

## Manager and Supervisor: Being an Adult within an Organisation

By Sarah Fraser

*The author describes her supervision journey as part of growing up and how she fell in love with supervision, interestingly enough the title of our forthcoming book. She particularly valued as a manager learning to see things from a systemic perspective, and this enabled her to take her place within the system with more authority and presence.*

I am interested in the role of the seven-eyed model of supervision in project management in an organisation. I have worked for 22 years within a small HIV Charity, and I currently manage a team of remarkable individuals who provide HIV peer support services. I am an independent supervisor which means I provide supervision in any setting, though the majority of my supervision is to the team I manage. This supervision covers all aspects of work: Educational, Supportive and Managerial (Kadushin, 1976). I have years of experience, and a love of working with people. Some of the influences that shape my approach have been working in collectives, the radical feminism of the 1980s and training in both gestalt therapy and as a homeopath.

When I compare all my other roles to being a supervisor trained in the seven-eyed model, being an independent supervisor is the role I enjoy the best and where I feel the edge of the extending possibilities. I enjoy it because I feel finally I am an adult, and what that means to me is that I have arrived at a point where I am doing something that feels like the right relationship

with work, life and people around me. The supervising as a manager role is more complex, and yet when it works it is very satisfying. There is the tug between the two roles of supervisor manager because you have the organisation and the individual and the participants in the organisation. I would love to do more supervision at work with less of the management element.

I came to training as a supervisor through my own experience of external non-managerial supervision. Non-managerial supervision made managing people I found difficult to manage easier: I could test things out, get better at it and, when I felt that I was running on empty, I would come back to supervision and be fortified to start again.

Being a manager is complex, and in a peer-support organisation there are additional complexities. HIV diagnosis is still a traumatic event, even if you are diagnosed today and have had barely a symptom and are in treatment. HIV diagnosis carries the history of the tombstones adverts, anger, political activism and stigma,

whole communities blamed and bereaved. The people I manage have all experienced trauma in their diagnosis. In my role of managing people, I would find it stressful getting the working relationships right. I would take things personally, and forget to take into account the systems and politics and history that I have described. I separated the relationship with the people I was managing from the wider world – it was all about trying to get the person to get the work done. I often get stuck in one dimension – I think that’s a tendency as a person; I’ll focus on a particular detail of the work, like a dog with a bone. I see it in other aspects of my life not letting something go.

As Paul Giding says in his book *The Great Disruption* (2011), the world is facing an unprecedented time of challenge on all fronts. We are facing climate crisis, political challenges, failure to agree and resolve on a global level, increased polarisation of wealth and poverty.

This means that there is an inevitable increase in human disruption, disturbance, distress and disease and where will the human consequences of this be most felt? It will turn up daily in our schools, hospitals, prisons, care homes, on the street and in our workplaces. The helping professions will be at the front line of addressing the human consequences while they also have to adjust to fewer resources and greater demand.

In the face of how on earth I can get people to do their work, I sought additional training in supervision, guided towards CSTD through my supervisor. My intention was to do the core training and stop there. Arriving with my ‘I’m here to get the skills to get my team working better’ attitude, expecting an array of people like me, to be faced with therapists, coaches and counsellors was terrifying. In triads doing supervision, no excuses, no ‘sorry I’m not a therapist, I can’t do this’ (I tried that). By the end of the first day I fell in love with supervision and began what I experience as the start of my becoming an adult in the organisation.

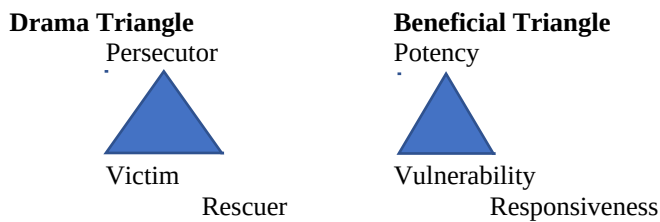
I began to understand my role, which is to work with my team and the organisation to do the best work we can with the resources we have. I realised that previously I wasn’t clear about what my role as a manager supervisor was: Educational, Supportive and Managerial (Kadushin, 1976). I

couldn’t hold the boundaries of the role because I didn’t know what they were. Someone on the course was very damning of ‘managers’, and it was great to get that insight into the reputation of the manager role and the feelings it generates for many.

I immediately experienced the difference the training made within the organisation and my life because of feedback from my colleagues – ‘Since you’ve done that course, you’re different’. I decided to do the whole certificate in supervision, whether the organisation would fund it or not. Yet because they could see the benefit to the organisation, I got a ‘yes’. I sensed that I was growing as a manager because I developed better relationships and projects blossomed. I was becoming more effective, I was enjoying my work, I was becoming equipped to step fully into the role of supervisor in any capacity. I was appreciative and freer.

