# Youth Work Supervision: Supporting Practice through Reflection

**Jocelyn Wiedow**
*Sprockets, Saint Paul*
*jswiedow@gmail.com*

## Abstract

The role of a youth work supervisor is critical in supporting frontline staff to develop and strengthen their skills to provide high-quality programs for youth. This article emphasizes the need for supervisors to create a staff-centered approach to reflection. Key elements of strong youth work supervision include building trust with staff, embedding reflection into supervisory practice, and seeking continued support to improve supervisory practice. Examples from the field illustrate how these components can look in practice.

## Introduction

High-quality youth programs are important contributors to positive outcomes for youth (National Institute on Out-of- School Time, 2009). But how do supervisors best support youth workers in providing these high-quality programs? Since we know there are best practices for providing growth opportunities for young people, I looked at those same practices in developing youth workers. I also reviewed literature on adult learning and management practices. Early in this article I review the intersection of adult learning and high-quality youth work in terms of human development and call out reflection as a vital part of supervision.

In addition to reflecting on my own experience and reading the literature, I felt it was important to tap into the rich knowledge and experiences of youth workers and supervisors currently working in the field. In order to provide a snapshot of current practices, I collected data through an electronic survey that went out to youth workers in both urban, suburban, and rural settings through local and statewide after-school networks in Minnesota. Of the 109 individuals that responded, 12 provided their email for additional conversation. To follow up, I personally

interviewed seven youth workers. Throughout this article I include quotes from youth workers from both the electronic survey and the personal interviews.

From my own experience, discussions with colleagues, and through review of research I have determined that youth workers supported by supervisors who include intentional reflection as part of their supervision practice become stronger youth workers. To strengthen understanding of this type of reflection the paper outlines a supervisor's role as well as the benefits and barriers to reflective practice. This practice parallels what we see good youth workers do with youth. When a supervisor models reflection and a youth worker experiences the process, the staff is better equipped to provide higher quality opportunities for youth. The process of reflection shifts power from the supervisor to the youth workers who then direct their own learning and growth. I conclude with what supervisors must do to include intentional reflection as part of their supervisory practice. The three key elements: build trust, embed as part of a routine, and train supervisors, each contain an example from the field that highlights what other youth work programs are doing to implement that element into practice.

## My Context

I am employed by an out-of-school time network in Saint Paul, Minnesota that works to improve the quality, availability and effectiveness of out-of-school-time learning for all youth in the community through the committed, collaborative and innovative efforts of community organizations, government, schools and other partners. As the Network and Quality Coordinator, my role is to support youth programs in continuous quality improvement. To strengthen my ability to perform this role I have studied the nationally recognized Youth Program Quality Intervention (YPQI) process. YPQI improves the quality of staff instruction through continuous improvement practices. These practices include standardized assessment of instruction, planning for improvement, coaching from a manager, and training for specific instructional methods (Smith et al., 2012).

Over the years, I have played multiple roles in the field of youth work serving both directly as a youth worker and as a youth work supervisor. My work has spanned enrichment and prevention programs as well as intervention work with young people involved in corrections. My experience has been that regardless of the context, when supervisors operate in a hierarchical way and do not engage staff in reflection, staff is less invested, less motivated and less prepared to provide quality opportunities for youth.

## The Problem

After spending time reflecting on how I, as a trainer, facilitator, youth worker and colleague can support youth workers to improve program quality for youth, I had my moment of truth. No matter how much support my intermediary network provides through discussion and training, youth workers need to have a platform within their organization to revisit the information and apply it within their youth work practice.

> *I get sent to great trainings but then come back to my site and*
> *nothing happens. We don't talk about the content or bring the*
> *information into what we do.  I feel like if we were able to get*
> *together as a staff even just once a week we could actually do*
> *something with what we learned. (Direct service youth worker)*

This isn't unique to the youth development world. Peter Senge (1990) notes that management practices often involve sending staff to trainings for professional development without offering support within the organization to apply the learning.

