empowering youth work supervisors

with Action Research Strategies

by Margo Herman

Supervising youth workers is a challenging, demanding job in a complex field. Too frequently youth workers get mired in reacting to the everyday crises that dominate their work, finding it difficult to rise above the daily demands to reach a place where reflection can help guide their work. Strategies based in action research can empower youth work supervisors to invest in their own growth and in the continuous improvement of their programs.

The strategies proposed in this article were crafted as my project in the Afterschool Matters (ASM) Practitioner Fellowship in Minnesota, 2009–2010. These strategies fit with the goal of the ASM Fellowships, which support out-of-school time practitioners to study effective practices and share program improvement strategies (Hill, Matloff-Nieves, & Townsend, 2009). Grounded in action research and qualitative data analysis, the strategies are designed to encourage a proactive and reflective approach to supervising youth workers.

Action research is a kind of inquiry typically conducted by practitioners rather than professional researchers. It is a form of professional development in which ordinary practitioners investigate and evaluate their own practice by raising significant questions in order to find ways to improve a situation. More and more practitioners are investigating collaborative work and making their stories public in order to strengthen understanding about the field (McNiff & Whitehead, 2006). Youth work supervisors can use action research to capture stories, enable their supervisees to share experiences, and facilitate problem solving.

One method of capturing stories and experiences is qualitative data analysis. Qualitative data often come

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from fieldwork, and the analysis is distinctly non-statistical. Qualitative researchers make firsthand observations of activities and interactions, sometimes engaging personally in those activities as "participant observers." They collect extensive data from multiple sources such as observations, interviews, and document reviews; they then organize and translate the results into a readable narrative with themes, categories, and case examples (Patton, 1990). When qualitative data are used in action research, youth workers' stories become powerful tools for personal and program improvement.

Though some youth workers have been using action research in their practice, few action research projects have been specifically directed at youth work supervision. This article presents a sequence of strategies for using action research in youth work supervision (see box). My priority in designing the strategies was to encourage and empower a reflective and participatory culture, based in action research, for youth work supervisors.

The strategies can be pursued within the action-reflection cycle illustrated in Figure 1 (McNiff & Whitehead, 2006). This cycle can serve as a framework for continuous improvement as youth work supervisors engage with staff to investigate and evaluate specific issues and then to create and modify new actions based on ideas identified through the five strategies. The potential of action research becomes real when issues are linked with action and people give meaning to the action (McNiff & Whitehead, 2006). The five suggested strategies can be viewed sequentially and in tandem with the action-reflection cycle, which provides a model for using the data gathered to move in new directions.

SUGGESTED STRATEGIES TO IMPROVE SUPERVISION PRACTICE IN YOUTH WORK ORGANIZATIONS

Strategy 1. Analyze youth work practice outside your organization by reading field research, seeking practitioner stories, and connecting with a peer network.

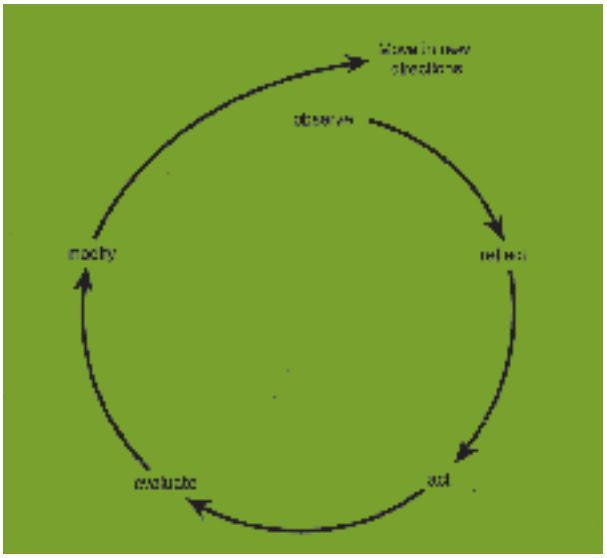
Strategy 2. Learn and apply qualitative data analysis and action research tools, collecting data by intentionally observing staff over time and by interviewing staff to enhance understanding of the dilemmas and tensions they experience.

Strategy 3. Identify themes and reflect on the issues that emerge from strategies 1 and 2 to illuminate issues to be addressed with staff.

Strategy 4. Incorporate the issues identified in strategy 3 into internal staff development interactions such as staff meetings, one-on-one meetings, or learning circles.

Strategy 5. Coach and mentor staff on the themes, dilemmas, and issues that emerge in strategy 3.

Figure 1. The Action-Reflection Cycle



Implementing the Five Strategies to Improve Supervisory Practice

Strategy 1. Analyze Youth Work Outside Your Organization

The first strategy is to analyze youth work practice outside one's own organization by reading field research, seeking practitioner stories, and connecting with a peer network. Discovering research and practitioner stories from the field of youth development can foster ideas that elevate a supervisor's viewpoint above the day-to-day busywork. The knowledge of novices and experts, academics and practitioners can be combined to inform youth work practice (Cochrane-Smith & Lytle, 2001).

