

7. Supervision as an Act of Service

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Supervision is powerful when grounded in service creating respect, safety, and growth that ripple outward to strengthen staff, build trust, and improve care for children, youth, and families.

When Marissa started her first week on the job, she was nervous but eager. She wanted to do well, to prove that she could manage the challenges of working with young people. Her new supervisor noticed the tension in her posture and the way she hesitated before asking questions. Instead of rushing her into tasks, the supervisor slowed down, listened carefully and created a space where Marissa felt both supported and respected. At first, this approach confused Marissa. She was used to leaders who emphasized power and focused on correction but as the days unfolded, she realized that this steady presence was something different. It wasn't about authority for its own sake. It was about service, and it was about her growth. Her supervisor was modeling the very values that Marissa would be expected to bring into her own practice with young people.

In the context of supervision, service is the intentional use of one's role and influence to promote the growth, confidence, and effectiveness of others. It means creating relationships grounded in respect and trust so that staff (and, in turn, the young people and families they serve) can grow into their potential. Service is not self-sacrifice or control (nor is it limited to surface gestures like pizza and doughnuts meant to boost morale). It's a conscious commitment to support development, model relational integrity and foster conditions where genuine growth and meaningful care can mature over time.

Supervision in child and youth care should be built on the same relational foundation as our direct interactions with children, youth, and families. The values that guide us in caring relationships – respect, presence, curiosity, trust

and shared responsibility – also shape the way we lead and support staff. Just as we create conditions of safety and belonging for young people, we are called to create the same for those we supervise.

This idea of parallel practice is central. The way we engage with staff becomes a mirror of what we hope they will provide to others. When we treat practitioners with dignity and invite them into learning moments, they are more likely to extend the same approach to the young people in their care. Supervision, then, is not a separate skill set detached from practice. It is an expansion of it.

The beauty of this perspective is that it does not require us to abandon what we already know. The skills we have honed during our everyday interactions – listening deeply, using rhythm and timing, being emotionally present and doing with rather than doing for or to – become the very foundation of effective supervision. Each supervisory interaction becomes an opportunity for staff to experience the same relational process that we expect them to embody in their work.

When we recognize that what works in practice also works in supervision, we free ourselves from thinking of leadership as something entirely different. Instead, we build on what we already know to be true: relationships matter most. And when we create a supervisory relationship grounded in those same values, we give staff a different and often healing experience, one that strengthens their ability to carry those values forward into their daily work.

Relational Encounters

Throughout our careers, we have likely supervised individuals who carry the weight of difficult experiences with prior supervisors. At times, the effects of those relationships surface almost immediately. We see it in staff who hesitate to ask for time off because they once had a supervisor who made them feel guilty for doing so. We notice it in those who are overly fearful of taking risks, asking for feedback or admitting mistakes because they were previously humiliated or disrespected by someone who should have supported them.

These experiences leave a lasting impression. Practitioners may or may not have lived through relational trauma in their personal lives, but they have likely encountered coercive or intimidating relationships in the workplace. Sadly, this pattern is far too common. The harm caused by supervisors who

misuse authority continues to echo in subsequent supervisory relationships, shaping how practitioners perceive leadership and what they expect from those in authority.

In many ways, working with these staff mirrors the work we do with young people who have been mistreated by those meant to care for them. What many practitioners have missed is the simple but profound experience of being treated with dignity, respect and kindness by a supervisor. Some have never known the security of a supervisory relationship built on trust.

Our task as supervisors is to provide a different experience. Just as in our direct work with children and youth, we are called to offer new relational encounters that allow people to see themselves differently in relationship with others. Supervisors hold the power to shape these experiences in ways that promote healing, foster growth, and model the very practices we want staff to bring to their work with children, youth, and families.