Support to connect learnings from trainings to practice isn't the only need for youth workers. People I know who work with youth do so because they want to make an impact in the lives of young people. However, the amount of experience, education or preparation for the role of youth worker varies immensely. There are youth workers in the field with degrees in education, social work or youth studies. I have also worked alongside full-time, salaried youth workers who had little or no formal education beyond high school.  Others are college graduates with degrees not related to youth, but in subjects ranging from English to business to biology. There are many part-time, direct-service youth workers who evolved into their roles after being engaged in programming as a participant. Regardless of the level of preparation for the role, working with youth is complex and stressful. I do not believe that any amount of formal training fully prepares a youth worker for the unexpected moments and high stress of day-to-day programming. Staff need to have a process for connecting training to their practice, but they also need a way to address complex issues that arise when working with youth.

> *I don't have all of the answers and sometimes I need to debrief.*
> *No matter where you are in the field, there is burnout. Having*
> *support and trust of a supervisor is important to making me want*
> *to come to work every day. (Direct service youth worker)*

So the question becomes, "How do supervisors support continued learning and application within their organization?"

## Human Development

Much of what we know about high-quality youth work overlaps the concepts of adult learning. For example, the following are commonly agreed upon quality youth program components:

- physical and emotional safety,
- supportive relationships,
- opportunities to connect.
- making connections to learning,
- opportunities for building skills,
- decision making and planning,
- reflection, and
- support for self-efficacy.

When looking at the components of youth development, it is easy to make the jump to realizing that those practices that are best for nurturing healthy, capable youth are also the components for developing capable adult youth workers. It isn't so much about youth development or adult learning as it is about the process of human development. "Every person wants to be significant. The developmental process is never-ending. In it we see the totality of human life. No developmental stage is static. Each stage is related to other stages and builds towards other stages. Each stage is seen as having its own significant aspect" (Konopka, 1973).  The process to self-actualization is never-ending and must continue to be supported. As a person moves through childhood, adolescence and into adulthood, the rate of development is likely accelerated when an individual is surrounded by those who foster one's thinking and increased responsibilities (Knowles, Holton, and Swanson, 2005). We know this is true when youth have adults in their lives with the goal of providing that support. It is then imperative that supervisors model this same value in a parallel process as youth workers do with youth. It is a supervisor's responsibility to create a culture for staff to reach self-actualization. A discipline of personal growth and learning leads to self-mastery (Senge, 1990).

A traditional management model is for the manager to be in control, provide leadership by dictating goals and advocating with staff as the way to create buy-in. This practice doesn't promote productivity, innovation or actual buy-in from staff. In youth work, that may look like supervisors dictating process, content, and expectations of youth-adult interactions within the program. The goal of the manager is to create conditions where staff can learn, grow, and develop as staff and individuals. Senge (1990) refers to this as "personal mastery" which is grounded in competence and skills, but strives to continually clarify what is important and

reflect on current reality. For this to happen there needs to be a change in practice. This practice includes reflection.

I reviewed research on staff development methods and roles of supervisors and compared it to quality youth development practices, and determined that when supervisors include intentional reflection as part of their management practice, staff become stronger youth workers, who are better equipped to provide higher quality opportunities for youth.

## Supervision and Reflection

In the field of youth work there are many supervisors, but do they actually practice supervision? As I reference supervision in this paper, I do so with Hilary Jenkinson's (2010) definition in mind: "A worker meeting with a supervisor on a regular basis in order to talk through issues arising for them in the course of their work" (p. 158). This type of supervision is often practiced in social work or counseling professions, where it is viewed not just as good practice, but as an ethical obligation. Yet this is far from the experience of many youth work practitioners (Jenkinson, 2010). Traditional youth work supervisor roles often entail program coordination, budgeting and administrative tasks like approving time sheets. These roles do not support the development of the youth worker.

