

## CHAPTER 5

# Building Staff Capacity and Achieving Quality Performance

Often, one of the most satisfying aspects of supervision is helping caseworkers grow and develop on the job. Supervisors can dramatically affect the learning and development of their staff. In addition, supervisors set the standard for excellence in their units. Their own emphasis on quality and results influences the level of staff performance. This chapter describes how supervisors can have a positive impact on staff development and performance.

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### PERFORMANCE EXPECTATIONS AND STANDARDS

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The first step in building staff capacity and achieving excellence is clearly communicating the outcomes and goals of child protective services (CPS), as well as the agency's mission, vision, and values. These provide a framework for practice by providing purpose, direction, and guiding

principles. Performance expectations communicate to CPS caseworkers how their role contributes to fulfilling the agency's mission. They also ensure clarity regarding the duties, tasks, functions, and activities for which CPS caseworkers are responsible.

There are numerous and varied expectations for caseworkers. Exhibit 5-1 provides a sample of performance expectations for CPS staff. Performance standards represent the judgment of experts in the field regarding best practice and define both the level of quality required and a measure for evaluating results. Communicating both expectations and standards gives caseworkers a clear understanding of what the supervisor and agency expect and why. Additionally, they assist the supervisor in determining the competencies caseworkers must possess to perform their duties and provide a basis for assessing caseworkers' level of competence.

#### Exhibit 5-1 Sample Performance Expectations for CPS Caseworkers

- Record information obtained from the reporter in a clear, concise, thorough, and understandable manner.
- Gather information to determine whether the report meets the statutory and agency guidelines for child maltreatment.
- Evaluate the credibility of the reporter.
- Assess the level of risk of harm to the child.
- Determine the response time necessary to ensure the safety of the child.

**Exhibit 5-1**  
**Sample Performance Expectations for CPS Caseworkers (Continued)**

- Establish whether the child's safety can be ensured in his or her own home and what interventions will be needed to protect the child. If it is determined that the child's safety cannot be ensured in his or her own home, the least restrictive placement that best meets the child's needs must be determined.
- Identify any emergency physical or psychological needs of the child and family.
- Provide or ensure that needed emergency or crisis intervention services are delivered to the child and family.
- Develop an initial assessment or investigation plan including who to interview and in what order, what records and documents to obtain, what examinations to conduct, and who should be involved in conducting the initial assessment or investigation.
- Treat the children and family with respect and empathy.
- Analyze the initial assessment data and determine the validity of the report.
- Complete all investigative reports within the required time frame.
- Identify the strengths and resiliencies in the child and family that may provide the foundation for change.
- Determine the underlying behaviors or conditions that contribute to the risk of maltreatment.
- Determine the nature and level of risk of future maltreatment.
- Reach consensus with the family on the behaviors or conditions that must be addressed to reduce or eliminate the risk of maltreatment.
- Identify the intervention approaches or services that will help the family reduce or eliminate the risk of maltreatment and meet the child's treatment needs.
- Resolve whether the agency can meet the family's needs and whether the family will benefit from and is willing and able to participate in ongoing CPS services.
- Develop a case plan with the family that builds on its strengths and provides clear direction and guidance for changing the behaviors or conditions that contribute to the risk of maltreatment.
- Deliver or coordinate the delivery of services to the abused or neglected child and his or her family.
- Ensure that every contact and intervention with the family is planned and has a purpose.
- Continually assess the risk of maltreatment to the child and the child's safety.
- Evaluate the family's progress toward reduction or elimination of the risk of future maltreatment.
- Review, revise, and update the case plan within the time frames required by the State.
- Determine whether the risk of maltreatment has been reduced sufficiently so that the case can be closed.

In making decisions regarding standards for caseload, case management, and documentation, supervisors require administration support and guidance to balance both processes and outcomes. For example, most States require that caseworkers prepare a case plan with the family within a specified period of time. It is the role of supervisors to define what constitutes “quality” for that process (e.g., goals will be behaviorally specific, will build on the family’s strengths, and are developed with the family) and to provide staff with a visible model of it. (See Appendix E—The National Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics for a listing of ethical standards for professional conduct of all social workers, including CPS caseworkers.)

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### STAGES OF CASEWORKER DEVELOPMENT

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New CPS caseworkers typically progress through four stages of development—high anxiety, “make it or break it,” basic skills, and relative independence. Caseworkers usually require at least 1 year of full-time, on-the-job experience before they are able to function on a more autonomous or independent basis. The following factors affect how quickly caseworkers move through each of these stages:

- Educational background—Caseworkers who possess either a bachelor’s or master’s degree in social work are provided with some basic knowledge and skills to do the job (e.g., knowledge of human behavior and psychopathology, social work principles and ethics, and intervention techniques).
- Previous social work or child welfare experience.
- Preservice training—New caseworkers who attend preservice training during the first few months of employment are more prepared to perform effectively.

- Supervisory interventions—Regular involvement and input by the supervisor that is designed to address the feelings and meet the needs of caseworkers at each stage of development. This factor helps build caseworker capacity and helps to maintain acceptable performance.<sup>15</sup>

