

# 3

## Perception Is Everything

*We do not see the world as the world is, we see the world as we are.*

— Stephen Covey

### ❖ PERCEPTIONS OF EFFECTIVE SUPERVISION AND QUALITY LEADERSHIP

The last chapter provided research and many accounts on the importance of and significant role individual perceptions play in shaping our experiences with leaders and work environments. We know for certain that it is the workers' perceptions of leaders' behavior and character that will determine whether a worker will trust, respect, and subsequently "follow" or be inspired by that particular leader. There is a direct connection between workers' perceptions of the quality of leadership and their experience of competence, personal accomplishment, organizational commitment, and job satisfaction. Therefore, whether or not leadership is determined to be of quality and/or effective is dependent upon the workers' perception of that experience.

Individual perceptions and the impact on a workers' experience of work and of themselves within the work extends beyond the immediate leader-member relationship. We also know that workers who perceive their immediate work environment as positive experience greater job satisfaction and organizational commitment. When workers perceive

their work climate to be positive, meaningful, and supportive, outcomes will be better for both the worker and the clients they serve. Worker perceptions of the leader, leadership, and the work environment therefore directly impact their experience, their attitudes, their behaviors, and, most importantly, how they perform at work.

I have witnessed firsthand the significant role worker perceptions play in shaping and determining the worker experience of leadership and of the work overall. Among many of my important learning experiences as a supervisor and trainer of supervisors and managers over the years, there are three situations in particular that stand out as “lightning-bolt moments.” It was these specific instances that contributed to and solidified my understanding of the importance of employee perceptions, a quality leadership experience, and subsequent impacts on employee engagement, motivation, and performance. I will share a brief overview of each situation, including insights, themes, and important lessons learned that have influenced and continue to influence the primary importance I place on employee perceptions and the employee’s story—their lived experience.

### **Situation 1: We may not know what we think we know.**

Like most supervisors in the social services, I began supervising clinical therapists and residential group care workers long before I had any formal training as a supervisor, other than a field-placement training course, which I taught! I had a great deal of supervision experience but lacked formal training or any type of feedback on the quality and effectiveness of my supervisory efforts. At one point in my career, I was responsible for supervising the staff in a large residential youth care program: seven clinical therapists, 22 program managers, and approximately 125 frontline child and youth care workers. Without a direct supervisor or manager myself, it was not long before I realized that providing quality and effective supervision for everyone might be absolutely impossible! It was desperation and necessity that led me to enlist my clinical therapists to help with supervision of staff. Also, because the program did not have time or money to provide formal supervision training, I planned to train my team to supervise as an aspect of their professional development through their individual supervision sessions with me.

Now I think it is important to note that up until this particular time, I would state confidently that I was a great supervisor. It was my perception that I was doing everything well; for years, my teams

seemed happy and productive, and I had never heard otherwise. So confidently I began to prepare my clinical team members to be supervisors and encouraged them to consider their preferred supervision approach. It wasn't until I asked them to do this that I realized I had never considered mine. In addition to this, it was not until this point that I had ever stopped to think, "How do I prefer to be supervised?" and, "How do I prefer to supervise?" These were not easy explorations. It took me some time to connect with what, why, and how I preferred to supervise. I had never ever stopped to consider this before. Wow!

Through exploration and various reflections, I discovered that I supervised the individuals on my team the way that I preferred to be supervised, which was directly linked to my own needs, values, and goals. In addition to this, I supervised everyone on my various teams the same way—same structure, same process, same format, same questions, and so on. I learned that I just pieced together what I had learned from my own past supervisors over the years and combined it with what I "liked" from the supervision courses I was teaching at the university. Like most supervisors, I was doing what I liked and what made the most sense for me.

This represented a very important yet challenging and meaningful eye-opening journey. It seemed as though I had to start from the beginning again, which was a little embarrassing because I had been supervising some of my team members for years. I asked each of them these questions:

- Tell me when supervision was the best or most helpful for you at any time in your career?
- What made it so meaningful or valuable?
- How would you prefer supervision?
- What would be the most helpful for you?

