

Using the “Professional Package” to help supervisors enhance cultural sensitivity when confronting



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Abstract

The topic of confrontation can bring uncomfortable feelings and many times is avoided by supervisors. This can allow less than acceptable practice to be validated and continue. That reluctance to confront is often compounded when the behavior to be confronted has culturally sensitive dynamics. This paper will offer a definition of confrontation the authors have developed that will present a more positive view of confrontation and encourage supervisors to see confrontation as a dynamic vehicle for growth. The paper outlines strategies to develop what the authors call a “professional package” for a confrontation that will minimize the potential damage to self esteem and increase the possibility for cultural sensitivity. By focusing the confrontation on addressing a generally accepted professional standard that is not being met, or an attempt to better understand the intent behind the behavior, a forum is created for a rich supervisory process. The paper closes with a seven step model for a professionally packaged confrontation.

Why confrontation is avoided

For many people merely the word “confrontation” brings an uncomfortable feeling in their stomach. It often brings thoughts of an unpleasant interaction or aggressive encounter. For those in the helping professions it seems to

particularly go against the very nature of their personality, or what many years of schooling has taught. While it can be easy to intellectually accept that differences of opinions, ideas, and thoughts are inevitable among critically thinking people, and that constructively resolving these conflicts will most often strengthen the relationship, many still find rationales to avoid confronting a situation. Some reasons that confrontations are avoided include; a desire to be "nice", hoping that the situation will just get better on its own, or fear things may get worse after the confrontation. The supervisor may also avoid confrontation because of a feeling that he/she has already waited too long to confront and thus validated the behaviour in some way, or is not modeling the behaviour to be confronted. In addition to all these temptations not to confront, the supervisor may be especially wary of confronting a behaviour, which is a potentially culturally sensitive issue. This can create a cycle of not confronting as the failure to confront a culturally laden issue doesn't create a forum for the parties to understand the cultural dynamics making a confrontation even less likely next time.

Cultural sensitivity

The desire to be "culturally sensitive" would seem to be an indisputable goal for everyone, yet trying to understand and quantify what this means is a complicated task. This is partly because the definition and meaning of "culture" is so wide ranging and elusive. Many times when one

thinks of culture the frame of reference is limited to one's ethnicity. Ethnicity is only one part of a person's culture and is generally connected to a person's own identification with a group of common origin. Yuet Cheung defines ethnic identification as "the psychological attachment to an ethnic group or heritage" (Cheung, 1993). Trying to define "culture" entails a much larger view. In our cultural competence courses we use the generic definition of "shared values, language, customs, celebrations, traditions, arts, institutions and norms of a group of people". J. W. Green adds an important insight to the understanding of the definition of culture by describing it as "those elements of a people's history, tradition, values, and social organization that become implicitly or explicitly meaningful to the participants" (Green, 1982). Any attempt to strategize a confrontation relating to a culturally laden issue must take into account the increased level of meaning the cultural framework brings to the situation. Figuring in the ethical responsibility for culturally competent practice, the task seems even more daunting. There are many definitions of cultural competence but the one put forth by the National Association of Social Workers is fairly inclusive of many of the themes. "Cultural competence refers to the process by which individuals and systems respond respectfully and effectively to people of all cultures, languages, classes, races, ethnic backgrounds, religions, and other diversity factors in a manner that recognizes, affirms, and values the

worth of individuals, families, and communities and protects and preserves the dignity of each" (NASW, 2001). It is an extremely admirable definition, and a wonderful standard to reach for. However, one can see that if he/she were already anxious and not confident about confronting the idea of trying to be sensitive to that standard of competence might rule out confronting anything they viewed as potentially culturally sensitive.

A different view of confrontation

Part of the lack of comfort in confronting is the typically negative definitions of the word and concept of confrontation. The Miriam-Webster on line dictionary defines confrontation as "the clashing of forces or ideas". The Cambridge International Dictionary of English simply states "a fight or argument". The compact Oxford English Dictionary describes the verb to confront as "meet face to face in hostility or defiance". These are typical definitions and certainly do not encourage the idea of a confrontation being a culturally sensitive intervention. We have developed a working definition of confrontation for our supervision trainings that gives a very different perspective. We view confrontation as:

A proactive intervention to intercept and redirect behaviour that may require change

and

to create a forum to better understand and guide the judgment/practice of both parties in order to ultimately improve quality and culturally competent service.