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### The High-Anxiety Stage

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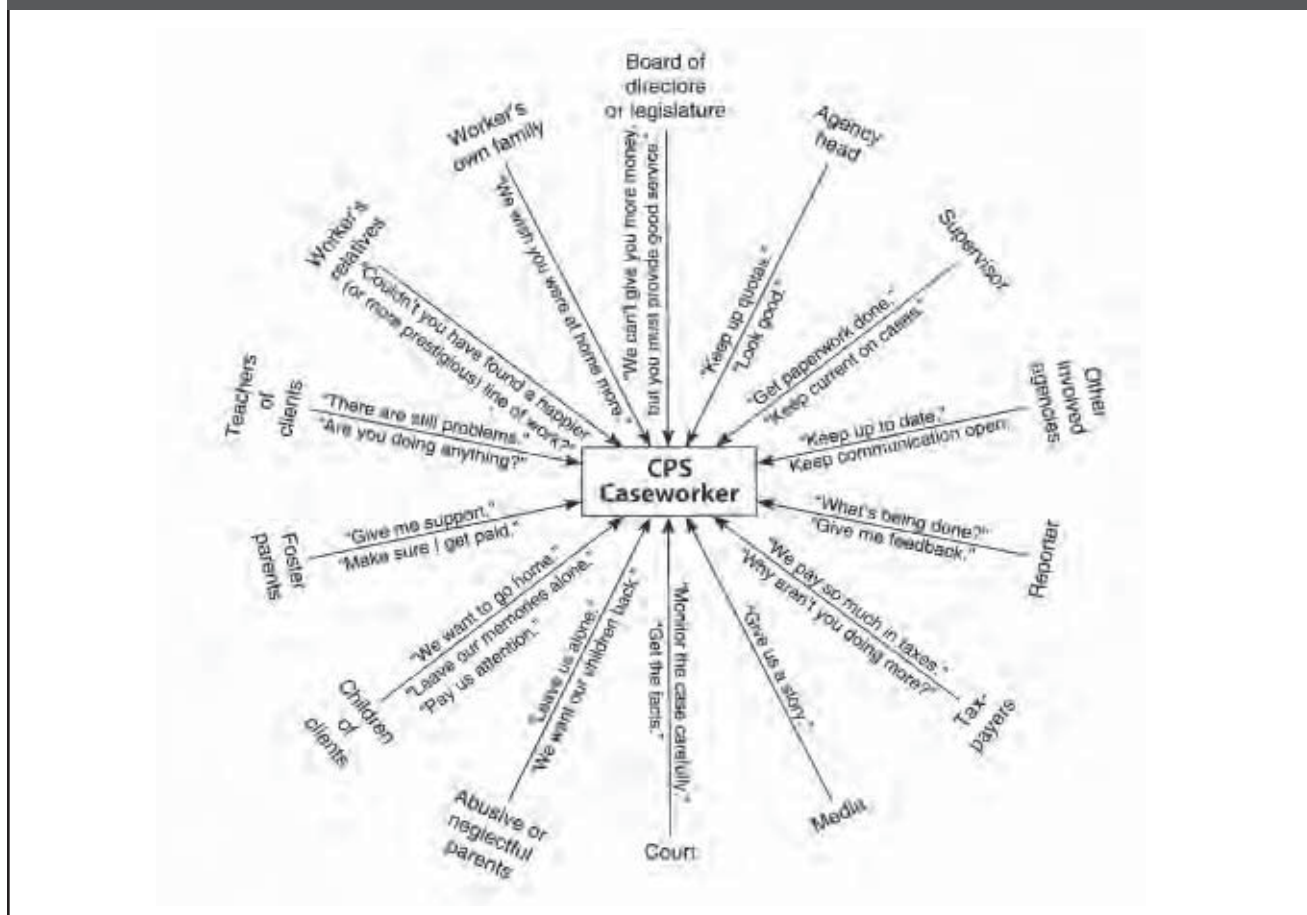
The high-anxiety stage begins the first day on the job and often lasts up to 6 months. At this stage, caseworkers may feel overwhelmed with everything they have to learn and be able to do. Further, they may feel inadequate to perform difficult but necessary CPS tasks. Caseworkers may be confused about their feelings toward abusive or neglectful parents and about their own roles and responsibilities. They may experience anxiety about being responsible for life and death decisions and the potential impact of those decisions. Caseworkers also may experience some positive feelings, for example, a sense of excitement, enthusiasm, and challenge.<sup>16</sup> The supervisor often plays an important role in normalizing the caseworker’s feelings, as well as providing opportunities for the caseworker to express and resolve those feelings. Exhibit 5-2 illustrates many of the pressures caseworkers often experience.

To lessen feelings of anxiety, caseworkers need numerous pieces of information to gain a greater understanding of:

- The agency’s mission, organizational structure, and programs
- How the various programs interrelate
- CPS’s goals, policies, and legal mandates
- Agency and supervisory expectations
- The client population
- Community resources.

The Child Welfare League of America has produced a “Standards of Excellence” series for child welfare organizations. See *CWLA Standards of Excellence for Services for Abused or Neglected Children and Their Families*, (1998, revised edition) for standards in child protection. This publication is available at <http://www.cwla.org>.

Exhibit 5-2  
Pressures on CPS Caseworkers<sup>17</sup>



Although this period is the most difficult for caseworkers, it is also the time when the greatest amount of learning and growth take place. The structured time that supervisors spend with staff at this stage of development will help retain staff and mold them into effective caseworkers. Supervisors should observe a gradual reduction in the intensity of negative feelings over the 6 months. Some of the developmental hurdles that staff at this stage may exhibit include:

- Becoming immobilized by intense, negative feelings (e.g., having difficulty making any decisions on their own).
- Being afraid of asking too many questions or admitting to mistakes.

Supervisory strategies during the high-anxiety stage include:

- **Accepting and meeting caseworker dependency needs.** Expecting caseworker independence at this stage is premature. It is appropriate for new caseworkers to seek security and stability from their supervisor. Supervisors should be more directive than with experienced caseworkers. Frequent feedback related to positive performance is critical. Just as supervisors accept the dependency needs of caseworkers, they should encourage caseworkers to accept the dependency needs of some of their clients.
- **Providing factual tools.** Supervisors should ensure that caseworkers clearly understand the expectations for performance. They also should provide caseworkers with information regarding the agency's mission, services, programs, unit goals, values underlying the goals, legal mandates, policies, and procedures, and how they relate to

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specific cases and casework intervention. During this stage, inexperienced caseworkers need structure and specific instruction.

