Implementation Tips *for* USAID Partners

Sharing Resources and Knowledge Among the Global CSO Community

Definitions

Active Listening—A communication technique that requires the listener to focus on understanding, interpreting and reflecting upon what the other person is saying.

Social Intelligence—The capacity to understand social and interpersonal relationships and situations. Having high social intelligence helps you work with people to develop and pursue a common goal, such as building a workforce committed to activities that support an organization's mission.

Supervision—The process of fostering and reviewing staff performance according to the defined standards of the organization.

Supportive Supervision—A process that uses dialogue and constructive feedback to help staff, volunteers or entire organizations improve their performance in pursuit of the organization's mission, while also setting goals for personal growth and development.

References

Path
Guidelines for Implementing Supportive Supervision: A Step-by-Step Guide with Tools to Support Immunization.

UNICEF
Supportive Supervision/Mentoring and Monitoring for Community IYCF.

WHO
Training for Midlevel Managers: Supportive Supervision.

Supportive Supervision

Q. What is supportive supervision and how do we do it?

A. Supportive supervision is a process that uses dialogue and constructive feedback to help staff, volunteers or entire organizations improve their performance in pursuit of the organization's mission.

Beyond simply overseeing employees' responsibilities and tasks, by using supportive supervision, managers can play a key role in making their employees feel valued and motivated and, as a result, more productive. This is particularly important in challenging environments where resources are scarce and the needs of the community are great.

By using supportive supervision, managers can not only create a healthy work environment, but can improve and sustain the performance and satisfaction of their most valuable assets: the people in their organization. Using a few key skills and tools—and with a little practice—managers can create a dynamic relationship with staff and others to help them grow as individuals and help their organization grow as well.

Guidelines for Supervising Staff

Supervision can be an interactive process; however, traditional supervision often focuses on discussing faults instead of solving problems and enhancing two-way communication to improve performance. To effectively provide supportive supervision, consider the following guidelines:

1. **Set clear expectations from the beginning.**
   Supportive supervision can begin as soon as a person is recruited to work for your organization. The first step is providing your new employee with a clear job description. This ensures that the manager and the employee have a common understanding of the expectations and responsibilities of the position. As time goes on, the manager and employee should work together to periodically review and revise the job description to develop "SMARTER" goals that align the employee's work with the organizational mission.

SMARTER Goals are

Specific and clear about what needs to happen and who needs to be involved.

Measurable, with clear targets against which progress can be measured.

Aligned with the organization's mission and vision.

Realistic and can be accomplished.

Time bound so that there is an appropriate sense of urgency.

Evaluated periodically and, if necessary, adjusted.

Rewarded when accomplished.

Active Listening Skills

- *Eliminate distractions* (such as phone calls) and avoid having physical barriers (sit in comfortable chairs rather than having a desk between the two of you).

- *Listen carefully* to the main ideas and let the speaker finish his or her thoughts without interruption.

- *Ask open-ended questions* that show that you are interested in the speaker's ideas and interpretations. (For example, "What are your suggestions about how we should address this problem?")

- *Do not judge, critique, or get defensive* while the speaker is talking. Instead, focus on understanding his or her experience and perspective. Verify your understanding by repeating key points back. (For example, "If I understand you correctly, you are saying…").

Remember: You have two ears and two eyes…but only one mouth. So let your ears and eyes do twice as much work!

A related tool regularly used in supportive supervision is a tailored checklist outlining exactly what will be assessed and what is required for employees to get a positive assessment. The checklist should be made available to staff ahead of their actual supervision session. This ensures that people see that they are being treated fairly and assessed objectively.

2. **Provide regular feedback.** Supportive supervision is not a once-a-year performance review; it involves continuous performance assessment. This means making time and space for the supervisor and employee to regularly communicate about job performance. Managers should employ active listening skills and provide feedback in an open and respectful manner to facilitate a dialogue about improving behavior and job performance over time.

During supportive supervision sessions, both the manager and employee should have time to describe achievements in the period under review as well as challenges and areas for improvement. These discussions should be documented by the manager and shared with the employee to ensure that both agree on the outcomes of the discussions and the employee's progress is tracked in the event of a change in management.

3. **Provide opportunities to discuss challenges and suggestions.** Supportive supervision should be two-way communication. Your staff members are the ones doing the work on a day-to-day basis, so they have first-hand knowledge of what is and is not working. Often they also have ideas about how to address challenges or gaps; other times they will need advice and suggestions for problem solving.

4. **Ensure staff get the tools, skills and resources necessary.** A key part of supportive supervision is following up on any issues or challenges that are identified during discussions. If, for example, a staff member describes having a hard time completing his or her monthly site visits due to lack of transport, you may need to work with the finance manager to determine how the organization can allocate additional funds for fuel or work with the program director to coordinate access to the organization's vehicle.

Likewise, supportive supervision provides opportunities to discuss— and sometimes even provide—the additional skills and training that will enhance your staff's ability to do their work. Identifying training needs is important, as is following up after trainings to ensure that staff members have opportunities to apply the skills in their work and to share with colleagues.

By making employees feel valued and motivated, managers can play a key role in increasing employees' productivity.

5. **Reward performance through recognition, incentives and opportunities for advancement.**

Most people working in development are motivated by values and ideals to help people in need and strengthen communities. But intrinsic motivation alone may not be enough to sustain performance for everyone over the long term. External recognition for excellent work will help your employees maintain their energy and commitment. Rewards can include public recognition (such as commendation during community events or write-ups in publications) and incentives (such as small gifts or invitations to special events). Another critically important part of rewarding staff is ensuring that they have opportunities for advancement (such as trainings to enhance their knowledge and skills).

Strategies for Supervising

Supportive supervision strategies also work well in relationships with partner organizations and subgrantees. Similar to what is needed with employees, supportive supervision for a non-governmental organization, community-based organization, or other partner entails:

- ensuring that the organization's leaders and stakeholders understand what they are expected to do (including reporting);
- providing regular and constructive feedback on performance;
- creating regular opportunities for them to provide feedback to you on their challenges and get assistance with solving problems;
- supplying adequate resources and support so they can conduct their programs effectively;
- recognizing and rewarding good performance.

Culture of Supportive Supervision

Integrating supportive supervision throughout your organization's structure will result in a stronger organization, with more efficient and satisfied people working to achieve your organization's mission. Creating a culture of supportive supervision will help your staff, volunteers and the organization flourish.