

APPLICATION OF GROUP SUPERVISION AS A METHOD OF DEVELOPING STAFF IN PENAL INSTITUTIONS

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Introduction/background: The article discusses the subject of group learning among prison service officers based on the example of group supervision.

Aim of the paper: Based on the studies of the subject literature and the authors' own research, an attempt was made to identify the benefits and barriers which accompany the implementation of group supervision within the framework of the prison system.

Materials and methods: The research was conducted in 2020, and the research method was individual interview with a standardized list of searched for information (semi-structured). The selection of study participants was carried out through purposive sampling; the respondents were prison service officers acting as psychologists with at least 15 years' experience in active service, defined as "experts".

Results and conclusions: The respondents agree concordantly that group supervision is a valuable method of group learning, emphasizing benefits such as: expanding awareness, understanding the dynamics of relationships with inmates, coping with difficult emotions, and obtaining valuable feedback. Among the barriers preventing officers from using this form on a permanent basis, the respondents mentioned: budgetary constraints in terms of financing, lack of regularity and cyclicity of meetings, and low awareness among superiors as to the beneficial aspects of supervision.

Keywords: staff development, prison service, penal institution, group supervision, group learning.

Human capital improvement methods

Nowadays, the competence potential of staff is one of the key elements underlying the success of any organization which is systematically subjected to the influence of an unstable environment and dynamic economic processes resulting from technological, social, cultural, legal and economic changes. This applies to both businesses and public, non-profit organizations. The improvement of human capital is of particular importance, since it is related to such phenomena as the ability to learn, acquisition of competence, and the ability to apply those in the workplace. The requirement of permanent competence improvement results from destandardization (it will be increasingly diverse and unpredictable) and dynamization (a greater number of challenges, significant changes and biographical turns, including changes of the employer, profession or place of residence) of career path models (Worek, Turek, 2015, p. 81). The effectiveness of the improvement process depends on the selection of adequate methods. There are various criteria for the division of methods: formal ones (development in the workplace, coaching, mentoring, job rotation, formal training, personal development based on directing one's own learning with a manager) and informal ones based on the experience gained in the past during the performance of tasks, discussion or self-education (Mendryk, 2016, pp. 246-247). One could also use the criterion of the place of training, which allows for distinguishing the following: on the job training and off the job training (Kulkarni, 2013, p. 139). I. Mendryk (2016, p. 247) also distinguishes methods related to functioning in a workplace, related to functioning in the organization, and based on one's own activity, not related to professional functioning. When analysing the phenomenon of occupational improvement historically, it first consisted in acquiring professional practice, and over time learning through practice gained recognition as an important element connecting the theoretical and conceptual basis of formal teaching with knowledge derived from experience. At the same time, improvement based on relationships and trust is gaining increasing importance. These are the trends in staff development that group supervision is part of as a learning process through the assessment of experience in order to improve the skills and competencies of learners and teachers, since it is a two-way process which benefits both parties. What is of importance is the fact that this method is based on trust and collaboration but differs from consultation or mentoring. At the same time, due to the increasing complexity of management problems, an interdisciplinary approach is employed increasingly often, especially in terms of psychological or medical experiences. This also applies to the transfer of training methods and the possibility of implementing group supervision in the practice of human resource management. It allows both personal and professional development. It becomes a forum for critical reflection and improvement of professional identity. As a universal method of human resources development, it can be used both in businesses and in public organizations.

Characteristics of the functioning of the prison service

The Prison Service is a formation which brings together staff who are diverse in terms of education, specialization, and professional tasks. Prison staff participate in the implementation of the rehabilitation function of the imprisonment punishment. According to Ciosek (2016), the organization and process of resocialisation in such a specific place as a penal institution – assuming that carrying out "this process in this place is possible at all, (...) depends primarily on prison officers, their traits, credibility, and authenticity, efficiency of message conveyance, etc."

In order to be able to perform the undoubtedly difficult job of working in direct contact with inmates well, one should have relevant qualifications, including formal education, prior to commencing the service (Kalaman, 2014). Pursuant to Art. 27 of the Act on the Prison Service, officers should demonstrate appropriate general and professional preparation, experience, a high moral level, and systematically learn and improve professional qualifications (Szatkowska, 2014). All forms of training ought to have the nature of practical occupational training, which should integrate knowledge and skills to apply the knowledge to the extent necessary for the position held in the service. These all serve to improve the quality of the Prison Service staff – possession of the knowledge and skills necessary and useful in everyday performance of the service (Szczepaniak, 2015). Professional improvement of the officers is organized by training centres and staff improvement centres in the form of: specialist courses, conferences, meetings and seminars, as well as general and department training. They are conducted in a system based on quartering in barracks, or an electronic distance learning system. The importance of the issue of lifelong learning in the Prison Service (PS) seems to be important as the officers who were asked in the survey about the main sources of stress at work mentioned, among others, the inability to achieve self-fulfilment (Pomiankiewicz, 2010).