Interestingly, just as I struggled to figure out what, why, and how I liked to be supervised, it was difficult for my team members also. It was as though we were all on autopilot. In sharing perspectives, we were able to figure out specific individual preferences for what we each defined as a quality supervision experience.

Thankfully, I found out that I was doing a lot of things right, such as being trustworthy, respectful, a good listener, and a role model; however, there were things I could have been doing differently that would have made a significant differences for each of my

team members. For instance, Lindsay preferred more supervision, not less, and preferred it early in the day, when she was alert and energized. She preferred a more structured, organized, supervisor-led supervision session with a clear agenda and concrete objectives and activities focused primarily around cases and clinical intervention. Small talk and getting off topic was not a favorable occurrence for Lindsay as she wanted to use the time most efficiently. However, personal check-ins were very important as was Lindsay's preference for having her strengths identified and feelings affirmed and validated. These were just some of the many insights I gained around Lindsay's preferences for the most meaningful and valuable supervision. Raegan on the other hand wasn't as concerned with formality, structure, or format and preferred a collaborative back-and-forth dialogue that was led mostly by her. She valued supervisor input that was relevant and concrete. Rather than following a set agenda, Raegan preferred a quick review of cases so that there was more time to discuss pressing matters as they related to clients, the team, the organization, or her own professional development. Raegan believed that less supervision was better for her at that particular juncture in her career and within the present work environment.

I began to learn that despite my team members' common purpose for being in this field, they maintained unique needs, values, and goals for supervision and the work overall that if and when accommodated made a significant difference for them and their work. This knowledge enhanced my work in a number of ways. I found individual supervision sessions became more focused, effective, and meaningful. Furthermore, because effectiveness and quality were enhanced, individual supervision sessions were shorter in length and were required less frequently. From a practical standpoint, we were saving valuable time and energy, which are what I refer to as nonrenewable resources in the social service industry.

This particular situation surfaced important themes that were positively impactful then, and the insights gained continue to influence my understanding of the importance of perception on effective supervision and overall leadership quality. Some of these themes are

- many supervisors don't know what they think they know,
- supervisor perspectives often differ from their workers,
- often supervisors don't know what they are doing that works well with staff and/or what needs to be changed,

- worker perceptions and experiences hold the key to worker preferences for effective supervision and quality leadership,
- supervisors and workers may not know their own preferences for supervision,
- worker perceptions on effective supervision may be different than their supervisors' perceptions, and
- perceptions of trust, respect, and empathy are important to most workers.

### **Situation 2: All is not as it seems.**

Early on in my career as a provincial trainer of supervisors and managers in child welfare, I began to learn of a gap in perceptions that existed between those of the supervisors and of their individual members. The advantage of training in a small province as a trainer of frontline workers and managers is that there are times when one week I would have frontline workers as attendees, and later that month, I would have their direct supervisors in training on supervision. This proved to be an interesting situation because often frontline staff would talk about experiences with their supervisors. Also, managers would be encouraged, as part of their training curriculum, to talk about specific staff concerns, especially in the three-day program designed to assist supervisors on how to effectively manage "difficult" employees.

One day, a supervisor who I will refer to as Barb showed up early for the "how to manage difficult employees" training. She informed me that she had been waiting for this training for months because she really wanted to learn how to "fire a problem staff member." I reminded her that the curriculum was designed to assist with understanding and managing challenging behaviors. She boldly stated, "Nothing will help this guy I inherited. He has got to go!" Despite my efforts to encourage her to use the curriculum strategies to gain an understanding of the presenting issues, she was adamant that nothing was going to change her mind. On more than several occasions over the three days, I had to interrupt the group work at her table because she capitalized on the working time to enlist five other participants to sympathize with her plight. She continually focused on the negative aspects of her situation and built her case with colleagues at the table to fire this particular staff member.