Jenkinson (2010) defines four different supervision models:
1. Individual managerial supervision–where supervisor and supervisee meet together to help improve the effectiveness of the supervisee in their role.
2. Group supervision–where supervisor meets with multiple youth workers at the same time.
3. Peer supervision–where youth workers meet together and process their work in a way that provides mutual support, and where no one person is in a supervisory role.
4. External supervision–where a non-managerial supervisor is from an external source. This may be the case when a non-supervisor is a project, collaborative or contracted lead.

While all four supervision models are valuable, to achieve a culture of learning within the organization I believe a supervisor must be actively engaging their staff in reflective supervision. For this paper I reference intentional reflection as individual and group reflective supervision.

Reflection is a key strategy in youth work for young people to make meaning of experiences. Youth workers use reflection as a way to check in with young people about how they are feeling and build connections. It is used after icebreaker and team-building exercises to make connections to what was felt, experienced and learned. Reflection used during and after projects or planning helps young people consider how things went and how they would do things differently in the future. Reflection is a powerful tool, but not just for working with youth. Reflection is a critical tool for all people to learn and develop.

## A Snapshot of Reflective Supervision Practice

I was curious about how often youth workers are on the participation rather than facilitation end of these practices. In discussions with other youth workers, it became clear that although youth organizations have broadly accepted the YPQI framework to help guide youth to grow and develop, youth workers are not consistently getting that same support in their work. To get a sense of what the current experience of reflective supervision is in the state of Minnesota, I surveyed 109 individuals involved in out-of-school time. Respondents self-identified as youth worker (46), site coordinator (35) and administrator (28). In the survey, I defined reflective practice as, "An intentional act where a supervisor actively listens and provides thoughtful questions that allow staff to analyze and evaluate their own work as well as identify areas or ideas for improved practice." The survey asked respondents to rate the frequency of which they engage with their supervisor in this way both individually and as a staff team.

I believe that for supervisors to achieve a culture of learning that staff value and respond to, reflection must be intentionally embedded into their practice. I also recognize that depending on the context of the work and youth worker, there is a range of frequency needs. For this reason, I categorized survey responses in the following manner:

- Inadequate—Receives intentional reflection with a supervisor never, annually, or semi-annually
- Adequate—Receives intentional reflection with a supervisor monthly, weekly, or daily

Table 1 shows the percentages of youth workers surveyed whose reflective supervision was rated inadequate or adequate.

***Table 1. Survey Results: Percentages of Inadequate and Adequate Reflective Supervision***

| Survey response | Percentage |
| --- | --- |
| Received inadequate reflective supervision individually or as a staff team | 28% |
| Received adequate reflective supervision either individually or as a staff team | 23% |
| Received adequate reflective supervision both individually or as a staff team | 49% |

I was was excited to see that nearly 50% of youth workers were engaging in intentional reflection with their supervisors both individually and as a staff team (see Table 1). I think this is likely reflective of much of the YPQI work that had been going on regionally within the field.

When I first saw that another 23% were receiving intentional reflection with their supervisor in some form, I was pleased, thinking that made 72% of the respondents engaged in some type of reflective supervision. I was a bit disheartened, however, when reading individual descriptions of what reflective supervision looked like. These narratives suggest that 23% is a bit inflated, as some of the descriptions do not mirror what I feel are key elements of reflective supervision. For example, respondents wrote:

- *"At our regular (monthly) check-ins this happens a bit."*

- *"We check in occasionally, as needed. Typically only when challenges arise."*

- *"My supervisor does not offer such opportunities even though we have meetings twice a month."*

- *"At the end of the day, the staff meets to discuss concerns, successes, and problems. However, seldom do we have input on solutions and decision-making. That comes from top-down."*