We feel that adhering to this definition will provide the supervisor with a much more positive sense of confrontation and encourage them to see it as a vehicle for understanding and growth. We describe confrontation as an intervention that should be proactive and thoughtful. It is not recommended that a confrontation be done on the spot unless there is an immediate safety concern or there has been a thoughtful decision to confront in public to make a strong message about an issue. If the latter is the goal we recommend a consultation with at least two objective parties to see the possible negatives of a public confrontation before proceeding. Confrontation should be strategic and with the intent of growth, not an emotional reaction. We specifically use the phrase "behaviour that *may* require change". If someone has made up their mind that the behaviour confronted must change no matter what, then we suggest it is not a confrontation but rather a corrective interview. The person confronting should be willing to hear the other point of view and perhaps be convinced they misperceived the issue. One of the goals of consistent use of professionally packaged confrontations should be to enhance the relationship of the parties involved. In a situation where the confronting party genuinely listens and changes their position a strong basis of trust is created for future confrontations. The second part of the definition focuses on confrontation being a vehicle for discussion that will hopefully create a learning situation for both parties. The learning

that can take place in a confrontation with cultural overtones takes on added significance as one hopes to move further along the road of cultural competence.

Confrontation and supervision

There are many different definitions of supervision in our field. Most are close to the basic framework laid out by Alfred Kadushin which states that supervision entails three main task areas of administrative, educational, and supportive responsibilities (Kadushin, 1992). In the definitions we have seen there has not been any specific references to confrontation as an integral part of the definition of supervision. As a way to encourage supervisors to see confrontation as a positive part of their role we have included it in our definition of supervision:

Supervision is a professional relationship that provides support, education, monitoring of quality, and creates a safe forum to reflect on professional practice. It should encourage constructive confrontation and critical thinking that informs and improves the practice of all parties. Respecting the inherent hierarchy in the relationship, it should accept the ethical responsibility to use power in a thoughtful manner. The dynamics in the supervisory relationship can create a parallel process in all other relationships including that of the client/worker.

Ultimately, supervision should be the vehicle to create dynamic growth, establish high professional standards and enhance quality and culturally competent services.

We specifically use the word "encourage" in regard to confrontation, in keeping with the idea that confrontation can be a dynamic vehicle for a forum to better understand each other and to foster growth for both parties. A basic ethical premise for supervision is that a supervisee should have a clear understanding of what is expected of them in order to fairly be evaluated on their performance. Additionally, the relationship should have clear mutual expectations. "In order for supervision to be effective, the worker and the supervisor must be clear about their expectations of each other" (Michael, 2005). Regular and constructive confrontation provides a consistent forum to continually clarify expectations and to establish the expected standards of practice. In addition, there may be a need for a number of constructive confrontations regarding a particular issue to mutually clarify expectations and establish the standard.

Our definition of supervision points out the importance of understanding the supervisory relationship as one that has the possibility to create and reflect on parallel processes in other relationships in the program. Many child and youth care workers can become comfortable with confrontation as a way to impact a child's behavior positively and ultimately enhance the relationship between worker and child as part of the inherent role in the relationship. However, the professionally power laden nature of the supervisory relationship can sometimes make the idea of confrontation be less comfortable. Often, when the

worker is confronted they see the confrontation as lack of support, or as the supervisor failing to understand the day to day struggles of the worker. An effective supervisor will have the concept of being supportive very high on their priority list and may shy from confronting an issue for fear of it being perceived as not supporting the worker, as opposed to creating a forum to discuss the behavior. This dynamic reinforces the importance of both parties in this relationship seeing confrontation in a positive, growth producing way and as a regular part of their relationship. Supervisors should contract the idea of positive confrontations as a responsibility of both parties and as a way to build trust in the relationship.

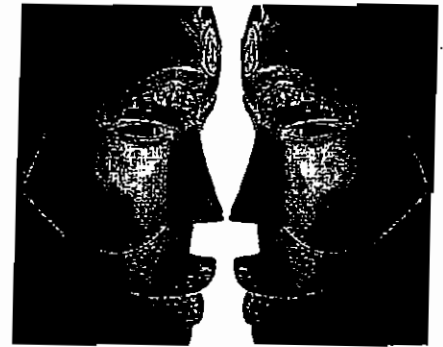
“Professionally packaging” a confrontation