- **Accepting caseworker feelings of confusion and inadequacy.** The confusion and sense of inadequacy felt by new caseworkers should be viewed as part of their development. If supervisors help normalize these feelings and demonstrate that they are acceptable, caseworkers will come to accept these feelings and view them as a natural part of professional growth.
- **Encouraging open discussion of feelings.** Undoubtedly, caseworkers will experience anxiety over their performance, their feelings toward clients, and client interactions. Supervisors should encourage caseworkers to express this anxiety and provide the necessary acceptance, support, and reassurance to enable caseworkers to develop professionally. Supervisors should engage caseworkers in open discussions regarding any other feelings that they might be experiencing.
- **Being constructive and helping caseworkers identify mistakes.** New caseworkers are not always aware that they have made a mistake. They have not developed sufficient knowledge and skills to identify gaps in performance. Therefore, supervisors need to assist caseworkers in identifying their needs in a way that builds on their strengths and identifies strategies for change.
- **Having regularly scheduled supervision meetings.** Beginning with this stage and continuing throughout the next two stages of caseworker development, supervisors should spend approximately 2 hours each week with each new caseworker in regularly scheduled supervision meetings. It may be helpful to provide follow-up to these meetings with notes. It is important for supervisors to be readily available to new caseworkers. In addition, crises and emergencies also will require extra time and effort on the part of supervisors.
- **Substituting for caseworkers only in cases of extreme emergency.** Caseworkers develop a sense

of confidence in their skills and knowledge by successfully dealing with issues that surface in their caseload. They need to know that their supervisor will support them and be available to help solve problems and make crucial decisions. However, supervisors also should demonstrate confidence in caseworkers' ability to handle specific tasks.

- **Building caseloads slowly.** If possible, for the first 2 months, supervisors should limit the number of cases a new caseworker is assigned. Cases should be introduced slowly, and supervisors should use them as tools to reinforce expectations, policies, procedures, and the casework processes. This supervisory practice allows time for confidence building and reduces pressure.
- **Clarifying both client and caseworker behaviors.** Questions asked during supervision meetings should identify client responses to caseworker behaviors. Supervision should also include clarification regarding the reasons for particular client responses. Focusing on both client and caseworker behaviors helps caseworkers identify those interventions that are successful and those that need to be modified.

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### The "Make It or Break It" Stage

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This stage often overlaps with the previous stage, begins after approximately 3-4 weeks on the job, and may last up to 6 months. The hallmark of this stage is ambivalence. At this point, caseworkers have some familiarity with the supervisor, unit members, job duties, and client population. Consequently, they may be questioning whether this is the job for them and whether they can get their needs met in the agency. By the time they enter this stage, caseworkers should have developed limited confidence in concrete tasks. However, caseworkers will continue to feel a sense of inadequacy regarding some of their responsibilities and tasks. They may still experience some anxiety regarding the decisions they must make and the impact of those decisions on the lives of the

children and families. They will probably have a greater sense of comfort because of their increased understanding of what is expected of them and how to fulfill their responsibilities. Sometime during this stage, caseworkers develop a sense of belonging to the unit.

Caseworkers need to know that they are progressing and increasing their knowledge and skills. They need their supervisors to encourage their growing independence while remaining available to provide considerable support, and they will need continued assistance in identifying casework strengths and mistakes. They may need additional information on the children and families they are serving and how to perform specific casework tasks. Finally, caseworkers will continue to need opportunities to practice new skills, make decisions, and receive feedback on their performance.

Some of the developmental obstacles that staff at this stage may exhibit include:

- Increasing negativity and ambivalence, which could be influenced by some of the more pessimistic members of the unit or agency.
- Questioning the credibility of their supervisor.

Supervisory strategies during the “make it or break it” stage include:

- **Expecting and allowing errors.** At this stage, caseworkers test new behaviors in their work with clients and, as a result, may experience a loss of confidence when their attempts fail to meet their own expectations. All caseworkers inevitably make errors and miscalculations. Supervisors should help caseworkers accept and learn from these errors. When supervisors communicate a willingness to admit and accept their own missteps, they demonstrate to caseworkers that errors are acceptable. These should be viewed as learning experiences rather than as failures.
- **Reinforcing knowledge.** By this stage, caseworkers should have acquired most of the basic knowledge to perform CPS functions. The

supervisor’s role is to help caseworkers draw on this knowledge and apply it to specific cases.

- **Helping caseworkers organize observations and ideas.** At this juncture, caseworkers should begin to identify patterns and trends occurring across cases. Part of the supervisor’s role is to underscore these similarities and help caseworkers synthesize them into principles of practice.
- **Analyzing intuition without stifling creativity and spontaneity.** As caseworkers gain confidence, they begin to act on instinct, common sense, and intuition. Supervisors should assist caseworkers by validating this practice and by helping them analyze what factors led to the intuition.
- **Linking caseworkers with a mentor or with positive, more experienced caseworkers.** This can help reduce the influence of negative unit members, help create a sense of connection to the unit, and assist caseworkers with developing the competencies needed for successful performance.
- **Helping caseworkers feel a sense of connection to the unit.** From the beginning of employment, caseworkers need to feel a sense of connection to the unit. Consistently recognizing caseworkers as valuable members of the unit is particularly important in cultivating this feeling.

An important word of caution for the first two stages of development—caseworkers should exhibit a gradual reduction in the intensity of anxious and negative feelings over the first 6-month period. If supervisors do not observe this reduction and a commensurate increase in confident and positive feelings, they should not permanently place these caseworkers. If there is minor improvement, supervisors may wish to extend probation. Certainly if the caseworkers have not moved out of the first two stages by 1 year, supervisors should not make the caseworkers permanent. The job is probably not the “right fit” for them. It also is important that supervisors create an environment allowing caseworkers the comfort and support to be able to say

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if the job is not a “good fit.” It may be better if caseworkers come to this decision themselves rather than for supervisors to make it for them.

### Basic Skills Stage

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At this stage, staff possess the core skills needed to perform the job, but do not have the specialized skills for independent practice. Caseworkers are feeling confident in their ability to perform essential CPS functions. They are generally able to identify and analyze client problems. Basic knowledge and skills have been incorporated into their interventions, and gaps in services are more apparent to them. Caseworkers are feeling some satisfaction because they see evidence of the impact of their efforts. At the same time, they also may experience some dissatisfaction or disillusionment. Because they have the core skills needed to perform the job, caseworkers become aware of the obstacles (e.g., high caseloads, lack of resources, ineffective supervision) they face in fulfilling their responsibilities to help children and families. In addition, many caseworkers recognize the need to develop more specialized skills and to set professional goals for themselves. This is the beginning of independent practice.