The survey shows that of 109 individuals, 28% were not receiving any intentional reflection to improve practice at all. That is 30 people who are not getting the support they need to improve their work and self-mastery skills. Research would say this also means they are less satisfied with their work and not reaching their full potential. Most importantly, that means there are 30 youth workers that are limited in their ability to provide the highest quality opportunities possible for young people. Narratives for this group included the following comments:

- *"We occasionally debrief things that happen during staff meetings, but it is usually rushed and meetings are more about business and funders."*

- *"This is not one of my supervisor's skills. And from what I can tell she rarely thinks about the development of me as a professional or of the program I oversee."*

- *"The director of my program does not practice any sort of reflection or effective supervision practice with the staff."*

**Figure 1. What Youth Workers Value and Do Not Value when Meeting with Their Supervisor**

| What youth workers value | What youth workers do not value |
| --- | --- |
| <ul><li>When a supervisor listens</li><li>Enough time to talk through work since last meeting</li><li>An agenda or objectives, including things (the staff) want to talk about</li><li>Absence of judgement</li><li>High expectations with high support</li><li>Trust in (staff) ability</li><li>Talking through scenarios</li><li>Upcoming programming details/planning opportunities</li><li>Having someone to bounce ideas off of/help think through different approaches</li><li>Walking away with more knowledge, ideas, information or solutions</li><li>Clarity of expectations</li><li>Honest and straightforward conversation</li></ul> | <ul><li>Time spent only assigning new tasks or added responsibilities</li><li>Empty validation—acknowledging concerns but not supporting action; say they will "pass on" concerns, but never follow up with feedback</li><li>Not taking staff or concerns seriously</li><li>Frequently canceling or rescheduling</li><li>Mismanaging the time</li><li>Focus on "fighting fires"</li><li>Wast of time—no reason to have the meeting or things that could go out in an email</li><li>Supervisor talks the whole time or interrupts when staff is talking</li><li>Answers their own questions</li><li>Critical</li><li>When the supervisor has no idea what staff does and doesn't try to learn</li></ul> |

## Supervisor Role in Reflection

True reflection requires the supervisor to set aside their managerial roles and power to create a staff-centered dialogue where supervisees determine the focus of conversation. Supervisors can

support reflection by focusing on inquiry-- using divergent questions as a tool to engage staff in their thoughts and possibilities (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2005). National Helpers Network, Inc. (1998) and Knowles, Holton, and Swanson (2005) provide key strategies for supervisors implementing reflection with staff:

1. Create and dedicate time to the process.
2. Be reliable, trustworthy and genuine.
3. Listen and don't focus on creating or providing the answers.
4. Focus on coaching for staff to create their own solutions and provide support accordingly.
5. Don't judge ideas, encourage staff to be critical thinkers in their own right.
6. Avoid one right answer, encourage many possibilities of action.

Minnesota-based youth workers I interviewed identified key components that they value in supervision meetings and which components they do not value (see Figure 1).

## Benefits of Reflective Supervision

There are multiple benefits to reflective supervision for all involved: the youth worker, supervisor, agency and youth.

### Benefits to the Youth Worker

When youth workers participate in reflective supervision, it enables them to participate in their own learning in an active way. This happens through self-examination, relating theory to practice, testing knowledge, exploring what else needs to be explored. Reflection leads to performing at higher levels (National Helpers Network, Inc., 1998). "Youth workers who participate in reflective supervision not only continue to grow, learn and become better at their job, they also feel more confident, report higher job satisfaction and find that they are able to contribute more to the organization (Jenkinson, 2010). Senge (1990) notes similar sentiment in that individuals who are committed to personal growth are more committed to their work, take more initiative, and learn faster. Reflective supervision is not only beneficial for young or new youth workers. When Senge talks about those individuals who have a high level of personal mastery he does not mean to say they are masters of their craft. The term is a bit misleading as it insinuates an end to development. In fact, those who achieve personal mastery are those most aware of their need to continue growing. Their self-confidence comes in their awareness

that they can navigate the process of continual learning. So reflection is important for staff at all stages of their career.