Just as we aim to create experiences of safety and belonging for children and families, we must recognize that the same principle applies to practitioners. We cannot expect them to offer what they have never received or are not encountering in the organizational relationships around them. Experiencing safety, respect, and encouragement in supervision becomes the groundwork that allows them to extend the same to others.

Providing these experiences can become a natural part of supervision. When we intentionally offer something different from what staff may have known before, we do more than help to heal past harm. We create a new model of leadership, one rooted in trust and respect, that equips practitioners to carry those values into every relationship they form.

Motives Matter

Effective supervisors start by developing a personal awareness of their own motives for taking on a supervisory role within a team or organization. Whether we are conscious of them or not, our motives (and more specifically the way we view ourselves) shape the way we show up, influence how we interpret the actions of others and frame the meaning we make of daily events. When we pause to consider what first drew us to this role, we begin to uncover the values, needs, and hopes that guide our leadership. This kind of awareness is not about striving for perfection. It's about grounding

ourselves in honesty and recognizing the orientation that shapes how we act and how we evaluate the actions of others.

Taking time to reflect on our motives gives us a clearer picture of both our strengths and our blind spots. It helps us recognize when we are leading from conviction and purpose, and when we might be pulled by less helpful impulses such as the need for control, approval, or advancement. With awareness, we can bring these motives into balance, drawing on what is life-giving and being more intentional when our motives risk narrowing our perspective.

The reasons we are drawn to supervision are varied, and may include:

- Expanding our influence across a team or system. Stepping into supervision allows us to shape more than our individual practice.
- Replicating the positive experiences we had with a past supervisor. We admired their example and want to create that same support for others.
- Pursuing organizational roles that require supervisory experience. Taking on supervision becomes a step toward advancing in leadership.
- Responding to encouragement from others who see our potential. We take on the role because trusted colleagues or leaders affirm our ability to succeed.
- Supporting and coordinating a team's potential for greater effectiveness. Supervision offers a way to help the group align and thrive.
- Enjoying the responsibilities that come with being in charge. The role can be personally fulfilling when it meets our own needs for influence and responsibility.

Whatever our motivation, the key is to hold it with awareness rather than judgment. Our reasons for stepping into supervision are not inherently right or wrong. They simply give us insight into what fuels us and where we may need to keep learning. By naming our motives, we create a foundation for steadier leadership, greater empathy toward others, and a clearer understanding of how our personal story intersects with the team's story. At the heart of it all, our motivation must remain anchored in the commitment

to promote and ensure quality care for the young people entrusted to our programs. When we lead from that place of awareness and purpose, our influence extends beyond ourselves and into the lives of those we guide and support.

Serving First

Supervision in child and youth care involves learning to relate to one another in ways that avoid coercion and create space for genuine support. At its best, supervision is an act of service, placing the growth of others at the center of our role. This perspective shifts the focus from exercising authority to creating the conditions where staff can learn, flourish, and contribute their best. When supervisors approach their work in this spirit, service becomes the foundation of leadership.

Robert Greenleaf, founder of the Center for Applied Ethics (later renamed the Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership), spent much of his career studying management and education. His conclusion was simple but profound: serving others is the priority of a leader or supervisor. True leadership begins with service, centering the growth of others without neglecting our own well-being.

Greenleaf described this idea as servant leadership. In his 1970 groundbreaking essay he wrote that “the servant-leader is servant first ... it begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first” (see Spears, 2025). Leadership, he explained, grows out of this desire to serve. It is a conscious choice that follows the impulse to care for others.

By contrast, Greenleaf observed that some people are “leader first,” driven more by a desire for power, recognition, or material reward. “The leader-first and the servant-first,” he said, “are two extreme types. Between them there are shadings and blends that are part of the infinite variety of human nature” (see Spears, 2025).

This distinction is worth the attention of all of us in a supervisory role. Are we stepping into the role because we want to serve and support others? Or are we more motivated by the authority, influence, or control that comes with the position? Supervision challenges us to ask: Is my primary desire a drive to seek power or a drive to serve first? Is it about control and coercion or about influencing others to become their best? The practice most aligned

with child and youth care is to lead through service, making the growth of others our first commitment.

