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**What's in a name? Strengths-based
Supervision – Reality or Rhetoric:**

An Analysis of Supervision in an Organisation with
a Vision of Strengths-based Practice

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Abstract

The aim of this research was to explore the impact of a transition to strengths-based practice within a social service organisation. The central consideration within this study was the participants' conceptualisations of what strengths-based practice and supervision might look like; how this connected, or collided with their views around traditional approaches to practice and supervision and whether strengths-based supervision is a distinct model or approach to supervision or a repackaging of traditional approaches to supervision. This research also sought to locate the significance of the transition to strengths-based practice within the participants' experiences of supervision and the nature of the relationship between external supervision and the change process.

The research was informed by participatory action-research methodology, which was utilised because of the requirement that the researcher join a change process being undertaken within the agency and the compatibility between this research methodology and the principles of strengths-based practice.

The need to be clear about what strengths-based practice and the importance of developing shared understanding about what this actually means beyond the rhetoric has been highlighted in this research as a fundamental task for the Organisation, Supervisees and External Supervisors. The research findings presented a variety of constructions and meanings associated with strengths-based practice and continued to highlight the debate in the literature about the validity or otherwise of distinguishing strengths-based practice as a new approach to practice. This research offers a view that continuing to dichotomise strengths and deficits approaches may be less helpful in the long run as this has the continuing potential to alienate and engender defensiveness.

Supervision as one of the critical places for workers to reflect on the fit between their actions and their view of these actions was reinforced within the findings. Although the research question about the existence of strengths-based supervision as a distinct supervision model was not addressed definitively within the research findings a clear theme has emerged within the participants' responses that supports a supervision framework that is clearly linked to the principles of strengths-based practice. The

narrative of the supervisee participants in the research strongly supported the notion of a supervision environment where supervision focuses on strengths and competency and a safe transparent and clearly contracted relationship that encourages supervision to be a supervisee-led and focused process. This research supports the greater ownership of supervision by supervisees and the development of the supervisee voice within the supervision literature.

The importance of engaging external supervision processes in a change process and also the value of connecting up and establishing clear and well-structured three-way contracts between supervisees, external supervisors and the organisation have been highlighted within the research. The findings related to the nature of the relationships between the participants lend weight to the argument for supervision as an important and central tool and resource in a change process and point to the value of ongoing clarification of the expectations and roles of all those involved in supervision.

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