Some of the developmental obstacles that staff at this stage may exhibit include:

- Symptoms of “compassion fatigue”;
- Desire for less supervision;
- Lack of growth and development and “getting stuck” in the stage.

Supervisory strategies during the basic skills stage include:

- **Listening carefully.** This is the primary skill necessary in relating to caseworkers at this stage of development. Although supervisors need to ask clarifying or informational questions, the primary function of supervisors at this point is to listen first and then discuss.

- **Identifying and discussing caseworker resistance.** Caseworker resistance may require some attention in earlier stages, but it is at this stage that any resistance must be specifically addressed in supervision meetings. When caseworkers are reluctant to deal with certain clients or client behaviors, this reluctance should be assessed in terms of how it affects the caseworker-client relationship and the achievement of agency and unit goals. Attention should be directed to the way in which clients react to caseworkers’ interventions and how caseworkers can use personal and professional strengths to improve relationships with clients.
- **Helping caseworkers identify and examine options.** While supervisors may agree with the options or ideas presented by the caseworker, it is essential, however, to expose the caseworker to as many other options as possible. Brainstorming is one way to assist caseworkers in identifying options for their clients.
- **Providing feedback.** Specific positive and negative feedback is essential at all stages of caseworker development. In the earlier stages, feedback takes a more developmental focus. (For more information on this, see Chapter 6, “Supervisory Feedback and Performance Recognition.”) At this stage, it is important to measure caseworker performance against agency and supervisory expectations and standards, providing feedback accordingly.
- **Encouraging ongoing growth and development.** If caseworkers appear to be stuck in this stage, supervisors must create some discomfort. Supervisors should promote self-awareness with these staff, work through resistance, and challenge caseworkers to stretch and grow.

### Relative Independence Stage

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Supervisors want all caseworkers to aspire to and reach this stage. These are the best caseworkers in the unit and the ones supervisors rely on most. Caseworkers at

this stage should have a strong sense of competence and confidence regarding their knowledge, skills, and ability to perform their responsibilities and make critical decisions. They can identify problems and options. They typically determine a substantial portion of the agenda for supervision meetings. At this point, caseworkers have a strong sense of independence and autonomy. However, as in the previous stage, they may be experiencing frustration, “compassion fatigue,” disillusionment with their cases, and burnout. They may express the need to grow professionally and experience new challenges.

As caseworkers prepare for new challenges, they need recognition for their accomplishments and efforts. Supervisors must be as creative as possible in assisting caseworkers to identify ways that they can continue to grow and develop on the job. If caseworkers feel challenged and experience growth, they are more likely to be motivated.

Supervisory strategies in the relative independence stage include:

- **Encouraging active involvement in supervision meetings.** At this point in their development, caseworkers are aware of their own supervisory needs. One-hour meetings are still important for clinical supervision, monitoring, and consultation on key decisions. They also provide staff with coaching, direction, and feedback, as appropriate.
- **Assisting caseworkers in clarifying their professional development needs and identifying educational or training needs.** Caseworkers need to continue to learn and grow. Supervisors are instrumental resources for identifying opportunities for continuing education and training.
- **Preparing caseworkers for new roles.** Unless caseworkers continue to experience new challenges on the job, they lose interest. It is important for supervisors to encourage caseworkers to take on new and creative responsibilities, which helps them prepare for new roles.

- **Avoiding the most common management trap.** The most common management trap is giving the most difficult, complicated tasks to the best people. This translates to giving the best caseworkers the worst cases. Over time, the consequence of this practice is caseworker burnout.

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## ORIENTATION

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The old saying “first impressions are often lasting impressions” is especially appropriate for new employees. The first few weeks on the job are typically filled with anxiety, concern, fear, and curiosity. If no one takes the time to reduce those feelings and to make new caseworkers feel part of a group, those initial feelings may affect the performance and retention of caseworkers. If caseworkers get off to a bad start, they may never recover. Therefore, a program for orienting new caseworkers is not a luxury; it is an absolute necessity.

The primary purpose of an orientation program is to help new caseworkers fit into their jobs, work groups, the organization, and even the community. Orientation provides information about the employee’s role in the agency and the agency’s role in the community. This helps to reduce the anxiety that new staff experience, creates a sense of belonging to the unit and agency, and promotes the development of staff competence.<sup>18</sup>

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### Creating a Sense of Belonging

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Strategies for promoting a sense of belonging to the unit and agency include:

- Calling new staff members before their start date in order to provide an introduction, welcome them to the unit, tell them where to park and where to enter the building, and inform them of security measures when entering the building.
- Making sure someone in the unit greets the new staff members.



- Introducing new staff members to others in the unit or agency.
- Making sure there are workspaces for new caseworkers, including essential materials (e.g., telephone, paper, pens, computer, stapler).
- Placing a welcoming gift (e.g., a coffee mug or flowers) on each new caseworker's desk.
- Sending a memo or e-mail notifying other units of the arrival of new caseworkers.
- Having a breakfast or lunch where staff can meet the new caseworkers.
- Pairing new caseworkers with other caseworkers in the unit or arranging for mentors.
- Being available and accessible to new caseworkers.
- Showing them around the office and pointing out where things are located (e.g., bathroom, kitchen, and copy room).
- Providing a schedule of activities for the first week.
- Including their names on the schedule for weekly, individual supervision.<sup>19</sup>

### Process for Orientation of New Staff

The process for orientation varies from agency to agency, so the role of supervisors in orientation also varies. Some agencies have an ad hoc approach, while others have a consistent, identified orientation plan. Examples include:

- **A training unit.** In this model, all new caseworkers are assigned to a training unit, typically for 4 to 6 months. In addition to orienting new staff, the training unit works to develop necessary competencies. Preservice programs and classroom training are coordinated with on-the-job training. Cases are assigned gradually to teach caseworkers what they need to know to perform their responsibilities effectively.
- **Structured agency orientation.** In this model, the agency has a plan and process for orienting new staff. The plan and process will vary from agency to agency. For example, some agencies assign new caseworkers to a unit, but they designate a training supervisor who coordinates orientation and training for new staff. New caseworkers meet for 1 to 2 days per week for classroom orientation, training, or observation. Another example of a structured orientation is one developed and coordinated by a task force with representatives from all levels of management. New staff may meet for a day with human resources, a supervisor from each program may provide an overview of the purpose and outcomes for their program area, and new staff may be taken to different community agencies.
- **Orientation provided by the supervisor.** In some agencies, orientation of new staff may be the responsibility of the supervisor. How structured, consistent, and informative the orientation is varies dramatically from supervisor to supervisor.

