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FEEDING IT FORWARD: CO-SUPERVISION AS A HEALTHY CONVERSATION

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Sally Hardy and Paul Johnson: In conversation.

Introduction

Thinking about what 2024 will bring can often be a daunting prospect. We all face challenges, some of which are known, others remain unknown, in what another year entails. Whether a challenge this year is to change, in terms of career, lifestyle, or behaviour changes, we know that human behaviour is frequently inhibited by past experiences, manifest most comfortably by repeat patterns, or relying on old habits we have formed over many years to manage anxiety and stress. For example, when considering work pressures, we know our public services are challenging places to work and can also be challenging for those receiving services.

As those ambitious New Year resolutions begin to fall by the wayside, it is our old habits that quickly start to resurface. This blog explores how to utilise aspirations in terms of 'feeding it forward', and how important time spent in conversation with a critical friend can become an essential arsenal in our armoury, from which to remain buoyant in the relentless challenges, and anticipated changes we will undoubtedly experience in our working and home lives. Importantly, how can we keep ourselves vibrant and excited as to what is around the corner?

Captured in this blog is the essence of a critical conversation between a colleague and myself, whom many of you may know. Paul Johnson worked for over 21 years in our Norfolk and Waveney System, most recently at Norfolk and Suffolk Mental Health NHS Foundation Trust (NSFT), as their lead educator. Paul and I worked together for several years, culminating in working with Sri Lanka to extend mental health knowledge and skills through the NHS England funded mental health programme.

Our critical conversation occurred in early January 2024 aiming to use that precious time before starting back at work post winter break. We wanted to have some time to share both recent life events and work-related issues, gaining insights from each other's knowledge and expertise as a process of co-supervision.

What do we mean by co-supervision?

Co-supervision, in this context, is a collaborative inquiry approach where supervision is a conversation between two people who agree to take turns in discussing aspects on which to critically reflect. A mutual goal is seeking a shared understanding and enhanced learning potentials from the issues being discussed. Through drawing upon each other's expertise, theoretical perspectives and experiences, co-supervision provides a safe space to explore aspects we find challenging. Also known in the therapeutic field as peer supervision, (Basa, 2019), this approach offers an alternative to more formal approaches to clinical, or managerial supervision, where there is an anticipated level of hierarchical standing between a learner and their more experienced or skilled supervisor. Working in this mutually respectful dyad (or pair) provides a reflective space and time given to reaching a deeper understanding of situations, motivations and informed actions, as a mutual endeavour for supporting and further

stimulating each other's work. However, in our discussion we also realised we were keen to feed forward our learnings, in the process of further enabling others in their situations and circumstances.

Hence the idea of writing up our conversation into a blog. We share this blog, not only as an example of how to address and capture contemporary workplace challenges, explored from a psycho-dynamic perspective, but also in how to keep our personal inner selves from the potential risk of drowning under the pressure of workplace demands during 2024 and all it has to offer and will bring for us to deal with.

Sally: *How is the new job going?*

Paul: *I am getting into the rhythm of it, although still early days and having to get used to all the travelling and being away from home. Having been over 22 years in the NHS it is hard to not feel constantly guilty for not working in the same way I did in my previous role. With the commute to and from London it gives me time to listen to podcasts, and think about the programme I will be delivering & ruminating on the culture of the organisations I work with. Then the return journey is about reflecting on what worked well, what could be improved, why did this happen, what else can I share with the delegates next time?*

Sally: *It is fascinating, isn't it, that our brains need to process complexity that way. It is as if our backgrounds in mental health and your group psychotherapy training helps us achieve that processing quite quickly. Being able to quickly read the room, understand the dynamics of a team or an organisation and the working relationships within it, are so important.*

Paul: *Definitely. I see so much shame in the system. Where people are feeling under the gaze of auditors, Care Quality Commission (CQC), regulators, whatever it is, there is a constant fear held that people are not performing somehow. And even wider than that organisations are also facing shame. All of which has an impact on the staff who work within it, have to hold that feeling and sense of being overlooked and judged all the time. It can become traumatising for the whole system.*

Sally: *That article you shared with me before, on Fear and Anxiety in Healthcare – who was it again?*

Paul: *Ah yes – Ben Fuchs. Ben and I talked about Shame in healthcare, and he shared his paper and ideas, which was pre-pandemic but highly relevant to today.*