Training at the district level, organized by district inspectorates and subordinate organizational units or organizational cells of these units, is carried out in the form of departmental training, in accordance with the needs established in this regard by the head of the unit. It mainly includes raising the level of the general professional or specialist knowledge and practical skills of an officer; familiarizing the officer with the current regulations pertaining to the operation of the Prison Service, or providing training to the extent necessary for the correct execution of official tasks and activities. District-level improvement is conducted by heads of units, heads of organizational divisions of these units, as well as officers, Prison Service employees and other persons with experience, knowledge, skills or instructor's qualifications. External occupational improvement is also organized and carried out by entities outside the Prison Service. The image, professional qualifications and level of education of Prison Service officers are changing. Recruitment to the service is also undergoing a transformation. Much emphasis is placed on the mental predispositions of the staff.

The system of educating prison staff required thorough qualitative changes. Traditional lecture forms have given way to practical classes, workshops and seminars. Today, an attendee of such training is not only required to possess theoretical knowledge, but also to be capable of applying it in specific professional situations. A crucial element of professional competence is knowledge of the mental state of inmates, emerging under the influence of prison isolation, and an awareness of social processes taking place in an institution as specific as a prison. Knowledge of the mechanisms responsible for the behaviour of people in conditions of social isolation and the influence of the total institution on the staff and inmates allows for predicting threats, diagnosing a problem, and counteracting the negative effects of prison. Therefore, it is very important to develop the general and professional knowledge of officers, support their self-education, consolidate their ability to analyse and evaluate the situation and their actions, as well as develop and maintain their physical and mental capacity to serve in the Prison Service in addition to the necessary interpersonal skills.

The concept of group supervision

Supervision may be defined in various ways; for the purposes of this article, following Grewiński and Skrzypczak (2014), it can be stated that *supervision is a constantly changing learning process which takes place in the course of an interaction between a supervised person and the supervisor (person or group), if the content, duration and frequency, contexts and approaches are mutually agreed upon according to mutually agreed objectives*. Therefore, in order to simplify it, group supervision is a method of consulting one's own work with patients (or clients) within a circle of other specialists¹. Aleksandrowicz (2010) emphasizes that supervision seems to be an essential part of training specialists in the field of psychotherapy. Its aim is to discuss in detail and gain insight into the phenomena occurring in the therapeutic relationship, in accordance with ethical standards, to ensure high quality therapeutic services. According to Gilbert and Evans, supervision is “the relationship between a supervisor and a supervisee, used in the joint search for solutions. It is a situation in which two people are considering the well-being of a third person (...)”. The aim of supervision is, first and foremost, the well-being of the patients treated by us in psychotherapy. Currently, supervision in psychotherapy is not only an innovative and very specialised practice of training psychotherapists. It has become a standard and universally applicable model for monitoring the process of psychotherapy and a place for training therapists. The main tasks of supervision are to ensure the possibility of using the knowledge and skills of the supervisor, providing the supervised person with experience in building a therapeutic relationship, and shaping the way

¹ Depending on the presented modality, psychotherapists use the term – "patient" (e.g. psychoanalytically oriented ones) or client (e.g. those oriented towards the humanities).

this person functions as a psychotherapist. Supervision may be carried out both individually and in groups. Participation in supervision, especially in a group form, means participating in the process of giving – by bringing one's content on the relationship with the patient as well as receiving – support, feedback or tips from both participants and the supervisor. During the supervision, we share our difficulties and doubts with other psychotherapists, and we observe their work. Supervision is a mutual exchange of experiences, thoughts, joint reflection on the sources of difficulties, searching for the essence of the problem, finding new solutions and revealing one's feelings. As Anderson (2000) points out, supervision is based on three pillars – the connection between participants and supervisor, cooperation and co-creation. Often it is also the discovery of one's own previously unknowing feelings and beliefs. Supervision work focuses on a better understanding of phenomena such as resistance, transference, countertransference, etc. The therapist has an opportunity to increase their self-awareness at work, which in turn influences the quality of the health services provided by them.