## Benefits to the Supervisor

It isn't just the staff members who benefit from reflective supervision. Supervisors value being aware of what work is going on, their individual staff members' experiences and creating a partnership between staff and supervisor. This increased connection with staff builds confidence in their roles as supervisors and the ability of their staff to make good decisions. "As a supervisor of multiple site coordinators, [intentional reflection] has made my team more self-sufficient, from the site coordinators to the instructional staff" (Deb Campobasso, director of SPPS 21st CLCC, personal communication, June 16, 2014). In Jenkinson's (2010) project, she also found that when supervisors held regular meetings they felt less stressed in their jobs and there was an increase in efficiency and productivity. In her project, staff reported better communication within the organization, greater sense of solidarity among staff and improved overall atmosphere and morale. This is true even in staffing situations where there may be personality clashes among staff. Senge (1990) found that conversations between staff and supervisors that are grounded in reflection are more open and reliable despite the presence of these differences.

## Benefits to the Agency

An organization grows stronger when it has a commitment to the personal growth of the employees (Senge, 1990). Much of this growth is attributed to higher retention of staff. Hartje, Evans, Killian and Brown (2008) examined direct-service youth workers' sense of competency in implementing features of positive youth development and their intent to continue working in youth development. Staff who felt they were a part of an organization where supervisors provided support and allowed staff voice in decision-making indicated intention to continue working with youth. Reflective supervision creates that space and the supportive work environment that will retain staff. When there is inadequate support and supervision, staff turnover is higher and supervisors must continue to hire and train new staff.

## Benefits to the Youth

It is difficult to measure direct connections between reflective supervision and positive outcomes for youth, but there is research that states that higher quality programs lead to better outcomes for youth (National Institute on Out-of- School Time, 2009). Since we know that staff who participate in reflective supervision with their supervisors become better at their jobs, it is

not a great leap to see the connection between competent, capable staff and quality programs that lead to better outcomes for youth. In Jenkinson's (2010) project, staff reported that they felt that the improved atmosphere and sense of teamwork contributed to better quality programs. Youth workers need to feel competent in their abilities to implement quality program features that improve program quality (Hartje et al., 2008).

## Barriers to Reflective Supervision

There is a lot of information available about supervision, reflective supervision, and adult learning in general. So why isn't more reflective supervision happening in the field of youth work? It is important to acknowledge the barriers so that supervisors can plan for and make accommodations to overcome them. These barriers include trust, time, organizational culture and understanding.

### Trust

Youth workers find it difficult to be honest about their struggles and weaknesses with their supervisor when they feel there is a direct connection to their future reviews or employment. Supervisors hold power in their managerial roles that must balance with the need for reflective supervision.

### Time

Time is often seen as a barrier for scheduling regular reflective supervision with staff. Supervisors and youth workers both feel stretched across multiple work responsibilities. Finding a regularly scheduled time can be difficult, and is often a low priority. Meetings are seen more as engagement when there is a problem. One youth worker I talked to noted that she had coworkers who were hesitant to start meeting with their supervisor because they saw it as an added requirement:

> If they haven't experienced the value of meeting with their supervisor they see it as an add-on to their day, something extra they have to do. It needs to be built into the job. For example, if supervisors keep their staff fifteen minutes at the end of the day, their schedule should reflect that time as well so there is an understanding that their day isn't done until after the meeting, not just after the kids go home.