Expanded Influence

Leadership, in many ways, is the influence we carry over the people and processes entrusted to us. That influence is never neutral. It can be exercised in ways that support and equip others or in ways that diminish and disempower. Our task as supervisors is to use our authority to create conditions where people can do their best work and grow in their capacity.

Supervisors who lead well shape more than daily operations. They help staff see possibilities beyond immediate circumstances, extend choices and experiment with new approaches. They bring energy into the workplace, invite reflection and spark change when it is needed. Problems are not seen simply as obstacles – they are approached as opportunities for learning, chances to transform setbacks into resilience and failures into growth.

At the same time, supervision is not only about vision or possibility. There are details to manage that cannot be ignored: work schedules, program agendas, community relationships and recruiting new workers. Just as important, supervisors ensure that listening to young people remains central so that their voices and experiences shape the program. Every decision, every interaction becomes an opportunity to strengthen staff and, ultimately, the care provided to children, youth, and families.

This balance between support and challenge is crucial. Supervision rooted only in challenge quickly drains and discourages. Supervision rooted only in support, however, risks becoming condescending and preventing genuine growth. Effective supervision holds both – offering encouragement and celebrating strengths while also engaging in honest feedback and acknowledging areas for improvement.

A core responsibility of supervision is helping workers reflect critically on their own practice. When supervisors avoid difficult conversations altogether, staff lose opportunities to learn. When those conversations are handled in ways that shame or damage trust, staff may necessarily engage in self-protection and defensiveness rather than feeling safe to learn and grow. But when feedback is offered with honesty and respect, it becomes constructive. Staff experience what it feels like to be both supported and

stretched and they are more able to carry that same balance forward into their own work with young people and families.

Effective supervisors are aware of the power they hold but they do not cling to it. Instead, they use their authority to empower and equip others, creating a ripple effect of growth and learning that extends far beyond the supervisory office and into the everyday lives of those we serve.

Meaningful Service

Effective supervisors measure their success not by how much authority they exercise but by how well they promote the growth and development of those they supervise. At its heart, supervision is a relational practice of service. The true test of leadership is whether those we serve grow as people – becoming healthier, wiser, more capable and more autonomous (Spears, 2025). Applied to supervision, this means asking: Are staff gaining confidence and skill because of our influence? Are they developing the capacity to take on more responsibility with steadiness and care? When we frame our leadership this way, the focus shifts from protecting our authority to creating the conditions where others can thrive.

Service sometimes calls us to step to the front (e.g., coaching, guiding, advocating or addressing faults in the system). At other times, it calls us to step back (e.g., making space for practitioners to shine, succeed and lead in their own circle of influence). Supervisors who serve well know when to protect, when to challenge and when to get out of the way.

Service-oriented supervision, then, is about more than offering support. It is about balancing encouragement with accountability, affirmation with honest feedback. When staff experience this balance in supervision, they are more prepared to extend the same to the young people and families they serve.

Marissa was initially confused by her supervisor's pace and intentional approach but in time she realized it was becoming the foundation of her confidence. She became more comfortable in her role and more confident engaging staff and youth in shared goals and growth. When new staff joined the team, Marissa echoed what she had received. Listening first, offering encouragement alongside constructive feedback, and creating safety for others to learn. The service she experienced became the service she offered.

This is the legacy of meaningful supervision. When we serve those we lead, they in turn learn to serve others. Our influence ripples outward, shaping practitioners, strengthening teams, and ultimately transforming the care offered to young people and families.

Reference

Spears, G. (2025). Servant leadership and Robert K. Greenleaf's legacy. In D. van Dierendonck & K. Patterson (Eds.), *Servant leadership: Developments in theory and research* (2nd ed., 15-36). Palgrave Macmillan.