Barb consistently listed all of the behaviors that bothered her. She stated that her staff person was lazy and avoidant. According to her, he was spending less time at work, and when he was at work, he would leave unit meetings and group supervisions early. He was withdrawn and passive in individual supervision sessions. According to her, she didn't know if he was even listening as he consistently "did not take direction well." She stated that she had reprimanded him on several occasions and indicated that he must attend all unit meetings and individual and group supervision sessions. In describing her staff member and his behavior, Barb used words like lazy, uncommitted, uncooperative, insubordinate, passive-aggressive, and poor team player. Throughout the training sessions, I did my best to assist Barb on working to understand the employee's behavior. She was adamant that she had done all that she could. Her staff action plan stated, "Fire Brandon!" in bold letters across the entire staff development document.

Flash forward one month. I am training 70 frontline workers in a relationship-based strengths approach to child welfare intervention. In the back of the room is a participant that catches my attention. He is active and engaged, asking great questions, and responding to the material in an operationally consistent manner that was well in line with the curriculum values and preferred practice. Not only did he know this approach, it was obvious that he was a skilled practitioner also. He stood out so much that I became curious to know where he had trained, and I was also interested as to whether he had or would consider training workers in this approach. I had lunch with him.

What I learned blew my mind! As I listened to his story, I heard that training was one of the few contexts in the field where he still felt good and confident in his abilities anymore. He went on to say that he loved his job as a community support worker but was feeling very unsatisfied at work over the past year. He claimed that he did not have a good relationship with his supervisor, stating that he had little respect for her as a leader. He mentioned that he entered the field to work with people, not to spend his time in meetings and group supervisions. He stated that he appreciated team functions but not too many; nor did he like meetings that went on too long or were irrelevant to his work or his professional development. He noted that although he didn't feel good about it, he had been avoiding team functions in order to make more time for the clients on his caseload. He indicated that this had caused a great deal of tension between him and his supervisor. In his words he stated, "I don't trust her. I think she is lining me up to be fired." His

name was Brandon! Oh my goodness, it hit me: This was Barb's problem staff member! I was in a bind because I could not breach confidentiality; however, I offered to help. He declined as he was feeling hopeless and felt as though he had tried everything. He considered putting in for a transfer to another department. I heard from my professional contacts that Brandon was terminated six weeks later.

This was another lightning-bolt moment. How could the person described by Barb as the worst social worker ever be experienced by me and/or other supervisors as the social worker we would love to have on our team? We need workers like Brandon in the field. He was a great worker—motivated, engaged, and wired to make a positive difference. Regardless of the details, there was a serious problem with perceptions. What is astounding is that the more I listened to Barbs and Brandon's stories, the more I learned that they actually wanted the same thing: to work in a manner that was best for clients and the team. They both wanted to get the job done and to do their best by the clients they served.

This experience hit me hard and deeply as a person committed to developing the best capacities of both frontline workers and their leaders. I also share the desire to do the best for the children, families, and communities we serve. Quality client service and support is dependent upon workers and their leaders. Remember, there exists a set of inextricable links between quality leadership and positive worker experience of self and the work, between good practice decisions and preferred outcomes for clients. We need workers like Brandon to feel better and to perform better. We need supervisors like Barb to be less frustrated, angry, and exhausted. While I will discuss similar leadership dilemmas in Chapters 4 and 7 in the context of understanding and approaching resistance and oppositional behavior, it is important to note that the gap in different perceptions/experiences between supervisors and employees is very common, and the space can range from minor and insignificant to absolutely massive. I sometimes refer to the big ones as the "Grand Canyon gaps" in perceptions, issues that can lead to increased stress and conflict and all sorts of problems for leaders, their staff, and eventually for their clients.

This particular situation, like many other similar situations that followed in my career, surfaced important themes that were positively impactful then, and the insights gained continue to influence my understanding of the importance of perception on effective supervision and overall leadership quality. Some of these themes are as follows:

- Often supervisors and workers, despite differences, want the same things: better working relationships and preferred client outcomes.
- Supervisors and workers can have very different perceptions of the same situation.
- Large differences in supervisor and worker perceptions can cause stress and conflict.
- Conflict caused by differences in supervisor and worker perceptions can negatively impact trust, respect, the leader–member relationship, and overall performance.

