



Social Work Supervision: An Art as Much as a Science

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September 10, 2022

In 2021, [47 million](#) American employees resigned from their jobs. As the “great resignation,” or “great rethink,” took hold, some employees left roles that simply didn’t align with their personal values. Better pay, more flexibility, and increased job satisfaction replaced the allure of a nine-to-five, clock in, clock out work culture. The idea of taking a job only for the sake of a paycheck was less appealing, especially for those in the early stages of their careers. Who wouldn’t, after all, capitalize on the opportunity for a more fulfilling work-life balance?

The Bureau of Labor Statistics discovered a one-to-one [correlation](#) between job switching and job quitting. Employees simultaneously quit one job to accept a better one. The sectors hit hardest by COVID—health care, hospitality, and retail—all experienced a seismic shift in resignation rates, although the switch to other industries is unknown. Health care workers, directly impacted by COVID, embraced telemedicine over in-person visits. Elective surgeries were put off, leading to a [\\$323.1 billion](#) loss in hospital revenues.

Many front-line workers experienced significant signs of chronic fatigue, burnout, and vicarious traumatization. One [CDC](#) report revealed that absenteeism—an indicator of burnout—spiked for home health aides, childcare workers, and other direct service personnel. These findings are not surprising. They merely affirm the reality that COVID had a measurable impact on those battling the pandemic.

Social workers were not immune to the collateral damage of the pandemic and the great resignation. [Studies](#) urged social workers to engage in self-care routines to mitigate the effects of burnout, especially in health care settings. Given the gravity of the situation, should social work supervisors be held to a higher level of clinical competency? Hospital social worker supervisors need to support their employees during these tough times, and they must ensure that their employees feel valued, appreciated, and understood.

Supportive and sound supervision is correlated with retention and employee satisfaction. Yet, such supervision is a nuanced and sometimes overlooked function. While it's not possible to invent the perfect supervisor, there are some best practices and standards that are required for social work supervisors. The Association of Social Work Boards offers a *Social Work Supervision* handbook that delineates the unique role of a social work supervisor. The standards offer a potpourri of information, ranging from qualifications, competency, self-care, and other important areas of focus.

A social worker with excellent supervisor traits generally demonstrates superior technical, planning, interpersonal, and conceptual skills. But on a practical level, how can social work supervisors earn the trust of their employees?

Here are some suggestions:

Active listening skills. [Studies](#) show that active listening skills enhance emotional connection, and generally speaking, are a key factor for satisfying relationships. A good supervisor actively listens to the concerns of their employees, whether they are relational conflicts, self-care issues, or administrative concerns. Simply put, the employee will feel heard.

Conversely, a supervisor who frequently interrupts, gets distracted, or rushes their employees will never succeed in gaining trust. The crucial role of supervision is not only to enhance skills but also to establish a safe environment where their employees can explore emotionally charged thoughts and feelings. A supervisor who cannot tune into these needs will lead their employees to mentally “check out.” Therefore, one of the best questions to ask future employers is, “What is your supervision style?” or “Tell me about your supervision model [group, individual,

relational].” It is vital that employees feel that their supervisors understand them, otherwise they may resign and find a better fit.

Professional development. Learning is an ongoing process that doesn’t end with a terminal degree. Social workers must meet continuing education requirements, as should social work supervisors. NASW and other organizations offer courses that outline social work supervisory competencies. Engagement in professional development encourages a sense of good will. Employees who know that their supervisors are learning new skills or sharpening their skills will feel like sticking around. Even if the supervisor doesn’t seem up to par, an employee will appreciate the effort.

Supervisors need to demonstrate a willingness to learn new skills. It’s worth the effort to be part of the game and not sit idly on the sidelines. Employees will favor a supervisor who admits their mistakes and shortcomings over one that seems to be content with the status quo and not improving their own competencies.

Team building activities. Social work is by nature a grueling profession. The notion of “going it alone” is antithetical to the mores of the field. Social work supervisors are seen as team players if they encourage team-building activities such as outings, challenges, and taking on specific projects that are personally enriching for employees. The goal of any team-building activity is to foster creativity, to provide a platform for new ideas, and to cultivate a sense of community. The hallmark of great supervisors is their ability to bring out the best in their employees. Making social work fun has the added benefit of helping clients. It’s a win-win scenario: A social worker who is motivated is likely to approach their work with gusto, and this excitement is palpable to clients.

The aforementioned are gentle reminders rather than novel ideas. Yet, it is worth underscoring, especially during a time of transition and resignation, that social work supervisors may be a key reason why employees will stay or leave jobs. Supervisors are in a position of being greatly appreciated or greatly disappointed by their staff.

The pandemic hit everyone hard, especially health care providers. The great resignation caused employees to reconsider their values and potentially quit unfulfilling jobs. Given this ideological shift, it’s important to note that social work

supervisors hold critical positions. As such, they should be held accountable for the success and the morale of their employees. Is this cause for alarm? No, but in the language of the pandemic, it is a time for reassessment.

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Original link: https://www.socialworktoday.com/archive/exc_090922.shtml