Applications of group supervision in the prison system

In 2016 the supervision of psycho-correctional treatments with respect to imprisoned persons was introduced into penitentiary regulations. Penitentiary regulations were updated in this respect and in Regulation No. 19/16 of April 14, 2016 issued by the Director General of the Prison Service Chapter 4 in §71, which defines the collective implementation of specialised interactions at a therapeutic department, and indicates that it consists in, among others, the supervision of the therapeutic team. At the same time, §84 theoretically imposes an obligation on the Director of the penal institution in which the therapeutic department operates to provide financial resources for the implementation of supervision as part of the financial plan of the penal institution. It is worth noting, however, that in the Polish realities, supervision is provided for people providing therapeutic services to inmates, which is limited to a group of psychologists. This form of support and learning does not include correction officers or the staff of the security department who face challenges in their daily work with inmates, such as aggressive behaviour or episodes of self-mutilation, which contribute to the increase of professional stress experienced by them (Steiner, Wooldredge, 2015). Winship et al. (2019) cites an example of applying group supervision in a prison, describing it as weekly hour-long meetings of a team of prison officers, during which there is space for them to share their reflections on the dynamics of the relationships between themselves and inmates. Here one can find references to the concept of learning by Kolb, who emphasises that the learning process is based first on experience and then terminates through applying in practice the knowledge stemming from the conclusions drawn (Kolb, 2007). As pointed out by Fereirra et al. (2014, p. 47) – *the process of supervision can be strengthened if the supervisor and the*

supervisees are aware of their learning styles and are able to control their actions so that they will suit them. The practical application of this knowledge, therefore, becomes another experience which can initiate the learning cycle from the beginning. He postulates that thanks to supervision, prison officers are able to, in a way, "learn how to learn", i.e. reflect upon the experience they have gained and, on the basis thereof, incorporate new conclusions into their professional functioning (O'Hara, 2009).

Research purpose and methodology

The aim of the research was to answer the question of what benefits are brought by the introduction of the group supervision of the prison system and what potential barriers may hinder it. In order to gather material allowing this question to be answered, a decision was made to select the qualitative measure (Lucas, 2014); using the technique of individual interview with a standardised list of information sought (semi-structured). The interviews were conducted during the period August-September 2020. The selection of participants in the study was carried out through purposive sampling; the respondents were prison officers who had performed the function of psychologists with a minimum of 15 years' experience in active service. The respondents worked in various prisons throughout Poland. They are referred to as "experts" hereinafter. One type of instructions for interviews was prepared and it addressed the following issues: available methods of supporting PS officers in learning, the benefits of introducing group supervision, potential barriers to the introduction of group supervision, and activities aimed at making this method more effective for Prison Service officers.

Research results

All the experts interviewed stressed the important role of group supervision as a method of learning and building the personal resources of prison service officers. It was also pointed out that the implementation of this method prevents professional burn-out – *it is an irreplaceable safety vent,"which allows for relieving tension.* The importance of supervision for understanding the dynamics of interaction with prisoners was also emphasised – *it allows for gaining insight into a relationship with a difficult client in prison isolation – inmate, a person deprived of freedom.*

One of the experts also emphasises the fact that participation in supervision allows one to broaden awareness of and include information from areas which are often abandoned due to "cognitive economy", such as non-verbal communication. As one of the experts emphasises – *the reason for participating in supervision is to have a better view of the patient and oneself in relation to them*. Apart from the benefits associated with supervisees coping with difficult emotions better, the behavioural aspect of supervision was stressed. In the opinion of experts, it can act as a kind of "toolmaker", which the participant reaches for when it is difficult for them to find a solution in a given professional situation – *owing to the experience of others, it is possible to obtain numerous suggestions for correcting the conducted interactions in order to make them more constructive*.

The respondents also indicated the possibility of receiving valuable feedback not only from the supervisor, but also from other participants. *It is valuable that in a safe environment I can learn what other co-workers, who know the realities of working in prison, really think*.

Despite the unquestionable benefits of implementing supervision as a learning method in the prison system, which the experts participating in the study agree on, there are certain barriers to their widespread implementation. The first one is the financial barrier, emphasized as significant by all experts – *not all of the psychologists willing to participate can use supervisions due to budgetary constraints*.