### **Situation 3: One small difference can make BIG differences.**

I have had the privilege of working on some amazing projects that were geared toward enhancing social work team capacity. One project in particular, the Empowering Social Workers (ESW) Project (de Groot, 2006), was directed at empowering child welfare workers through a strengths-based approach to embrace and alter challenging workplace realities in a manner that would result in increased optimism, morale, empowerment, and team cohesion. A significant point to mention is that the ESW Project was initiated at the same time as what people refer to as the “worst time in child welfare in our province’s history.” The project was launched days prior to the discovery of an atrocious child death and the subsequent negative and tumultuous child death review that followed. This is important not because many project participants stated that it was the worst time to be working in child welfare in their entire careers but because the project demonstrated that we can effect positive change even at a time when workers in a system are feeling the most devalued, unsupported, and demoralized.

There were a number of purposeful and unintentional insights gleaned from the project. The hypothesis that we could effect positive changes in worker experience and overall workplace climate was confirmed in our work. This was exciting as it affirmed and validated the idea that we could positively affect workplace climate even if political, bureaucratic, fiscal, organizational, and workplace challenges continued to persist. However, despite the intentional deductions gathered, there were two significant surprises that occurred, one during the project and the other during project follow-up. The first surprise that occurred within the project was the importance the supervisor played in the experiences of workers and of the workplace

climate overall. Many project participants reported being dissatisfied with supervisory support and/or supervision due to a variety of factors. Some of these factors included a new supervisor being placed with the team, the team not knowing the supervisor, the supervisor not knowing all of the team members, diverse and differential staff support and supervision needs, trust and safety requiring more effort and work, little acknowledgment or validation by the supervisor, and workplace challenges making it hard on the supervisor (de Groot, 2006, p. 121).

It is important to note that when the project supervisor learned of this information following the project report, he was surprised and his feelings were hurt. However, like many great leaders, he agreed to team building in order facilitate a better understanding and accommodation of individual team members' needs and preferences for supervisory support and supervision. He wanted to do the best for his members and staff. I was asked to facilitate the initiative. I referred to the exercise as "Preferred Supervision: Identifying Needs to Succeed." This process was very successful and initiated steps the supervisor could take to enhance overall leadership quality for individual team members. At the time, I did not know that it was this process that stimulated the early development of the Preferred Leadership Profile (PLP), which I will discuss further in this chapter.

The second and most surprising revelation occurred during project follow-up and debriefing. Because the ESW Project was measuring changes in key areas such as worker feelings of optimism, empowerment, morale, and team cohesion, the evaluation design required two groups: the project group and the control group. The two groups were as identical as possible in size, location, number of team members, types of clients, number of cases, years of experience, and so on. What I found to be fascinating were the differences in overall worker satisfaction and workplace climate between the two teams. The control group reported a significantly higher level of morale, optimism, and team cohesion. What did most of them attribute it to? It was in large part due to the perceived supportiveness and supervision quality of the supervisor! This was exciting: an insight that confirmed the importance of employee perceptions have on worker experiences and workplace climate. More importantly, the greatest insight was that these two teams operated in similar environments with similar and persisting organizational and workplace challenges, yet due to positive worker perceptions of leadership quality, things were much better overall for the control team and its members.

This particular situation surfaced important themes that were positively impactful then, and the insights gained continue to influence my understanding of the importance of perception on effective supervision and overall leadership quality. Some of these themes are as follows:

- Worker perceptions and experiences of supervision have a significant impact on optimism, morale, job satisfaction, and workplace climate.
- Supervisors, by tuning into worker needs and preferences, can enhance the quality of supervision and support for workers.
- Effective supervision and quality supervisory support can buffer workers against the stress and challenges of a trying and difficult work environment.