So, what makes a confrontation “successful? The first characteristic would be that the behaviour confronted changes in a manner that is acceptable. The word “acceptable” is very important as often people get frustrated when they confront and they do not get a total change in the behaviour they felt was unacceptable. The tendency is to simply say the confrontation did not work and let this justify not trying again. It is important to remember that it may take a number of confrontations to provide the necessary understanding and growth for the behaviour to reach a balance that is comfortable for both parties. Sometimes the acceptable growth can be just a better understanding of the issue at hand. For example, if a person is culturally offended

by an action of another they might frame the confrontation by saying “When you said that before I felt a little offended by that statement. Was that your intent?” In most cases a person would not acknowledge purposefully offending, so they will likely say they did not mean to offend. That allows a discussion about what particularly was perceived as offensive and establishes that as a base for future respectful interactions. It also creates a better understanding of what a person sees as culturally offensive. If the same behavior happens again in the future the confrontation is not about the words said but gets into a more rich discussion of what is respectful between the two. The second characteristic of a successful confrontation is that the relationship will remain relatively intact. Any confrontation might have immediate stresses on a relationship but the goal should be to have the relationship grow from the process. The third and perhaps most crucial element would be that everyone’s self esteem remains intact. A confrontation that addresses someone’s personality, value base, or cultural beliefs will likely not end up in a positive way. To keep self esteem intact the confrontation should be framed in a way that asks for a better understanding of the reasons for the behaviour or addresses a commonly accepted standard that does not appear to be met acceptably. As a way to support that approach we have developed a concept of “building a professional package” for a confrontation. We define a professional package as:

A professional package is a cohesive concept that logically articulates a commonly accepted professional standard that depersonalizes an issue and stimulates a professional process. Consistent use of the package cultivates an organizational culture that promotes a standard of excellence, cultural competence, and highest quality services.

A key part of that definition is the goal of stimulating a professional process that will lead to a forum for better understanding and growth.



Building a professional package to confront

In preparing to construct a professional package to confront we suggest that you first get an understanding of Floyd Alwon’s concept of “managing problems” (Alwon, 2000). This supports the idea that a confrontation should not be viewed as a way to completely “solve” an issue, but rather should be seen as managing the problem. Alwon describes the model as:

1. Define the “problem”
2. Generate options
3. Anticipate consequences
4. Select a strategy
5. Implement
6. Evaluate



The key to making best use of these logical steps would be to define the problem in a professionally packaged way. As a way to do that we suggest extending Alwon's framework with the following process:

1. Is this an individual problem? An organizational problem? A cultural misunderstanding?
2. Is this primarily an ability problem? An effort problem?
3. Were the proper resources and information available? What role might you have played here?
4. Trust your "gut", but always try to confront with facts.
5. Try to always confront what you have seen, not what you have heard from others. This may entail waiting to confront until you can arrange to be directly involved in seeing the behaviour
6. Engage in an honest self-reflection. How are you contributing to the behaviour? Are you acting out a cultural preference or belief of your own?

Some examples of professionally packaged confrontations

Engaging in the above process should create the basis to frame the confrontation in a professionally packaged way. We define a 'professionally packaged confrontation' as:

Using assessment skills to frame the confrontation in order to de-personalize the issue and explain the problem in a way that reflects an acceptable professional standard that is unquestionable to most.

A professionally packaged confrontation should minimize the

potential to damage self-esteem and maximize the potential for cultural sensitivity.

The following vignettes provide examples of confrontations that would meet this definition.

Vignette #1

Bob is a child and youth care worker who is scheduled to be at work at 3pm. He does not show up until 3:45pm. Bob's role is to be one of the workers providing direct supervision of children after they return from school. In confronting Bob the supervisor should be careful not to frame the confrontation in a way that questions Bob's work habits or effort. The confrontation should open by targeting a generally accepted professional standard. In this case this is simply that Bob was scheduled to be at work at 3pm and was not there. So, the opening to the confrontation would be: "Bob, you were scheduled to be in at 3pm and arrived at 3:45pm. Can you help me understand what that is about"? That may elicit any of a number of answers from Bob that the supervisor may, or may not, be comfortable with. The key is that this opening does not attack Bob's self esteem and simply creates a forum for dialogue around a standard that was not met. It is also possible to "tighten the package" by asking Bob if he understands what happens when he is late. Bob may reply that when he is late Rebecca, a colleague, has to stay later. The supervisor can then point out that when Rebecca stays late it may be an imposition for her and also costs the agency overtime money. The "package" is now "You were not in as scheduled and

it created an inconvenience for a co-worker as well as costing the program money". The package can even be tightened further by asking if Bob is aware that if Rebecca cannot stay late it creates a less than desired supervision level for the children. The package is now tightened to "You were not in as scheduled and it created a potential safety issue for the children". This process now creates a forum for discussion about the standard of safety for children. It will also flush out the more important issues of how Bob responds to discussion around that standard. Professionally packaged confrontation focuses the situation to basic supervisory issues and not to the person's personality or work habits. Assuming Bob is a competent and dedicated worker the focus of safety of children should engage him positively in the discussion to make this situation better.