### Organization Culture

An organization's current culture can be a barrier to effective reflective supervision. The manager's action sets the tone for the organization. Even when managers have the time, they go from strategy to strategy without taking time themselves to examine why it is failing or reflect on what exactly they hoped to accomplish. When managers don't practice reflection themselves, they are their own stumbling block to becoming a learning organization (Senge, 1990). In the survey information I collected, of the 28 individuals who self-identified as administrators or program directors, only 10 reported individual reflections as part of their practice. Upon closer examination of their narratives that support their ranking, only six of those actually meant reflection with their supervisor as opposed interaction with staff. This reinforces that many managers are also not taking the time they need, which directly affects the culture of reflection within the organization. Despite how supervisors are getting support for their own work, that doesn't mean that there aren't some supervisors out there using some form of reflective supervision. The survey indicated more than 50% of respondents were participating in some type of reflective supervision that included their supervisor. It is not enough to create a learning organization with one supervisor effectively using reflective supervision. It is helpful for the staff in that department or program in the short term, but unless reflective supervision is embedded in the culture of an organization, it is difficult to maintain high quality across supervisor turnover. In the words of one youth worker:

> Due to staff turnover, this isn't happening nearly as often as it used to. I used to have individual staff check-ins weekly where I could reflect on the work I do. My new supervisor will only schedule monthly meetings which are task-oriented and are often canceled due to a variety of reasons. It is definitely something that is done well by some and not so great by others.

### Understanding

As stated previously, the definition of supervision is often misunderstood. Many supervisors and supervisees lack understanding of what good supervision entails. This can create lack of motivation for both parties when there is lack of purpose and support through the process (Jenkinson, 2010). Supervisors need to understand and honor the standard practices of reflection by: creating a safe, non-punitive, staff-centered environment; asking open-ended questions; and making space for staff to generate their own solutions. This requires practice and willingness to let go of and share power. This may be difficult for supervisors who have had negative experiences with staff in the past. There might also be negative connections for staff

based on previous experience of supervision. When supervision becomes a platform for criticizing work and a one-way conversation about what needs to be done, staff disengage. When staff members are used to environments where they act only when directed and not provided the freedom to offer what they know, it can be difficult to change the mindset to thinking innovatively. It is understandable then that staff would have reservations about supervisor support in future positions.

## What Must Supervisors Do?

Youth workers supported by supervisors who include intentional reflection as part of their supervision practice become stronger youth workers. For this to happen supervisors must a) build trust, b) embed reflection as part of their routine, and c) ensure that they are receiving the training and support they need to be effective, reflective supervisors. In this final section I elaborate on these three components and share case examples to illustrate what that might look like in practice. The following information includes examples I collected through interviews with youth workers that highlight what three specific programs in Saint Paul, Minnesota are doing to support staff in providing high-quality youth programs. Of course all organizations are unique, and these examples are just some of the ways supervisors could consider implementation.

### Build Trust

Just as in good youth work practice, supervisors must create a safe environment; youth workers need a supportive and collaborative environment with a sense of value. It is the role of the supervisor to create an environment where the youth worker feels heard, valued and trusted to be able to do their role and create solutions (Jenkinson, 2010). Building trust can happen through the same techniques as good youth development. One youth worker shared with me that in her staff team they found commonalities that bond them through both structured sharing and simple conversation: "I like meeting as a staff team. There are more perspectives to think about what to do. But it takes time; a culture needs to be created where people trust each other and feel safe to contribute ideas." Trust is also about putting yourself and ideas out there even if it is different from the norms. Supervisors must create an atmosphere where staff can share ideas that are genuinely considered and create a space where it is safe to fail. Senge (1990) states that in an environment where challenging the status quo is accepted and encouraged, personal mastery can be strengthened. This happens because it reinforces the value of personal growth and provides training directly connected to the day-to-day reality of the work.

*From the field: Youth Express*

Youth Express, a program of Keystone Community Services, has a history of encouraging personal growth through an entrepreneurial lens. Trust is built by questioning new ideas, a best practice that ensures sustainability in their social enterprises. This organization creates a safe place to question how things are done as part of their business planning and design process. As a social enterprise it operates as a traditional business that also serves behind the scenes as a "lab" where youth learn positive work skills and all aspects of how a small business operates.