Each of the three scenarios, in unique ways, demonstrates the role worker perceptions play in their experience of supervision and perceived supervisory support. While all of the lessons learned, including themes that emerged from the situations presented above, are valuable, it is the final bullet of the third scenario (*Effective supervision and quality supervisory support can buffer workers against the stress and challenges of a particular work environment*) that I find the most fascinating and profound. Situation 3 continues to confirm for me the power that quality leadership can have on workers' perceptions and experiences of the work and the work climate. I have been referring to supervision as a mechanism of leadership and have made reference to the context of supervision as representing an environment within an environment. Situation 3 clearly speaks to these ideas. Supervision as a mechanism can operate as a safe-haven for workers, especially during extremely difficult and challenging times. It reinforces the idea that while we may not be able to change or alter many of the bureaucratic, political, fiscal, and/or organizational impediments to good practice, as mentioned in Chapter 1, quality supervision and supervisory support can positively enhance workers' experience of themselves, the work, and the organization overall.

It is in the context of these scenarios that we may have a partial yet profound solution to the question posed by Patti (2009). That is, how do we create organizational conditions that will lead to positive worker perceptions, attitudes, and behavior in order to bring about the highest quality and the most effective service? It is through a quality leadership experience wherein the leader places primacy on the importance of the workers' perceptions of themselves and the work but above all their perceptions of the quality of supervision and supervisory support.

## ❖ THE EMPLOYEE AND THE EMPLOYEE'S STORY

Up to this point in the discussion, I have referred to the terms *perception* and *worker experience* to indicate how social service employees come to interpret and understand leader behaviors and their work environments overall. Perceptions are the key to experience. When making reference to the perceptions and experiences of workers, I often refer to the terms *employee story* or *worker story*.

I like to use the narrative concept of story to refer to the lived experience of individuals and/or groups. In the simplest manner, a person's story is his or her subjective experience of everything—of self, people, and situations. Our stories are made up of how we think and feel about ourselves and everything in the world around us. Our stories are shaped by our needs, beliefs, values, attitudes, and goals, and they are informed by our past, present, and future. How we make sense of our stories and the meaning that the stories maintain in large part determines the attitudes we hold and the behaviors we choose in our interactions with different people and/or in a variety of situations.

I mentioned in Chapter 1 that if asked for advice on how to be a better leader, my standard response is, "Get to know your employee!" I also highlighted an important and consistent theme which has surfaced from both practice wisdom and research: When employees and managers refer to their experiences of effective and quality leadership, it is not uncommon for them to attribute those experiences to the fact that their leader really knew them and had an understanding of their perceptions and experiences. Effective leaders are those leaders who are in tune with what workers need, what is important to them, and what they want for themselves, their team members, and the clients they serve. Getting to know the employee and the employee experience is absolutely essential if leaders are going to provide effective leadership and a quality leadership experience for the members that they lead.

In order to stress the absolute necessity of getting to know the employee and the employee's story for enhancing a quality leadership experience and motivating workers to perform optimally, it is important to place this discussion in the context of the definition of leadership offered in Chapter 2. Leadership was defined earlier as a process by which an individual or individuals inspire the attitudes and behaviors of others to engage in value-based and purpose-critical efforts in order to accomplish a set of shared objectives. An emphasis is placed

on the leader's ability to inspire, motivate, stimulate, or bring to action certain attitudes and behaviors that result in the optimization of worker performance and enhanced quality service. That's great, but the question becomes how do you inspire workers to be motivated and engaged as they carry out their work, especially when they are operating in challenging work environments that present serious barriers to preferred practice?

The answer to this question is at the heart of a Responsive Leadership Approach. Leaders can inspire their employees when they cultivate and connect with the experiences and perceptions of workers—perceptions of their work, their work environment, and their experiences of themselves within that particular context. The Responsive Leadership Approach places primary emphasis on establishing a respectful, trusting, and safe relationship that is, in and of itself, engaging, satisfying, and motivating. More importantly, however, such a relationship is critical as it creates what I refer to as a pathway to the employee's story—their lived experience. Why is the employee story so important? Because it is within the employee's perceptions and lived experiences that important needs, values, goals, and strengths lay. These are the key sources of individual motivation, engagement, commitment, and overall performance. This concept is built on the idea that the only way a leader can inspire is if he knows what it is that inspires each individual employee.