### Content of Orientation

The content of the orientation may vary from agency to agency, but it should include:

- Information about the agency's mission, the programs and services the agency provides, the unit to which staff are assigned, the new staff member's particular position, the organizational structure, and community resources;
- Performance expectations and standards of practice;
- Explanations, interpretations, and clarifications of policies and procedures to help new caseworkers understand the agency's standards and operational framework;
- Information about the client population;
- Personnel issues (e.g., benefits, leave, employee assistance programs);
- Models of practice (e.g., samples of completed case forms, opportunities to observe skilled caseworkers modeling appropriate techniques).

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## METHODS FOR BUILDING STAFF CAPACITY

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Developing or enhancing a skill consists of a multistep process:

- Receiving information on how to perform a task;
- Observing a model performance;
- Practicing the performance;
- Receiving developmental feedback.

This process should be used in classroom training and on-the-job training by the supervisor. For example, the first two steps of the process are completed by supervisors who provide information on how to investigate a complaint of maltreatment and assign an experienced caseworker to model how to conduct an investigation. Subsequently, supervisors or experienced caseworkers should observe new caseworkers as they conduct an investigation and provide feedback on the demonstrated skills.

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### Training

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Most State CPS agencies provide preservice training programs for new child welfare staff. The structure, content of, and frequency with which preservice training programs are offered varies. In some agencies, new caseworkers must wait from 1 to several months to attend preservice training. Some offer competency-based certification training programs for new staff. Further, some agencies offer a preservice training program that combines classroom training with highly structured, on-the-job training provided by the supervisor.

Despite differences in approach to training, the intent is the same—to provide new caseworkers with basic CPS knowledge and skills. Effective preservice training programs build the core competencies caseworkers must possess in order to achieve CPS outcomes and goals. For example, skills covered may include: demonstrating empathy, respect, and genuineness; determining the validity of the report; and assessing the risk of current and future harm to the child. Other models used may be based on a more task-oriented approach. They tend to provide information and skill development related to the stages of the CPS process (e.g., intake). The training also provides an opportunity for the agency to examine attitudes, values, and possible biases of caseworkers toward maltreated children and their families.

Periodic inservice training is important for all caseworkers. Some States require CPS caseworkers to obtain and maintain a license. In those States, caseworkers are required to obtain a specified number of continuing education credits (CEU) every 1 to 2 years. Competency-based training always should incorporate the multistage process of learning skills previously detailed. There are a variety of sources for obtaining inservice training, including:

- Specialized workshops provided by State development and training personnel;
- Continuing education courses offered by colleges and universities, including schools of social work;
- Advanced-training courses provided by national organizations;
- National, regional, State, and local conferences and workshops.

The American Public Human Services Association has developed guidelines on how to evaluate the quality of training. Supervisors are referred to *Guidelines for a Model System of Protective Services for Abused and Neglected Children and Their Families* (1999) for information about this topic. This publication is available at <http://www.aphsa.org>.

### Exhibit 5-3 Training on Exposure to Violence

Many caseworkers are unfamiliar with the special needs of children who witness violence.

Suggested topics for training include:

- The differential effects of trauma in children in the child welfare system: how history, personality, age, and a support system contribute to the traumatic experience and its after-effects.
- Factors contributing to misdiagnosis of psychological trauma in children.
- How to work with biological, foster, and kinship parents to identify and address behavioral challenges that result from the impact of the trauma.
- Differences in subsequent behavior of single versus repeated trauma.
- Techniques for handling mistrust and other symptoms during screening, assessment, case planning, and intervention.
- Cultural factors that may impact the trauma experience.
- How to integrate observations from case assessment, intervention, or evaluation into court reports or when providing testimony.<sup>20</sup>

#### Transfer of Knowledge

Most managers assume that when a staff member is sent to training, he or she will return to the job and apply this new knowledge or skill. Unfortunately, this is sometimes an erroneous assumption. Skills learned during training are more likely to be applied in the workplace if coordination exists between the trainee,

the trainee's immediate supervisor, and the trainer. This helps establish an environment that supports utilizing the information provided in the training. There are actions that occur before, during, and after training that either promote or hamper transfer. Exhibit 5-4 outlines actions that supervisors can take to reinforce the knowledge and skills learned by new caseworkers at trainings.

#### Exhibit 5-4 Supervisor Actions that Promote the Transfer of Knowledge

- Fully supporting the importance of training and providing “protected” time for the staff to attend.
- Having discussions with caseworkers prior to the training about its potential benefits, as well as their expectations and goals. A learning plan also should be developed prior to attending the training that includes what learning is desired and expected, along with how the new knowledge and skills will be used on the job.
- Involving caseworkers in deciding what training is appropriate, including input on determining when and where it is scheduled.
- Having trainees establish a plan for assuring case coverage while in training.
- Scheduling a meeting with caseworkers within a week after the training to review their action plan for integrating new knowledge or skills into the job.
- Having caseworkers provide an overview of the training to other unit staff members.
- Arranging for trainees to shadow another caseworker who has previously attended the training in an effort to observe how he or she implemented the workshop ideas.
- Demonstrating the value placed on the training to affect caseworkers’ attitudes about the training. If caseworkers perceive apathy toward the training, they are unlikely to see the relevance or utility of it on the job.
- Establishing a climate of open communication and exchange of information. This allows caseworkers to ask each other about training and how it might help everyone enhance their practice. A unit with a passion for learning, linked to improvement, will enhance transfer of knowledge.
- Creating opportunities for practicing what was learned, especially in units with large caseloads and heavy work demands. New techniques cannot become part of a caseworker’s repertoire without time to try them out, evaluate how they worked, and refine the skills.<sup>21</sup>

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## Supervisory Teaching Methods

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Supervisors need to be aware of and maximize the potential influence they have over what caseworkers learn. There are a number of on-the-job methods supervisors can use to facilitate staff learning and development.

