

Supervision – I don't need supervision!

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If I had been given a dollar for every time somebody had said the above to me, whilst I probably wouldn't be a millionaire, I suspect I would be significantly more financially secure than I actually am.

The imagination of this newfound wealth is of course somewhat flawed, and more fantasy than reality, since the reality suggests that once somebody, albeit initially reluctantly, chooses to engage in professional supervision, then they are normally hooked forever.

However the initial reaction I think this does raise a very understandable, if not legitimate concern amongst family lawyers around the terminology used to describe a process which can only enhance professional practice.

For my money I have always preferred the term 'professional practice consultancy' rather than 'supervision' to describe a process which allows one or more family law professionals to meet in an appropriately supportive and confidential environment, where you take those most bewitching, beguiling, confusing, irritating and challenging cases.

The very best professional practice consultant or supervisor will allow the supervisee or a participant an opportunity to talk through a case, piece by piece, deconstructing the pertinent dynamics of the relationship between practitioner and client, so as to be able to understand a little bit more what is going on between the two individuals.

To add to the confusion for family lawyers, many have during their training, undergone a formal supervision process in chambers or in court with a senior colleague - also referred to as supervision.

The supervision, or professional practice consultancy which is the basis of this article, is of course a completely different concept, although the possibility for supervision being misconstrued is very understandable.

I think the introduction of Family Dispute Resolution (FDR) and the requirements of all three ADROs the NZLS, AMINZ and LEADR, for all FDR providers to be engaged in an ongoing supervision relationship, has highlighted the need for a fresh look at, and discussion around the issue of supervision for family lawyers.

In modern professional practice, there are probably two ways of obtaining this

third-party independent and confidential support for your professional work.

Typically family lawyers may consult with a supervisor or professional practice consultant on a one-to-one basis, ideally meeting once every four or five weeks. Alternatively some may meet in a group – comprising other family lawyers, where again an independent third-party professional practice consultant or supervisor will work with the group to hear two or more cases presented, and then discuss issues emanating from the cases within the group.

More recently with the increasing availability of Skype and Apple's Face Time, more and more family lawyers are also engaging in professional practice consultancy or supervision from a distance – affording the most efficient use of time without the need to travel.

Whatever method is used, it is clear that more still needs to be done for FDR providers to feel comfortable in both accessing this professional support, and then becoming sufficiently engaged in the process to be able to experience tangible improvements in a wide range of their professional practice.

FDR providers appointed by the Law Society already have access to a range of professional practice consultancy and supervision services through an organisation called Think Well, but are also free to be able to access their own individual or group supervision support.

One particular model of group supervision, which has increasingly interested me, is a process called Balint.

Today, a Balint group has evolved into a model of support and professional practice for people from a wide range of disciplines, where there is an ongoing professional relationship, sometimes known as the 'i thou' relationship, between the giver/provider of a professional service and the consumer of such service.

Back in the 1950's a therapist, Michael Balint, introduced many interesting concepts in his now famous book "The Doctor, His Patient and the Illness", including the concept of "the drug, doctor". By this he meant that the patient responds, not just to a pharmacological substance, but to the person of the doctor: the atmosphere the doctor generates and what the interaction



means to both of them. The doctor, too, responds to the patient as a person, and the doctor's response can be a source both of difficulty in their interaction and also of important information about the nature of the patient's problems.

Today, these original concepts have been developed to apply to the widest range of disciplines. A Balint group explores such issues through detailed discussion of lawyers' accounts of their interactions with their clients. Through participation, lawyers learn to understand and skillfully utilise the lawyer/client relationship.

Balint group participants report increased ability to cope with difficult interactions, psychologically challenging situations in client interviews; reduction in work-related stress; and increased professional satisfaction.

I became convinced of the effectiveness of Balint work for lawyers after I witnessed a family lawyer's work in my own Auckland Balint Group.

In readiness for the start of the new year, I have established two new Balint Groups for family lawyers here in Auckland.

If you are interested in attending a free taster session for one of my groups, please contact me in total confidence on 021 0269 7433 or email me at timothy@thecp.co.nz.

The most important message nevertheless, is that however, or wherever, you access this support, please do so. You will experience a freshness and newfound insight into your professional work.

Timothy McMichael is a family law professional who has spent the past 20 years supporting individuals and groups in a wide range of environments. He is a Family Court counsellor, supervisor and trainer, and an accredited LEADR mediator, trainer and assessor. He is also currently the Family Works Resolution Service Manager and Expert Advisor for their FDR service.