Consider the three scenarios above. While very different stories, there is a common consistency that holds them together: To varying degrees there existed barriers to the access of the employee's experience. We the supervisors were all missing important information. I was missing important information regarding the needs, values, and goals of my team members. Barb was missing large chunks of important information and meaning around her "challenging" employee. The project supervisor was also missing information as it pertained to the perceptions of his team members regarding work, supervision, and the relationship with him as the supervisor. As I stated earlier, it is this missing information and meaning that can lead to a variety of experiences and situations that can range from relatively minor to annoying, all the way to serious stress and conflict between the supervisor and employees. An important note worth restating is that in each situation, other than Barb's because it was probably too late, it was accessing employees' perceptions and experiences that led to a better experience of quality supervision, a better leadership experience, and enhanced work overall.

## What Motivates Social Service Workers?

What if supervisors could access that information—the employee story and the meaning embedded in it—earlier? What if managers can discover important information before gaps in perception cause any difficulties in the leader–member relationship? What if supervisors could learn about employee needs, values, goals, and strengths right from the beginning of the leader–member working relationship? If so, wouldn't we be able to minimize the potential for stress and/or conflict with employees and the subsequent challenges that may arise in work and service as a result? Wouldn't access to this important information and meaning enhance the quality of the employee experience with their leader and the work overall? Wouldn't the cultivation and engagement with important aspects of the employees' story enhance their experiences of the work thereby lead to better practice decisions and preferred client outcomes? These are the questions that I pursued over the last 15 years in my work with supervisors, managers, and leaders. The answer to all of these questions is a resounding YES! Absolutely!

It was this inquiry that provided impetus for seeking out, through research and interviews with thousands of employees and supervisors, what information from the employee's story is the most essential to access. What information is necessary to enhance a leader's capacity to inspire greater motivation, engagement, commitment, and overall performance from all employees? My findings helped shape my understanding of specific domains that are key sources of motivation for social service employees. In addition to this, the plethora of information from workers was used to develop a tool: the Preferred Leadership Profile. It was constructed to assist workers and their leaders in the discovery and documentation of important employee needs, values, goals, and strengths as they relate to preferences for leadership and the work overall.

### Different People, Different Motivators

As stated in Chapter 1, social service workers are an exceptionally motivated group of people who value and desire making the lives of those less fortunate better. However, the plethora of organizational and workplace realities presented earlier challenge many workers' connection to and engagement with the things that motivate them the most. It is critical for leaders to understand and connect with the various elements and dynamics that contribute to fostering and sustaining

employee motivation and engagement. Over the years, I have come to learn that social service employees are motivated by a variety of different things as they relate to the work and the employees' experiences of themselves within the work. These "things" are very much tied to employees' needs, values, goals, and strengths. The following items, which will be revisited in Chapter 6, represent worker preferences that are key sources of motivation and quality engagement for most employees. They are

- quality relationships characterized by trust, respect, integrity, and empathy;
- to work in step with their personal and/or professional values;
- to have and hold a shared vision and mission with others;
- to engage in tasks and objectives that are important to them, or that they at least see the value in;
- to have some aspect of themselves or their work acknowledged, appreciated, and/or admired;
- an environment that supports personal and professional growth;
- to see results;
- to have positive and constructive feedback;
- to have a sense of personal power or control over some aspect of the work; and
- to have strengths identified and built on in the pursuit of important objectives.

This list, which will be the main focus of Chapter 6, represents an array of motivation sources for many employees; however, the degree to which each item is motivating and engaging has to deal with the unique preferences and experiences of each individual employee. For some employees, like myself for instance, working in step with my values is very important for me. I also like to see results. My colleagues may not hold the same preferences. My office-mate years ago was not concerned as much with values but focused most of his energy on opportunities that supported his personal and professional growth.

It is very important to note that if at anytime workers lose connection to important and preferred factors that keep them motivated and/or

engaged, there is a likelihood that they will begin to lose motivation, focus, and engagement with the work. The longer a disconnection from such preferences persists, the more apt employees are to experience a disconcerting feeling; the longer a disconnect persists, the more likely that disconcerting feeling may shift to disillusionment and possibly demoralization. The more a leader knows about employee preferences and sources of motivation, the better able he will be to respond and accommodate, to the extent possible, the various needs, values, goals, and strengths embedded within the unique employee perceptions and experiences of those preferences. In addition to this, the longer and more fully a leader assists employees with a connection to their needs, values, goals, and strengths, the longer employees will stay motivated and engaged with the work.