Vignette #2

Yun is a new supervisor in a child care program whose mission is essentially empowerment of children. Yun is a 29 year old woman who identifies herself as of Chinese ancestry. Yun supervises Mr. Lee, who is a 55 year old child and youth care worker who also identifies as Chinese. Yun has acknowledged she sees Mr. Lee as a father figure in some ways and Mr. Lee seems to treat Yun as a daughter sometimes. Yun also feels Mr. Lee may be angry that he did not get promoted to the job she was hired for, although they have never talked about that. Yun has noticed that when she is in a family session with Mr. Lee he will

often cut the child off when they are speaking and ask what the parents think about the issue. Yun knows she should confront Mr. Lee about this behavior but she is nervous about the ethnic, gender, generational, and organizational cultural dynamics that seem to be present.

In their next supervision session Yun compliments Mr. Lee on a number of interventions she has seen him do. About half way through the session she asks Mr. Lee about the family sessions she has been in with him. Yun packages her opening by saying to Mr. Lee "I noticed in a few sessions when Derrick was talking you cut him off and then asked his parents their opinion on the issue. What were you trying to accomplish by doing that"? Mr. Lee thinks for a moment and then says "Well, I believe little children should be seen and not heard in the presence of their parents". This opening does not judge Mr. Lee's intervention and creates the forum to have him explain the reasoning behind his practice. Mr. Lee goes on to explain that it is how he was raised and he thinks she would understand that view. Yun then asks "Can you tell me how that approach supports our mission of empowering children?" Mr. Lee thinks for a while and then acknowledges that he cannot see how it would do that. Yun then has an opening to talk with Mr. Lee about alternative strategies that would be in better tune to further the mission and goals of the program.

By "professionally packaging" her confrontation around having Mr. Lee explain how he saw his

practice supporting the mission she was able to elicit conversation about the basic standard of supporting the mission and not focus on having him feel judged about his value of children being seen and not heard. This allowed him to comfortably keep that value as a personal one as long as it did not infringe on the mission of the program and did not focus the issue to the many other cultural dynamics that were possible. It also left the door open for Yun to change her view of the situation if Mr. Lee made a convincing case that his interventions were supporting the mission in a way she had not considered. The carefully structured opening of "help me understand..." instead of "why are you doing that?" created the forum for a rich supervisory discussion.

A model for professionally packaged confrontation

In both of the situations above the supervisor did an excellent job of developing an opening that reflected a "professional package". Once that is accomplished the road to a constructive confrontation has a firm base. As the supervisor moves forward in planning the confrontation we suggest the following model as a guideline to building a professionally packaged confrontation:

- 1. Develop your "professional package".** Assess what the "problem" is and do some self reflection on your impact on the situation.
- 2. Strategize when and where to confront.** Unless it is an immediate safety issue a confrontation is best done in

private. A regularly scheduled supervision session is an established professional forum that would be an ideal place for the confrontation. The issue can be cushioned and the chances of engaging in a productive discussion increased when there are a number of positive discussions about practice.

- 3. Confront using the "professional package".** Avoid confronting attitude, work habits, or things you have heard from others. Focus the issue on a professional standard that is not being met or your attempt to better understand their practice.
- 4. Have a clear and simple opening.** "Help me understand..." is a good way to open the door to discussion. You can also use feelings that you "own" as an opening. For example, "When you said that it made me feel upset. Was that your intent"?
- 5. Actively listen with an open mind.** The person's behaviour may be acceptable after all once you understand it better. Be especially tuned in to hearing about cultural misunderstandings as a way to become more culturally aware and sensitive.
- 6. Stay on course.** This is difficult to do but made easier if the confrontation is focused on a professionally accepted standard. If the person tries to take you off course by raising what others are doing, make them "prove it" and deal with it later. Don't let people distract you with information they won't stand behind.



7. **Close with a mutually agreed upon plan to make it better.** Constructive confrontation should be a genuinely mutual process to improve a situation. Be sure to offer and acknowledge what help you will offer the person in this process.
8. **Set a clear time frame to review and evaluate the process.** This would be equally as important with confrontations that both parties felt were successful. A feeling that consistent confrontation in a positive way will enhance a relationship and create the forum for both parties to improve their practice.

Confrontation

"Supervisors give answers, great supervisors ask questions" (Gilberg and Charles, 2001). Using professionally packaged confrontations create numerous forums for the supervisor to ask questions that help better understand the supervisee and their work. This understanding is particularly important when there are culturally sensitive issues involved. By framing the confrontations in a "professional package", a forum is created for substantial supervisory dialogue that will increase mutual understanding of expectations and standards and ultimately strengthen the relationship.

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