duties, are actively supported to stay motivated to work proficiently, and, at times, effectively assisted to improve their work performance. Supervisors have to overcome many challenges to fulfill these critical duties, often involving frequent changes in their staff workforce and varying or limited resources.

Complicating the job of staff supervisors is a common lack of formal training necessary to perform their supervisory duties effectively. When supervisors do receive training on how to supervise staff work performance, the training is not always very useful. The training is frequently too general to equip supervisors with specific knowledge and skills to affect staff work performance on a routine basis. The training also is commonly based on unproven means of promoting quality staff performance, stemming from current fads or ideology that has little if any hard evidence to support the training content.

Over the last five and a half decades, a technology for supervising staff work performance in the human services has been evolving, derived from applied research conducted in many human service agencies. Such research has provided a sound evidence base to support the effectiveness of the supervisory strategies constituting the technology to date. We have been fortunate in participating in research on effective ways to supervise as well as in applying the technology in our work as supervisors in the human services. However, most supervisors have not had opportunities to become aware of these evidence-based means of fulfilling their supervisory duties.

The purpose of *The Supervisor's Guidebook* is to describe the existing evidence-based approach to supervision. Description of the approach is supplemented with practical suggestions based on our combined experience encompassing over 100 years of supervising staff performance in the human services. The intent is to provide supervisors with detailed information about tried and



tested means of promoting diligent and proficient staff performance and to do so in a way that maximizes staff enjoyment with their work. It is sincerely hoped the book fulfills this purpose for the reader.

D.R.  
M.P.  
C.G.

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# **THE SUPERVISOR'S GUIDEBOOK**



## **Section I**

# **INTRODUCTION TO SUPERVISION**



## **Chapter 1**

### **THE IMPORTANCE OF SUPERVISION**

**T**he most significant determinant of the effectiveness of human service agencies is the quality of work performed by direct support staff. Direct support staff spend more time with agency clients and provide more services that affect client welfare than any other agency personnel. In turn, a major determinant of the proficiency with which support staff fulfill their roles is the quality of supervision they receive.

The importance of supervision on the performance of direct support staff has long been acknowledged in the human services. Such importance is due to a number of factors. Most apparently, the majority of people who begin employment in a direct support capacity have no previous training in how to fulfill their roles. Although newly employed staff usually receive some agency orientation, most of the responsibility for training new staff how to perform specific job duties falls on their immediate supervisors. Relatedly, as new work expectations arise, such as implementing new teaching procedures with clients or programs to reduce challenging behavior, supervisors must ensure staff learn how to perform the new duties.

Because direct support staff usually have multiple performance expectations to fulfill, supervisors are also responsible for ensuring staff know what should be done at certain times and that staff have the resources to do their jobs. Supervisors must likewise intervene with staff at times to correct problems with work performance. Additionally, supervisors must help staff stay motivated to perform their duties proficiently on a day-to-day basis.

## WHAT IS SUPERVISION?

As just indicated, supervisors of direct support staff have many responsibilities to fulfill. In addition to the duties illustrated above, supervisors often have a variety of administrative tasks to perform, meetings to attend, work schedules to prepare, and documentation to maintain. However, from the perspective of actually *supervising* staff performance, the job of a supervisor essentially involves two basic responsibilities. First, when staff performance is less than adequate, supervisors must take action to improve that performance. Second, when staff performance is of sufficient quality, supervisors must take action to support and maintain that performance.

Supervisors typically acknowledge the importance of actively working to improve inadequate job performance of their staff. It is usually apparent, for example, that a supervisor must take action to reduce frequent absenteeism by a given staff person, alter inappropriate staff interactions with agency clients, or resolve problems with inconsistencies regarding how staff carry out client treatment procedures. In contrast, supervisors are not always cognizant of the importance of actively working to support appropriate staff performance.

Specific supervisory action is needed to support and maintain quality work among staff for a variety of reasons. In particular, a somewhat common phenomenon in human service agencies is what is generally referred to as staff “burnout.” Due to the effortful nature of providing direct services for individuals with disabilities day after day, many staff lose their motivation to work diligently and proficiently over time – they “burn out.” In other cases, new staff begin their jobs highly motivated but gradually lose their motivation because they are criticized by more experienced and less motivated staff for their work efforts. The latter staff resent the apparent motivation of new staff because it makes their less effortful performance more noticeable. Supervisors can prevent deterioration in the quality of staff work due to these and other reasons by actively supporting staff performance that is of high quality.

Taking action to improve inadequate staff performance and taking action to support and maintain quality performance represents the essence of supervision. These are the two supervisory responsibilities that have the most significant effect on what staff do in the workplace and correspondingly, the quality of services provided to agency clients. There is also a third component of supervision, though, that

warrants serious attention if supervisors are to successfully fulfill these two responsibilities on a consistent basis: the responsibilities must be fulfilled in ways that are acceptable to staff. Staff acceptance of supervisor actions is a key factor affecting staff work enjoyment, which in turn directly impacts staff motivation.

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**The essence of supervision is taking action to improve inadequate staff performance and taking action to support and maintain quality performance.**

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### **SUCCESSFUL SUPERVISION INVOLVES PROMOTING STAFF WORK ENJOYMENT**

Staff enjoyment with their jobs is a primary indicator of a highly motivated and quality work force, and should not be taken for granted by supervisors. Supervisors must actively strive to promote staff work enjoyment if their supervision is to be successful. Otherwise, supervisors will likely be working with staff who often dislike their day-to-day jobs, which inevitably leads to serious problems in the work place.

To illustrate, when staff are not enjoying their work, they reduce their work effort. Instead of directing their attention and effort to performing quality work, time is spent attempting to resolve the source of their discontent or simply complaining about the job. Relatedly, lack of staff enjoyment can negatively affect life quality of agency clients with whom the staff work. When staff are disgruntled about their work situation, they are less likely to interact in pleasant and positive ways with clients; their interactions with clients become more negative in nature.

Staff discontent with their jobs also makes the supervisors' job less desirable. Supervisors tend to enjoy their workday more if they are interacting with staff who are generally upbeat and pleasant versus staff who are frequently discontented. Additionally, when staff are experiencing frequent discontent with their work, absenteeism tends to increase as does staff turnover.

For the reasons just noted, as well as others to be discussed later, supervisors should go about their jobs of working with staff in ways that are acceptable to staff – ways that promote rather than impede