### **The Key Performance Motivators Scale**

Understanding key sources of motivation preferences for employees has been very helpful for myself and other managers for learning, understanding, and responding to the various needs, values, and goals embedded within the meaning of those preferences. Prior to developing the Preferred Leadership Profile, I created a simple tool I refer to as the Key Performance Motivators Scale (KPMS), which can be found as Appendix A. It was developed to help workers and supervisors alike to identify and connect with their own and others' preferences for the things that motivate and engage them as they carry out their work. The KPMS is short, straightforward, and simple to use. It can be completed and discussed between supervisor and employee, and it can also be used in groups as a team-building exercise for surfacing and discussing important individual and team discoveries. While the KPMS offers supervisors an avenue for getting to know their employees better, I often suggest that the supervisors I work with use the Preferred Leadership Profile to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the employee and their story—their needs, values, goals, strengths, and preferences for support.

### **❖ THE PREFERRED LEADERSHIP PROFILE: PURPOSE**

While the next chapter will detail a variety of barriers and challenges that exist to accessing and engaging the employee experience and offer tools and strategies for mitigating such impediments, I feel it is

important to introduce the Preferred Leadership Profile tool at this juncture of the discussion. It is my intention that the PLP overview provided here will enhance your understanding of and reference to the tool, including such things as employee preferences as they relate to leadership and various aspects of the work. The PLP tool can be found in Appendix B.

In the most practical sense, the PLP enhances the leader's ability to get to know, understand, and respond to the unique needs, values, goals, and strengths of employees in a manner that leads to the greatest development of employees and essentially the greatest delivery of preferred staff and client outcomes. The main role of any leader is to deliver on service and client outcomes by inspiring the attitudes and behaviors of others to carry out effective and quality work. In order to *deliver*, a leader must *develop* the capacities of the employee and the team overall. And because delivery of outcomes is dependent upon development, the most effective employee development is dependent upon thorough and accurate *discovery*. I refer to discovery, development, and delivery as the three *Ds* of responsive leadership. When a leader discovers the unique needs, values, goals, strengths, and overall preferences of employees, optimal development, motivation, and engagement is possible and delivery of preferred staff and client outcomes much more likely.

The PLP tool was developed to provide both leader and members with opportunities to discover and connect with preferences and key motivation sources so that work may be a more meaningful and valuable experience for everyone involved. In addition to this, the PLP structure and process offer both leader and member opportunities to strengthen the leader-member relationship, to assist in a quality leadership experience and enhanced satisfaction with overall supervision and supervisory support. We know from previous chapters that enhanced supervision and quality leader-member relationships as perceived by the employee are foundational for enhancing the meaning and value of the employee work experience. In addition, the more a leader knows and understands what employees need, what is important to them, what they want, and what their strengths are, the better able the leader is to create the best fit between workers' preferences and capacities and the work overall. We know that such experiences enhance not only the worker's perception of leadership and supervision but also the perception of work and a work environment as positive, meaningful, and valuable. Therefore, the PLP tool can be instrumental in enhancing worker motivation, engagement, job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and organizational citizenship behavior.

## ❖ THE PREFERRED LEADERSHIP PROFILE: STRUCTURE AND PROCESS

### What the PLP Contains

The PLP is a 10-page document housing four main categories with a variety of informative sections pertaining to key work preferences and motivators common to many social service employees. The four main categories of the PLP are *Values and Purpose*, *Preferred Outcomes*, *Strengths*, and *Preferred Performance Supports*.

*Values and Purpose* is the first category of the PLP. This section encourages workers to connect with and identify aspects of the organization or program's vision, mission, and values that are important to them and their work. This PLP area also guides employees to make connections between organizational objectives and their own personal purposes. An important aspect for understanding worker motivation is to know an employee's individual reasons behind taking and remaining in a particular job. In addition to this, the *Values and Purpose* section solicits from the worker information pertaining to their own WIIFM, an acronym which means "What's in It for Me?" The WIIFM can provide the supervisor with insight into one or more particular payoffs related to a worker's purpose in carrying out his or her role of helping.