*Sharing power.* From the beginning, this organization operated a model of shared power. Its founder recognized the importance of leveraging the strength of others to build the organization to what it is today. Chris Ohland, Education Director (personal communication, May 29th, 2014) shared that while that may not have been an intentional strategy, Jim's instinct of leadership provided a foundation of how Youth Express still operates today.

*Challenging the norm.* When exploring any business model, staff and apprentices are taught to practice analyzing ideas critically. This practice allows staff and participants to generate ideas and ask questions that help determine if the idea is worth pursuing. This concept is standard practice and doesn't reflect judgment, but promotes critical thinking and analysis. This doesn't happen right away. Often staff (both adult and youth) come into an employment position from other school, home, or work environments where they are used to being told what to do and what the answers are, but never really why. "It is a journey to get to the point where you have comfort and trust in the people around you. [In traditional roles or environments] there is fear that if you say something in dissent, you won't be seen as part of the team" (C. Ohland, personal communication, May 29th, 2014). Youth Express doesn't want to implement reflection as just a token step they take.

> [Reflection] is good as part of a lesson plan, curriculum, or supervisor practice, but the goal should be to have it become a mental habit; to frequently stop and reflect about what you don't know or whether or not something went ok so that next time isn't just different, but better. Because of our leadership it happens organically but it takes a long time to build a culture.  (Chris Ohland, personal communication, May 29, 2014)

### Embed Reflection as Part of a Routine

Trust is hard to build if it isn't intentionally and regularly addressed. When reflection happens only haphazardly, its value is undermined. For reflection to be most effective it must have a recognized and consistent appearance within the organization. Regular practice of reflective supervision creates a norm where staff members are supported in questioning their current practice and creating their own possible solutions to improving their work. This doesn't have to be an intensive time commitment. Programs can use their context to figure out what works best for them. Reflection can be as simple as a 15-minute end-of-the-shift staff huddle, weekly scheduled staff meetings or monthly reflective staff meetings. As long as the supervisor is engaged in some form of regular, intentional reflection with their staff the quality of youth programming will be increased due to the increased learning and development of staff.

*From the field: Saint Paul Urban Tennis*

Saint Paul Urban Tennis (SPUT) realized reflection was an essential part of their staff development when on-boarding their summer coaches. In the past, SPUT provided intensive spring training to get their large staff team ready for the summer. Once summer started the SPUT coaches disperse to their different sites, only to reconvene again at the end of summer celebration. At the end of the 2012 summer session the director, Becky Cantellano (personal communication, June 3rd, 2014) learned that there was a site where kids had a great time, but hadn't learned all of the tennis skills that were expected as part of the program. Staff were great at responding to the participants' interests by focusing on the group games, but this interfered with them spending the time incorporating all of the tennis skills that are foundations of their program. The kids were happy and engaged, but the goals of the program were not being met. This experience highlighted that though the pre-summer training was strong, staff needed to connect throughout the summer to problem solve where the training met implementation.

*Routines.* In 2013, SPUT implemented weekly meetings for staff from each of the sites to share what they see and experience. This allowed them to plan for the week ahead, reflect on how things were going, and create action plans for improvement. When staff are struggling with balancing the objectives of the programs and the voices of the participants, they would get the support to think through different solutions. Becky had confidence that the well trained staff were also receiving the support they needed to be empowered to problem solve the situations that arose throughout the summer. Routines do need to be balanced though. Realizing the

mandatory weekly meetings became a bit much for the context of their program, they have shifted to meet every other week.

### *Train Supervisors*

Great youth workers are often promoted within their organizations. More often than not, this comes with little or no training on what it means to be a supervisor. The change in role can be overwhelming as supervisors have many new duties to juggle. It hasn't been common practice to wear your youth work "hat" as a supervisor, so they adapt to the behavior of supervisors they have experienced. For supervisors transitioning from other fields this is also true. They too are familiar with the traditional power models of supervision and without a background in quality youth work practices this can be an even more discouraging relationship for supervisees. Supervisors may feel they need to prove themselves in their new role so they hold it as a traditional role of power. Through Jenkinson's (2010) work providing training for youth work organizations, she found that it was most helpful for supervisors to examine the nature and content of supervision. This allows supervisors to better understand the elements of supervision and provide a framework on which to base their practice.