This barrier gives rise to an organizational barrier, which was mentioned by three experts as pivotal – *the hourly rates of remuneration for supervisors in relation to the funds we receive to cover them allow an average of four group supervision meetings comprising a maximum of eight teaching hours. In order to make supervision meaningful, effective and efficient, it should be, above all, regular*. The lack of a fixed schedule for supervision, and thus the feeling of not having satisfied the need for predictability, is a difficulty stated by one of the experts – *supervisions usually take place in the second half of the year (once a week), because the funds for them are probably allocated before the holiday season*. Another obstacle mentioned, associated with superiors' convictions about this form of support for officers, may be rooted in the organizational culture of the prison system. *A barrier may be posed by decision makers' unawareness of the need for supervision felt by professionals in the field of support*.

Additionally, it is also related to another difficulty, which is the proper preparation of supervisors and the knowledge of the realities of working with the client in isolation – *the situation is sometimes a stalemate, because supervision with a certified supervisor, a clinician from outside the prison walls," often results in the proposed solutions being impossible to apply due to the regulations and rules applicable in a penal institution. The solution is therefore a supervisor who is familiar with the realities of working with inmates, who is, for example, a retired officer. However, in such a case they do not have sufficiently well-established therapeutic experience*.

The experts proposed specific actions that could be taken to ensure optimal conditions for such a form of learning as supervision. Of primary importance is appropriate allocation of funds to ensure the continuity and regularity of supervision *-in connection with the requirement of accounting for the so-called earmarked funds until the end of November and their allocation most frequently at the turn of March and April, a forced "gap" of several months without supervision occurs, which should be eliminated.* The aspect of the place where the supervision should take place was also emphasized as an obstacle to the potential opening up of supervisees and bringing difficult aspects of their work to the meeting – *from my experience, it would be better if it took place outside the prison – at a competent supervisor's place.*

Discussion of the results

The experts unanimously drew attention to the role of supervision as a mental health prophylaxis tool among officers. This conclusion is consistent with the reports from the research by Wallbank (2013), claiming that regular monthly supervision increases job satisfaction and reduces the level of emotional exhaustion. Earlier studies also demonstrated the existence of links between this emotional exhaustion and increased employee turnover (Cropanzano et al., 2003; Lee and Ashforth, 1996). Therefore, a conclusion can be drawn that group supervision appears to act as a tool supporting the maintenance of stable employment at a penal institution, as well as preventing premature departure of valued specialists, such as educated and experienced officers, from the profession.

The aspect of supervision related to efforts towards improving relations between officers and prisoners turned out to be significant. Similar conclusions were reached by Atkinson and Mann (2012), who created a focus group of prison officers. Its purpose was to isolate disturbing behaviours among inmates, which, however, escaped the attention of the remaining group of officers. As the authors demonstrate, this type of training increases the vigilance of prison staff, and also makes their observations extremely valuable, as they become an "untapped resource" in the prison system, which can be used to forecast changes in the functioning of inmates. Interestingly, research has shown that a safe, predictable and stable relationship between officers and inmates is associated with a lower rate of return to prison (Kennealy et al., 2012). As the authors emphasized, the work to impart such a character to these interactions was conducted, among others, during supervisory meetings.

The postulate of the cyclical nature of prison supervision is reflected in the literature on the subject, where regularity is cited as one of the basic principles for this form of work, constituting a sort of framework for its functioning (Tomlin et al., 2014). Another intriguing postulate is to take care not only of the aforementioned time frames, but also the space for holding supervision. It seems that it is often treated as a secondary matter, specific "technicalities", which, however,

significantly affect the quality and involvement of the supervisees in the supervision process. Creating a safe place outside the prison system may contribute to what, according to Józefik (2010, p. 16), is the basis of the supervision process, i.e. a good relationship between the supervisee and the supervisor, which comes down to accepting procedures, trust, and the possibility of openly sharing one's thoughts and emotions; Jelonkiewicz (2018, p. 78) holds a similar opinion, claiming that the supervision relationship can be considered a central and necessary element of the supervision work, and the supervisor themselves often plays the role of an adviser, teacher, expert and mentor. The role of group supervision as a support tool for newly employed officers seems to be an area worth exploring. Researchers (Dobrowolska et al., 2017) emphasize that nowadays young people planning to enter the labour market are at a greater risk of developing mental disorders than before, and therefore it is crucial to identify protective factors assisting in the adaptation to a new professional role.

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