### One-to-One Teaching

Individualized instruction is probably the most persuasive teaching method. Some advantages of this method include:

- That it can be easily individualized to accommodate caseworkers' strengths and needs, intellectual levels, academic backgrounds, and learning styles.
- That it can be incorporated into the regular interaction between caseworkers and supervisors, particularly since there is an expectation of teaching-learning built into such relationships.
- That it helps bridge status and cultural gaps by providing the chance for immediate clarification or further explanation, as well as by allowing the opportunity for both parties to learn how the other's background impacts their teaching or learning style and frame of reference.
- That it allows supervisors to impart experience and model performance.<sup>22</sup>

### Brainstorming

Brainstorming is a method used by supervisors to generate ideas and provide information about practice alternatives. During an individual case conference, for example, when a caseworker believes that all of the options for a client have been exhausted, brainstorming can be an excellent tool for identifying new strategies. This technique sets the stage for staff to escape from more routine approaches to problem solving. Brainstorming with the unit is another method that produces ideas and at the same time elicits full participation of the staff. Many sound ideas

surface that might otherwise be inhibited by interpersonal conflicts, dominant personalities, patterns of being uninvolved, or fear of criticism.

Brainstorming is useful in working through problems that caseworkers present because:

- It promotes caseworkers' active involvement in the decision-making process rather than waiting for decisions to be made.
- It provides a means for expressing ideas spontaneously and "on the spot."
- It enables supervisors and caseworkers to gain new perspectives in a stimulating and interesting atmosphere.
- In group situations, it reduces the likelihood of "one-upmanship" in the problem-solving process.<sup>23</sup>

### Modeling

Modeling is the deliberate display of behavior by the supervisor to demonstrate effective performance and promote learning. This technique can be very useful in teaching new behaviors, helping individuals retry behaviors previously associated with negative consequences, and improving the performance of previously learned behavior. There are three phases for learning modeled behaviors:

1. **Attention.** The attention of the caseworker is focused on identifying key behaviors.
2. **Retention.** The caseworker commits the observed behaviors to memory so that they can be reproduced. Sorting the observed behaviors in terms of importance and familiarity and rehearsing the behaviors is very helpful in aiding retention.
3. **Reproduction.** The test of learning is doing. Reproduction is the performance of observed behaviors.

The advantages of using modeling behavior in the supervisory process include:

- Caseworkers can gain first hand experience of the effects of the supervisor's behaviors.
- Poor practices can be altered through witnessing and performing positive practices.
- Good practices can be brought to the caseworker's attention and reinforced.<sup>24</sup>

### Role Play

Role playing is simply playing a part in a simulated or staged situation. It is an excellent instructional strategy for practicing and receiving feedback on performance, as well as observing feelings and behaviors of the individuals in the situation being staged. Role playing can be used to change behavior by allowing participants to:

- Try out new approaches or techniques;
- Identify potential problems and solutions;
- Develop intervention techniques;
- Develop decision-making skills;
- See issues from another viewpoint;
- Assess skills.

The effectiveness of role play in supervision depends on a number of factors:

- Thoughtful planning of roles, anticipated interactions, and the scene or situation;
- The comfort level of the role players;
- The amount of flexibility and improvisation encouraged;
- The prompting of behaviors or skills to be learned or practiced;
- The quality of feedback provided immediately after the role play.<sup>25</sup>

Afterward, role players should be provided the opportunity for debriefing. Feelings experienced in the role, reactions to the role play, and application of the exercise to practice are some examples of debriefing topics.

### Coaching

Traditional management style typically means being directive or telling staff what to do. This is a quick and easy method for getting the job done. However, coaching helps staff discover the answers through problem solving, as well as helps them develop a sense of personal responsibility and confidence. It enhances the quality of the work and develops staff skills at the same time. It also enhances self-esteem and morale. Coaching involves using specific strategies to change inner thought processes and to improve professional behavior. This approach requires supervisors to believe that staff have the answers inside of themselves. It also means that supervisors have to ask staff the right questions to facilitate the discovery.<sup>26</sup>

Two core skills used in coaching to create awareness in the caseworker and promote responsibility are listening and the use of open-ended questions. Listening is essential because, in coaching, the caseworker guides what issues are addressed. Perhaps the hardest thing a coach has to learn to do is to be quiet and listen. Skills necessary for being a good listener include:

- **Attentiveness.** This skill entails actively listening to a caseworker's total message—the verbal (actual words), the paraverbal (the tone, pitch, and pacing of the words), and the nonverbal (body language).
- **Clarifying.** This skill helps to bring the issue into sharper focus, add detail, and hold it up for inspection. It involves listening, asking questions, synthesizing information, and identifying any gaps in information or lapses in its logic.
- **Reflecting.** Reflective listening is the act of communicating back to the caseworker the

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content, feelings, or total message of what he or she said. A “content reflection” is essentially paraphrasing the substance of the caseworker’s message. A “feeling reflection” communicates the feeling part of the caseworker’s message, and a “combined reflection” communicates understanding of the client’s complete message.

- **Analyzing and synthesizing information, then giving feedback.** As the supervisor listens to the caseworker, he or she is analyzing and synthesizing what the caseworker is saying. When giving feedback, the supervisor succinctly describes what he or she sees is going on. This enables the caseworker to view situations from a different lens or perspective. It also involves giving the caseworker input into the validity of his or her discussion.
- **Summarizing.** Sometimes caseworkers digress and get caught up in numerous, sometimes minor details. Summarizing pulls the key issues together and helps the caseworker to focus on what is most relevant.<sup>27</sup>

The other core skill in coaching is asking open-ended questions. Asking closed-ended questions saves people from having to think, while open-ended questions promotes thought toward the matter. Use questions that begin with:

- What
- When
- Who
- How much
- How many

“Why” is discouraged because it often implies criticism and evokes defensiveness. Questions should begin broadly and increasingly focus on detail. The demand for detail maintains the focus and interest of the caseworker. As a coach, supervisors need to probe deeper for more detail to keep caseworkers involved

and to bring to consciousness those often partially obscured factors that may be important.