*From the field: Saint Paul Public Schools 21st Century Learning Community Centers*

Saint Paul Public Schools 21st Century Learning Community Centers (SPPS 21st CLCC) have worked hard to implement strategies around quality improvement. In the fall of 2013, staff began to learn about the power of coaching and the use of open-ended questions. "We believe coaching gets a lot more buy-in from the instructional staff because it allows them to solve their own challenges" (Deb Campobasso, director of SPPS 21st CLCC, personal communications, June 16, 2014).

*Coaching for quality improvement.* One step in their process was participation in Quality Coaching training offered by the Weikart Center for Youth Program Quality. This training is based on three main concepts of respect, observation and support. The model allows the staff to direct the conversation and create their own ideas and solutions. A main component of quality coaching is asking open-ended questions. Attending training isn't enough to successfully implement quality coaching. Staff also need opportunities to practice.

*Authenticity circle.* An authenticity circle is a model where members help each other as peer coaches. For the 21st CCLC team that means groups of three or four site coordinators gather monthly for an hour and a half, during which time one supervisor presents a real challenge they

are facing and the other supervisors ask open-ended questions to help the presenter create useful solutions. Not only does this process help support the supervisors, it allows the supervisors valuable practice to strengthen their coaching skills. "Asking questions as a coach isn't a natural instinct for supervisors. We are often problem solvers and want to provide solutions, which isn't as effective. Supervisors need to practice asking open-ended questions to become good at it" (D. Campobasso, personal communication, June 16, 2014). This process strengthened trust and built community with supervisors across sites.

*Different perspectives.* In addition to their own supervisors, site coordinators from other afterschool sites were invited to join the circles as well. "Our staff found it valuable to have outside organizations involved. It provided a more rich experience to include other perspectives" (D. Campobasso, personal communication, June 16, 2014).

## Summary

Youth-serving organizations want to provide high-quality programs for youth. To do this staff must be supported by their supervisors through intentional reflection. This promotes continued learning that builds staff ability to be empowered problem solvers. The supervisor role is critical and must include building a community of trust with staff. Supervision within organizations needs to be redefined to include reflection on a regular basis. Finally, supervisors must receive training and support in facilitating reflection that is staff-centered and staff-driven.

## References

Hartje, J., Evans, W., Killian, E., & Brown, R. (January 01, 2008). Youth worker characteristics and self-reported competency as predictors of intent to continue working with youth. *Child and Youth Care Forum, 37*(1), 27-41.

Jenkinson, H. (2010).  The importance and benefits of supervision in youth work practice. *Child & Youth Services*, *31*(3-4), 157-169.

Knowles, M. S., Holton, E. F., & Swanson, R. A. (2005). *The adult learner: The definitive classic in adult education and human resource development*. Amsterdam: Elsevier.

Konopka, G. (1973). Requirements for healthy development of adolescent youth. *Adolescence, 8*(31), 291-316.

National Helpers Network, Inc. (Ed.) (1998). *Reflection: The key to service learning* (2nd ed.). New York: National Helpers Network.

National Institute on Out-of-School Time. (2009). *Making the case: A 2009 fact sheet on children and youth in out-of-school time*. Wellesley, MA: National Institute on Out-of-School Time.

Senge, P. M. (1990). *The fifth discipline: The art and practice of the learning organization*. New York: Doubleday/Currency.

Smith, C., Akiva, T., Sugar, S., Lo, Y. J., Frank, K. A., Peck, S. C.,… Devaney, T. (2012). *Continuous quality improvement in afterschool settings: Impact findings from the Youth Program Quality Intervention study.* Washington, DC: The Forum for Youth Investment.