

Observational Supervisions

Traditionally, supervisions have been a structured affair, taking the tried and tested format of a scheduled face-to-face chat between a manager and their member of staff. But while this style of supervision has many benefits – including the chance to offload concerns, give and receive feedback and generally reconnect – they do not always give us a full picture of what's working really well, and sometimes not so well, with day-to-day support

Here, an area manager explains how adopting 'observational' supervisions has created a positive and continual learning environment that's not only improving the way staff work, but providing them with the real-time advice they need to become more confident support workers.

"I first heard about observational supervisions after attending United Response's Practice Leadership course in 2009. We were given the task of completing an observation, focused on engagement, in a service. Then within a area wide practice focussed consultation meeting, Team Managers discussed it – and we felt that this was such a useful tool that we adapted the form so we could use it in place of some sit down supervisions on a regular basis. We believed it would help teams to improve their skills around active support; and, as we supported a lot of people with very complex needs, this was an area I really needed people to excel at.

Active support is a lot about paying attention to the little things, so the idea of an observational supervision, where we could actually watch from a distance and give almost immediate feedback, fitted in perfectly. For new staff, in particular, who are not always as confident or as experienced in some of the support techniques we use, it gave us a great opportunity to check how they were getting on, encourage them when they did something well and talk them through how to do some things differently.

One of the advantages of an observational supervision is that it can be done flexibly as part of the normal routine, but the biggest reason to use them is that they shine a light on the little things we do, that if changed, could make a big difference to the people we're supporting.

One example of how we've used observational supervisions well was with a woman called Mary. Mary has very complex needs and we were trying to find a way of supporting her to engage in making her own cup of tea. By watching the way different staff supported her to do this, it became very clear that the effectiveness of the support was influenced by a variety of factors we would otherwise have paid no attention to – for example, whether the radio was on in the background, the words staff used to encourage her or whether or not someone else was in the kitchen at the same time. Once we realised these things were playing a part in how engaged Mary was with the activity, we made changes. We kept the environment quiet, used the same, consistent communication, and asked co-workers not to interrupt unless necessary.

Further observational supervisions revealed even more about what helped Mary engage or not with this process. The manager and her team knew that Mary didn't like her hands to be touched and so hand-over-hand techniques put her off undertaking this activity. To help her do more of the task without her supporters using this technique, they replaced normal sugar with sugar cubes so she could pick them up and put them in her cup without needing help to hold a spoon. Little things like this would not have been spotted in a normal supervision yet have now led to her being able to take part in the whole process of making her cup of tea.

My advice for any managers who want to start using observational supervisions is this:

1. Make sure staff know what they're about – that it's not about trying to catch them out - and that they're relaxed when you do one.
2. Watching each other support people is part of our job - the more you do it and the more you change as a result will improve things for everyone involved.
3. Always sit down and discuss what you have seen with the people concerned - be positive and spend time listening too
4. Be flexible and sensitive about when you do them – but actually, if you observe when it's not a good day or things are complicated, you may learn some very useful things – it's vital to use your judgement.