### Guided Reflection

Guided reflection is useful for modifying and improving caseworker behaviors. This process involves recreating the scene of intervention in order to examine caseworker-client interaction. The primary goal is for the supervisor to help the caseworker become more aware of the dynamics in the client relationship. Examination of the dynamics begins with guided recall (by the supervisor) of sequences of caseworker-client interactions and moves to self-directed analysis (by the caseworker) of the feelings and beliefs that underlie those interactions. The viewer (supervisor), by making simple observations of the other’s (caseworker) behavior, puts in motion a series of reflections and interpretations.

This technique is particularly effective for facilitating self-examination. In recalling a specific situation, the caseworker can discover errors and identify strengths. The supervisor may choose to guide the caseworker in self-reflection in the following situations:

- When reviewing a case record;
- When a caseworker is giving a verbal account of a situation;
- When a caseworker seeks the supervisor’s input in solving a problem in a case;
- When a caseworker has completed a difficult home visit or interview.

### Mentoring

Many innovative CPS agencies and supervisors are integrating mentoring in their staff development programs. The possible uses of mentoring include:

- **Orientation or induction**—To help staff become familiar with the organization.
- **Support for learning on the job**—To enhance job-related knowledge and skills for the present.

- **Career progression**—To assist in identifying and supporting staff potential for the future.
- **Support in a new project or new job**—To ensure rapid assimilation and delivery.
- **Coping with change**—To help people understand what is involved in change.<sup>28</sup>

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### DEALING WITH PERFORMANCE PROBLEMS

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The job of supervisors would be much easier if every employee enjoyed the job, performed excellently, and had an insatiable desire to grow and improve. Unfortunately, not all employees meet these parameters. Dealing with performance problems is an everyday reality in supervision. In CPS, performance problems surface in several ways. Some caseworkers are inconsiderate of clients, foster parents, or other service providers; fail to meet Federal, State, and local mandates on a regular basis; or do not comply with agency personnel policies. There are some caseworkers who conduct inadequate assessments, exhibit poor writing skills, or do not effectively engage clients.

In approaching performance problems, the most common error is concentrating on the symptom rather than the cause. For example, a caseworker may be persistently late in documenting contacts with clients. The missing documentation is the symptom or consequence of the problem, not so much the problem itself. The supervisor may define it as such because it is the agency's concern. However, it is likely that some larger factor is influencing this condition.

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#### Analyzing Performance Problems

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A process for analyzing performance problems consists of asking the following questions:

- **Can the supervisor identify a performance discrepancy?** A performance discrepancy is a gap between expected and existing performance. It

must be defined behaviorally and in specific terms. Are all cases overdue or are there only three that are overdue? Does the caseworker fail to pick up on all client family dynamics or only misinterpret certain ones?

- **Are performance discrepancies consistently present?** For example, a caseworker may have trouble accurately assessing a mother's ability to protect her child. In almost all cases, the caseworker's conclusion appears to be a guess rather than an assessment based on information from the mother and other relevant sources. This performance problem is different from that of a caseworker who is able to accurately assess the issue of protection in cases involving neglect, but not in those involving abuse.
- **Is the problem important?** Some behaviors that supervisors identify as problems have no negative consequences. For example, a caseworker may appear to be extremely disorganized, but still complete case assignments on time. The caseworker's disorganization only seems to be a problem because the supervisor is so well-organized. A real performance problem is a gap in results, one in which the problem is not likely to go away on its own.
- **Does the caseworker know what to do and when to do it?** Sometimes supervisors think they have communicated the necessary information for expected performance. However, the information may not have been interpreted correctly. For example, a caseworker who was told he or she has 24 hours to initiate an investigation may not understand that some case situations require an immediate response.
- **Does the caseworker know that his or her performance does not meet expectations?** Without clear feedback, a caseworker may assume that his or her performance is acceptable. A caseworker's extreme assertiveness with clients, for example, may seem to get results because the clients comply with immediate requests. However, the clients are not engaged as partners



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in the case plan. Without feedback, the caseworker may not see this issue as a performance discrepancy.

- **Is the problem due to external obstacles beyond the caseworker's control?** Supervisors are likely to hear many obstacles that prevent caseworkers from achieving performance expectations. Increased caseloads, conflicting priorities, failure of others to act responsibly, and problems gaining judicial acceptance of CPS recommendations are just a few of the reasons provided by caseworkers. A good rule of thumb in evaluating obstacles is to ask whether the obstacles exist for all caseworkers in the unit. For instance, do all the caseworkers have similar problems in court? If the answer is no, then it is more likely that the obstacle is due to caseworker performance rather than external conditions.
- **Does the caseworker know how to accomplish the necessary tasks?** Analyzing skill capabilities requires direct observation. Supervision meetings and review of case records provide only information filtered by the caseworker. Without direct supervisory observation, it is difficult to determine all the conditions affecting performance. Caseworkers may not know how to build the trust needed for disclosure and, although they are asking the right questions, they may not be eliciting honest responses.
- **Is good performance rewarded or does it receive a negative consequence?** Ideally, caseworkers who perform well receive appropriate recognition and support. On occasion though, they are penalized for their efforts. For instance, skillful caseworkers may consistently be given the most complicated or dangerous cases. Group norms also may produce negative consequences to good performance. Caseworkers who are always up-to-date with their paperwork may be excluded from informal interactions by others who are consistently late in completing this task.
- **Is nonperformance rewarded?** This is a common condition in units where supervisors focus

primarily on problems. Eventually staff learn that the way to gain the attention of supervisors is to have a problem.