A number of journals and newsletters feature practice stories from youth work organizations—stories that can deepen supervisors' expertise in youth work practice. For example, "Shining a Light on Supervision" from the Forum for Youth Investment (Wilson-Ahlstrom, Yohalem, & Craig, 2010) features exemplary

youth work supervision practices. The article says that satisfied youth workers, in contrast to their dissatisfied peers, were more likely to report getting the supervisor feedback they needed to do their job. "Some differences in practice may come down to whether someone is fortunate to have a good supervisor" (Wilson-Ahlstrom et al., 2010, p. 2). Examples of specific types of staff meetings and interactions with frontline workers are included in the article to help define exemplary youth work supervision.

Other youth work resources focused on sharing practitioner stories are available from the Forum for Youth Investment Ready by 21, Harvard Family Research Project, National Institute on Out-of-School Time, University of Minnesota Extension Center for Youth Development, the Next Generation Youth Work Coalition, and other national and local organizations. All of these organizations are easily found on the web; many offer email updates by subscription. Many also offer webinars, an additional option for tapping into practitioner expertise and stories.

As I pursued my action research project to develop the five strategies, journal articles from the Forum for Youth Investment were instrumental in shaping and validating the concepts. I also consulted chapters from works by McNiff and Whitehead (2006), Hubbard and Power (1991), Patton (1982, 1990) and Ryan and Bernard (1985).

I was also helped by consultations with youth work supervisors and peer participants in the ASM Fellowship. Peer networks are another powerful way to empower youth work supervisors through shared learning. If no network already exists, youth work supervisors can take the initiative to convene, say, a quarterly meeting over coffee to share stories and discuss challenging situations.

Strategy 2. Learn Qualitative and Action Research Tools

The second strategy is to learn and apply qualitative analysis and action research inquiry tools. The field of youth work, like other professions, is finding value in qualitative data drawn from fieldwork. Qualitative data can be helpful in creating new action strategies to enhance quality; the data connect research with practice and vice versa. Qualitative methods encourage gathering data from multiple sources including open-ended interviews and direct observation. Qualitative data can also come from practitioners' own fieldwork (Patton, 1990). Additional data can be collected to enhance the interviews and observations, such as e-mail notes, assessment data, photos—any variety of supporting information.

Interviewing provides an effective way of changing practice problems into evolving questions for action research. How inteview questions are asked determines the quality of answers, so the skill of interviewing to gather meaningful insights rather than predetermined responses is worth refining. The questions that lead to further pondering about an issue or dilemma are like a "grow light" for new thinking (Hubbard & Power, 1991). Michael Quinn Patton's book *Practical Evaluation* (1982) includes a chapter on thoughtful interviewing, which describes a variety of types of interviews, provides specific interviewing strategies, and suggests how to word questions. Interviewing staff about how they regard their work—noting how they describe difficulties and tensions—can provide essential insight into staff and supervision issues. A good interview can increase the base of understanding between supervisor and staff (Hubbard & Power, 1991).

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Observing staff can be as simple as briefly recording interactions and conversations between staff and youth, noting tensions, difficulties, and dilemmas that surface. The observations can be recorded casually and unobtrusively; it takes only a few minutes to jot notes that include facts as well as assumptions and opinions. The notes will be collected for use in strategy 3 and may be shared with staff in strategy 4.

Action research in the ASM Fellowship required observations and interviews. My research included a set of observations of staff and supervisors at a local Boys & Girls Club, in which I collected information and noted my opinions about interactions between staff and supervisors. Then I interviewed supervisory staff in this and other programs, asking about the skills and perspectives that make the biggest difference to new managers. The readings assigned to us in the ASM Fellowship about how to interview and how to record observations (Hubbard & Power, 1991; Patton, 1982) were invaluable.

Youth work supervisors who set aside 15–25 minutes twice a week to record quick entries would, over the course of six months, acquire a substantial amount of data. At this point, building the collection of observations and interviews is more important than analyzing the data, which is the task of strategy 3. When these data are placed in the action-reflection cycle (Figure 1), they set the stage for supervisors to reflect on the issues identified and consider how to craft new actions to address them. Looking back at observation and interview notes collected over an extended period of time helps to illuminate issues and dilemmas.

Strategy 3. Identify Themes and Reflect on Issues

The third strategy involves identifying themes and reflecting on the issues that emerge from strategies 1 and 2 in order to find the issues to raise with staff in strategy 4.

Strategies 1 and 2 will result in the collection of a great deal of data. Strategy 3 is the time to stand back and take the view from the balcony above the dance floor of daily activity, watching for patterns and checking interpretations (Heifetz, Grashow, & Linsky, 2009).

Strategy 3 starts with collecting all the data notes and spreading them out on a table. Supervisors begin to make sense of the data by reviewing the collection, searching for similarities, differences, and repetitions. Ryan and Bernard (1985) suggest marking different themes with different colored pens to begin analyzing the content. The voluminous raw data can be organized into color-coded groupings with major themes, categories, and illustrative case examples extracted through content analysis, as described by Patton (1990). This process is like interviewing the data—asking what goes together, organizing color-coded note cards to identify where questions emerge, and looking for commonalities and interpretations.