Sally: *It is as if Freud's iceberg analogy, of what is happening underneath the surface, in our subconscious is the guilt and shame and this manifests itself above the water, as behaviours, where people are either angry or resistant to change, and seeking blame elsewhere. It becomes that victim cycle where people feel trapped and ineffective.*

Paul: *Yet how do we enable people to address that through the work we do? The company I work for 'A Kind Life', recognises the need to facilitate and enable others through our programmes of work, but how to sustain that level of awareness is difficult longer term. We can address the individual, but the system level has an impact of re-traumatising staff and causing them to repeatedly experience shame, fear and anxiety.*

Sally: *I think that is where our facilitative work comes in, at that level of exposure. Yet, how to achieve that in a non-threatening way, in not being seen as someone coming in to yet give more pressure and pile on more shame. I see so often in the work I do that people are suspicious of how I want to work in collaboration with them, and their organisation, as their own expectation can be that we are in competition with them somehow, or being brought in to make change, when real transformational*

change happens from the ground up, and when board to beside there is a shared vision and value base for improvement.

Paul: What do you do then to build relationships with people? How do we allow them to feel safe enough to start to challenge their conventional thinking and long held traditional ways of doing things, having people come and do to them, rather than working with others?

Sally: I think I have to role model being accessible, non-threatening, create a safe space for having critical conversations, like we are doing now. But that can take time and a mutual understanding of how to attain a shared vision for change. It's about trying all the time to walk alongside people. If you can get like-minded people together, with an articulated shared vision and shared values that is when magic starts to happen.

Paul: Then life throws a curve ball, like a bereavement or something and it can destabilise that. We don't live life in a vacuum and have to pay equal attention to home and well as work.

Sally: For sure, it took me a while to realise I got terse with my family after my mum died. I was missing her I guess and that spilled over into my working relationships a bit too, as I got more and more intolerant of people, as if no one else had ever felt bereaved! We just don't get the space to talk that through with colleagues, perhaps for fear of making them, or me cry, or showing vulnerabilities in the workplace.

Paul: Families are such an important primary learning though. As the youngest of seven I found I needed to use all my project management skills for my Dad's funeral.

Sally: We are getting older Paul, losing our parents. It makes me think of my own mortality, does it you?

Paul: That's why I want to continue to feed it forward, sharing with the next generation, sharing my knowledge with others in the work I do. How can I do more of that in 2024?

Sally: That's a great idea, and something I am using in a talk that's coming up with the Embedded Scholars discussing 'what is next?'. How do they ensure they are also mentoring, coaching and bringing on others? It is important aspect of collaborative learning, no matter where people are in their career. There is a book by Richard Rohr called 'Falling Upwards', where he talks about how we spend so much time and energy climbing the career ladder, do we give enough time to considering what do we do when we get to the top? Where do we go then? Do we spend as much time planning for latter life, and how we use these life events to enable others on their life journey, sharing our wisdoms and experiences?

Paul: I did a podcast for Verve Health Care the other day on workplace kindness, culture and leadership¹, which covered some of that - I will share it with you

Sally: Can I get permission to use it in the NICHE newsletter, or website, for others? A great example again of us feeding forward.

Paul: Yes of course, this is all part of my feeding it forwards. I will check but I am sure it is freely available.

¹ With kind permission. Podcast link to Paul speaking on 'Kindness in leadership: Unlocking Workplace Wellbeing' can be found here: https://youtu.be/0j919r3C-r0?si=jpFL_jGrTJ0k6MHp.

Summary

Even within this brief extract of what was a far longer, involved and personal discussion between colleagues, we hope that what becomes clear is how a critical conversation allows for shared learning. It is recognised that such a conversation has beneficial outcomes. Not just for building our confidence, as ideas and thoughts are verified by another person, in agreement that we are doing the right things, but also in the shared ambitions and career goals of giving back. Giving back is one of the five steps to wellbeing². By making these social connections, giving time to each other in a critical conversation serves to reduce isolation and put a measure on self-doubt, as ideas and concepts become clearer in discussion with others. All of which are part of a healthy engagement and helps in achieving living fulfilling lives, in a fast-paced, charged and challenging world within which we inhabit together. Remaining open, curious and having mutual respect for each other's experiences is a worthy professional and personal investment. Try it sometime soon. We think you will enjoy the experience.

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² 5 steps to mental wellbeing <https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/self-help/guides-tools-and-activities/five-steps-to-mental-wellbeing/> (last accessed 17.1.2024)