- **Could the caseworker perform if he or she wanted to?** Sometimes certain caseworkers are just not well-suited for CPS work. No matter how hard they try to meet performance expectations, problems surface. In this situation, a transfer to another division or leaving the agency for work elsewhere may be appropriate. Personnel policies or union contracts usually specify how supervisors should proceed in such situations.<sup>29</sup>

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### Coaching for Improved Work Performance

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As previously mentioned, coaching is useful in developing caseworker proficiency. It is also a tool for dealing with performance problems. When applied to performance, supervisors can use the following steps to intervene and connect with staff:

- **Be supportive.** A supervisor needs to state in clear language his or her understanding of the caseworker's situation. This assessment includes the nature of the problem, the supervisor's current understanding of the caseworker's feelings about the problem, and the supervisor's objectives and initial offers of support in working toward resolution of the problem. The goal is to engage the caseworker and communicate that this is a problem-solving process rather than a disciplinary process. Being supportive does not require accepting the caseworker's explanation of the problem or explanations of why it cannot be solved.
- **Develop an understanding of what is happening.** This step requires active listening. The purpose is not to persuade the caseworker to accept the supervisor's view of the problem, but to help the supervisor understand the problem from the caseworker's perspective. It is important to understand that the caseworker's current behavior is an attempt to meet some underlying need. Solving the problem will require discovering the

underlying need and finding an alternative to meet that need. For example, a caseworker may routinely display punitive and judgmental attitudes toward suspected perpetrators of child sexual abuse. Strong emotional reactions to sexual abuse, as well as the caseworker's personal history and values, may be relevant in understanding this situation. Such influences should not be dismissed with statements such as "You need to learn to control your feelings." Instead, the supervisor may need to ask several clarifying questions to understand the cause of such reactions or emotions. Further, the supervisor needs to help the caseworker understand how such judgmental actions are likely to be detrimental to addressing the needs of the family.

- **Help the caseworker evaluate how his or her current performance and behavior are affecting personal goals.** To the extent that current performance undermines personal goal attainment, there is a basis of motivation on which to build change. This step helps to develop self-interest in change. For example, a caseworker may be neglecting documentation in favor of "giving more direct time to clients through personal contacts." The caseworker's goals are focused on the client. However, the caseworker also needs to understand the benefits of paperwork to clients, as well as the consequences of incomplete paperwork. In the caseworker's absence, a supervisor, another caseworker, or a judge may have to make a decision based solely or primarily on information available in the case record. In the absence of information known only to the caseworker, a decision may be made that may be contrary to the best interest of a child or parent.
- **Create a clear, specific, and feasible plan for change.** Once the underlying needs are determined, the supervisor can engage the caseworker in developing goals and future actions. This step involves developing a contract between the supervisor and caseworker that defines clearly what each wants and is willing to

offer. Agreements to "work on it," or general goals such as "improve my timeliness" are not acceptable in a case plan and are equally unacceptable in dealing with performance problems. Performance improvement plans must have the same concrete steps and behaviorally defined goals that one would use in planning with a parent or child.

- **Follow up.** Second only to inaccurate assessment of the performance problem, failure to follow up is the most frequent reason difficulties in performance persist. Plans for improvement are made, and the caseworker is left alone to implement them. In one way or another, the supervisor's behavior contributes to the problem. Getting the caseworker to enhance performance requires that the supervisor also change some part of his or her current behavior. Although most supervisors intend to follow-up, some become busy with other priorities. Some avoid follow-up because they do not want to confront the lack of improvement. If improvement is evident, some may assume that no follow-up is needed because the problem apparently is solved. Following up conveys to the unit that the supervisor cares about results.
- **Provide feedback.** Sustaining changes in performance requires supervisory encouragement and positive feedback. Therefore, the supervisor should provide both evaluative and developmental feedback on an ongoing basis to sustain the improvements in the caseworker's performance.<sup>30</sup>

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#### DEALING WITH CASEWORKER RESISTANCE

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In dealing with performance problems and coaching for enhanced performance, supervisors may encounter resistance on the part of caseworkers. Resistance is an emotional process. Any amount of rational argument by supervisors usually does not overcome it. In fact, such efforts often intensify the resistance.

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Supervisors may sense resistance is an issue when they:

- Feel increased tension;
- Explain something for the third time;
- Feel angry at or frustrated with a caseworker.

Caseworkers often communicate resistance by:

- Avoiding responsibility for the problem;
- Flooding the supervisor with details;
- Changing the subject;
- Acting unusually silent;
- Showing premature compliance;
- Attacking the supervisor verbally;
- Pressing for solutions rather than trying to understand the problem;
- Claiming that the supervisor does not fully understand the situation.<sup>31</sup>

Resistance may be the caseworker's way of expressing underlying feelings of vulnerability and loss of control. These feelings may require emotional rather than intellectual reassurance. In other words, if the supervisor responds by providing a logical explanation of the problem and a proposed solution, he or she is responding to the thinking, not the feeling, component of the caseworker's experience. As a preferred alternative, the following three-step process addresses feelings associated with resistance:

1. **Identify the form the resistance is taking.** The form of the resistance is evident in the caseworker's behavior. For example, the caseworker may verbalize agreement but communicate anger nonverbally.

2. **State in a neutral, nonpunitive way the form the resistance is taking.** This can be accomplished through statements to the caseworker such as "You seem to be giving me a lot of detail" or "You were raising many objections, but now you suddenly agree with me."
3. **Remain silent.** Let the caseworker respond to the statement.<sup>32</sup>

Remaining quiet can be very difficult. Sometimes a supervisor's anxiety about silence causes him or her to continue speaking. Supervisors must fight the inclination to talk. Silence is a necessary part of getting the caseworker to express underlying concerns such as "I'm afraid you're going to blame me for this." Here, the caseworker is expressing vulnerability. He or she perceives the situation as one of placing blame rather than finding a solution. Once the reason for the resistance is understood, the supervisor can acknowledge and deal with it.

It is always important to remember that the caseworker's resistant behaviors are not personal attacks on the supervisor. Defensive and resistant reactions are signs that the supervisor has touched on an especially significant or sensitive issue. It is equally important to remember that change always creates feelings of vulnerability. Direct expression of these feelings is not resistance. When a caseworker says, "I'm not sure I can do that," the caseworker is directly expressing a fear. On the other hand, when the caseworker repeatedly says, "You still don't understand the problem. Let me give you more information," the caseworker may be demonstrating resistance.

Managing performance problems is one of the most difficult aspects of supervision. The more a supervisor can determine the cause of the problem and coach the caseworker to improved performance, the more likely it will be that the supervisor will experience success in dealing with problems in performance.