Like many people in organisations I can easily get stuck in a role. For me it’s trying too hard and then getting frustrated with people, flying into fury or hurt, when I saw myself failing to achieve what I want, firmly stuck in the Karpman Drama Triangle (see Figure 1, below). I saw myself as someone wanting to change the system, I didn’t see the organisation as a system that I was part of until it was pointed out to me: ‘You can’t change the system because you are part of the problem?’ or that was my interpretation of what was said and subconsciously that laid down a challenge. I find myself asking the questions: Can you change the system from within or does it always have to be reliant on someone from outside identifying what needs changing, or is it both? When that person from outside has gone, how does the system thrive? How do we step outside the drama triangle into the beneficial triangle? I think those questions partly come from my delusion that it is all up to me to succeed or fail when the truth is that for a system to thrive it takes more than one thing, it’s not either or. It takes commitment from all of us within the organisation to work to a common goal, it takes for all of us to have two feet in, believe in the work and each other and ourselves. We all need nudging in the right direction and time for reflection with others, to learn, to extend and to remind.

**Figure 1 The Karpman Drama Triangle**



I believe being an adult in an organisation is committing to being the best version of yourself and developing the best possible relationships with the people you work with, to take responsibility to know when you are stuck, to know the signs. My at-home yoga practice (Yoga with Adrienne) invites you to start with yourself and then when your cup is overflowing, you can help others.

I've spoken about this being an adult with my peer supervision group. Somehow, being an adult makes me smile: it's a role I enjoy because it is going with all your senses – head, heart and gut – and it's new. Our supervision group of three has been together for over two years. As an independent supervisor who is a manager rather than a therapist supervisor, I feel completely on an equal footing with the others. The knowledge that I can use the supervision skills in any setting, and have done within the NHS, gives me a degree of certainty at work to go with my gut feeling and ask different questions that I didn't have before.

I have the growing self-awareness that my reactions mean something, and can be useful: if I am feeling angry, is the person angry or is someone they are working with angry, or is the wider system making us all angry? – in other words, using myself as data. I use and encourage others to use images to describe a relationship, or a situation, or how they are feeling, or if you were on a desert island with this person what would you be doing? I encourage people to say to me what they really want to say to the person, to explore options, ambitious ones. I have become more interested and aware of transference and countertransference – for example, does the person I am working with remind me of someone, and/or do I remind them of someone? Bringing in the context of the supervision has been incredibly useful, given the history and the stakeholders and ghosts in the HIV

organisation, given that everyone I manage is living with HIV and I am not.

I now manage a larger team within the organisation. It's been five months, and on a good day I experience there to be a shift in working as a whole team: we are all in better relation within the system, and there is a shift in trust. Most of the time I manage to stay committed to being the best version of myself. Some people are more engaged with the organisation and the work and enjoying their work more, and there is still a long way to go. People still shout at me and say that I just talk about budgets before listening to the ideas they have. The difference is that I can accept that as data – is it true? That is what they experience. I can explore what it says about them and me.

Then there are the moments when someone says that finally they understand what they are meant to be doing and their purpose. Some weeks I wonder if enough can change, as the history of the system that I am part of is strong: like a family system, we have our roles, and stuff has happened and cannot be undone. I believe that being committed to the seven-eyed model of supervision and being committed as a supervisor have changed the way I work, and that that will spill out more widely.

All managers have done some or part of the seven-eyed model training and we can all better express what we are experiencing. We often bring the drama triangle and beneficial triangle into our conversations. We use appreciative enquiry in the staff meeting, and see staff connect with why they are doing the work.

Being trained as a seven-eyed model supervisor I have fallen in love with supervision, and that's a great feeling. For me being an adult is trusting myself, having courage to try things out knowing I will get things wrong and continue to learn. It is stepping away from the day-to-day dissatisfaction and the pull to the drama triangle into appreciation of the possibilities that exist.

To be an adult in an organisation, within a system, is a bit like staying sane within a family group – challenging at times, but when it works, it is satisfying. I do like the supervision groups I facilitate as an independent supervisor where I then

walk away from the system after the group is finished and yet I have been in this particular organisational system for 22 years – so that’s something to think about!

## **References**

- Gilding, P. (2011). *The Great Disruption: How the Climate Crisis Will Transform the Global Economy*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Kadushin, A (1976). *Supervision in Social Work*. New York: Columbia University Press.

## **About the contributor**

See the first paragraph.