As our ASM Fellowship cohort gathered and interpreted our qualitative data, we learned that everything is potentially data. The data I collected on supervision practices included not only notes on interviews with supervisors and on observations of staff-youth interactions, but also notes on self-reflections, research by others in the field, notes from focus groups, and workshop evaluation comments. Other types of data for other fellowship projects included transcripts, case studies, journal entries, phone conversation notes, e-mails, texts, performance evaluations, student work, assessment results, and photos. Many sources can be considered qualitative data.

I transferred the data I collected through observations and interviews at the Boys & Girls Club onto note cards that I could shuffle around and color-code into themes, re-arranging the groupings to see where the data suggested an interpretation. This collating and theme-building process took a block of time, but when I laid out all the data and started color-coding common ideas, within an hour I experienced an "aha" moment as themes emerged. The specific themes that emerged from my data were:

- There is value in having a network of peers in youth work supervision.
- The shortage of resources in youth work has a significant impact on staff.
- Youth work supervisors play a critical role in supporting staff, enhancing their ownership and loyalty, and ensuring that their work has an impact.

These themes informed the development of my action research strategies for youth work supervisors. When the results of the qualitative data analysis are put in the action-reflection cycle (Figure 1), continuous improvement begins. Reflecting on the observations can lead to new actions and directions.

Sharing the themes that emerged from observations and interviews with staff opens the door for interactions that set new directions.

Strategy 4. Take the Issues to the Staff

In strategy 4, supervisors incorporate the issues identified in strategy 3 into internal staff development interactions such as staff meetings, one-on-one meetings, or learning circles. Sharing the themes that emerged from observations and interviews with staff opens the door for interactions that set new directions.

If the current staff meeting structure allows for professional development, supervisors could share practical issues that were illuminated by the qualitative data, working with staff to wrestle with those issues. This work can lead to new ideas for practice in the organization. If staff meetings do not include professional development time, supervisors might add time or consider a new vehicle, perhaps based on an idea from one of the

outside resources discovered in strategy 1. Though time and money will always be short, this approach has the potential to involve staff in creating solutions to common issues.

For my purposes, I used strategy 4 to incorporate my data into a workshop curriculum for the University of Minnesota Extension Center for Youth Development. The workshop, Leadership Matters, provides a wide variety of resources for youth work supervisors, a small part of which includes the five suggested strategies and the action-reflection cycle.

Youth work supervisors can reflect on which staff-supervisor interactions will encourage staff to think broadly, reflectively, and strategically about program issues. The interaction can enhance rapport between supervisors and staff. Supervisors can show staff how the action-reflection cycle helps the group identify new strategies. Staff members can try it out, setting new directions, observing and evaluating the changes, and then modifying the approach based on what they learn. Optimism about supervisors' willingness to try new approaches based on qualitative data may be a key to increased staff engagement.

Strategy 5. Coach and Mentor Staff

Strategy 5 involves coaching and mentoring staff about the themes, dilemmas, and issues that emerge in strategy 3. Staff members need to learn why, when, and how to implement the new directions they identified in strategy 4. Supervisors focused on developing staff maximize talents and resources, build power by sharing power, coach and mentor to create power in others and to increase the leadership capacity of the whole group, and build confidence by setting goals and providing performance feedback (Turning Point Program, 2006).

This perspective can help supervisors engage with staff to patiently and reflectively guide the action-reflection cycle through implementation and then evaluation. Modifications to new directions will emerge, perpetuating the action-reflection cycle. During this process, supervisors' accessibility will affect employee satisfaction (Bryant, 2011), a necessary ingredient in the ability to implement new ideas.

Supervisors who explore a variety of ways to support and mentor staff are likely to more fully engage staff in crafting new directions. The range of internal professional development opportunities includes "on-going informal resources such as newsletters, on-line discussion boards, and 'brown bag' lunches for staff members to share ideas and expertise" (Bowie & Bronte-Tinkew, 2006, p. 1). Developing staff involves bringing out the best in others (Turning Point Program, 2006). Supervisors who take a coaching and mentoring role will ensure that the suggested strategies and the action-reflection cycle are meaningful to staff in their particular work environment.

One of the youth work supervisors I interviewed in developing these strategies said that she started viewing herself as a coach and mentor rather than strictly as a supervisor focused on corrective action. She began to explore resources that would help her learn how to coach and mentor staff; more importantly, she shifted her expectations to model reflective practice herself and to become more accessible to staff. A focus on developing strengths and talents, as well as providing opportunities for staff to engage in the process, are key.

Action Research as a Tool for Organizational Improvement

These suggested strategies are intended to empower youth work supervisors to try some concrete tools. They encourage a strategic, reflective, and proactive approach to supervision.Though time and resources are undoubtedly short, making action research part of organizational practice has powerful potential for continuous improvement. Not only will supervisors improve their own practice, but they will also engage in meaningful analysis of their organization. Staff will become an integral part of solutions to complex problems. As issues are illuminated and addressed over time, the long-term implications for the organization are significant. The return on investment will be realized several times over in staff satisfaction and staff retention.

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