*Desired Outcomes* is the second major category in the PLP. This realm of the PLP brings purpose and objectives together as it encourages employees to consider specific goals—what they want for their clients, for themselves, and for the team overall. For most workers, these areas are key sources of motivation, focus, and engagement.

The third major category is the *Strengths* category. This section encourages employees to consider their own strengths as they pertain to both professional and personal domains. The strengths section is great for workers and supervisors alike. For employees, claiming strengths can be a positive, affirming, and hope-instilling process. In addition to this, it can assist employees in their own development as strengths are key to uncovering resources from past and present successes and are great for focusing on future successes also. For the supervisor, knowing employee strengths can be built on and leveraged in the pursuit of important goals and professional development. A strengths focus will be elaborated on further in Chapter 5.

The fourth and final category of the PLP is *Preferred Performance Supports*. It is the largest of the four profile categories as it contains a host of employee preferences geared toward enhancing professional development, learning, quality supervision, and communication. Employees are to consider and identify preferred goals for their own professional development. Additionally, employees are offered an opportunity to consider whether they have strengths that they would like to develop further. Employees are asked to reflect on their specific preferences for learning and to consider what qualities and/or ingredients would lead to quality supervision and support. This section of the PLP also offers employees the opportunity to outline preferences for structure and process within the context of supervision. Finally, the *Preferred Performance Supports* category of the PLP offers workers a place to outline and specify their own preferences for the most effective communication and feedback.

### **Introducing the PLP and Ensuring Buy-In**

One of the greatest impediments to preferred practice echoed by social service workers is that there is too much paperwork. This is one of the most common challenges and sources of resistance that surface when trying to introduce the PLP tool to individual employees and teams. Prior to introducing the PLP, it is critical that employees see the value in the tool. How do you get staff to see the value in the PLP tool? You consider their needs, values, and goals as a means to connecting the PLP to what they want for themselves, for their work, and, above all, for the clients they serve. Helping employees answer the questions, "What's the point?" and, "Why should I take the time to fill this out?" is critical for buy-in and engagement with the tool. If the answers to these questions illuminate that the PLP tool can indeed accommodate one or more of the employee's needs, values, and/or goals, he or she will be more likely to complete the PLP tool.

Another suggestion I make for supervisors and managers is to inform employees that the PLP tool will assist in greater quality supervision and better leadership overall. I suggest that leaders convey to their team members the following message: "I really want to be a better supervisor/manager. This PLP tool can help me with this." I have yet to hear employees argue with wanting to have better supervision or an enhanced leadership experience at work. This is another great way to introduce the PLP and increase the likelihood of buy-in by team members.

The PLP can be introduced to individual members in the context of a meeting or supervision session, or it can be introduced to the whole team at a unit meeting. Either way, time should be provided for a discussion of the PLP, the value of it, and the intended positive implications of its use.

The following chapter on communication and accessing the employee story will provide insights, tools, and strategies that will assist with introducing and discussing the PLP tool with members.

### **Completing the PLP**

On average, the PLP takes approximately two hours to fill out in its entirety. However, when and how a PLP is completed can be decided upon by both the supervisor and the employee. Because it is not mandated or legislated, the PLP tool can be completed and used in a manner that accommodates the realities of a particular work environment. Most employees that have completed the tool have preferred to take it home to fill it out.

Some, however, have completed the PLP if and when time permitted at work, within work hours. While most people have preferred to fill out the tool in its entirety, others have chosen to complete the tool in parts and pieces. Some supervisors have used various sections of the PLP for team-building exercises, by utilizing specific sections for group discussions and processes. Regardless of how the PLP is completed, it is important that the employee submit a copy to their direct supervisor or manager. It is up to the supervisor or manager to follow-up—to have a discussion with the worker regarding the PLP, including that worker's experience of his or her own discovery process within the context of completing the form.

### **The PLP Discussion Is Critical**

It has been emphasized and will continue to be that it is absolutely essential that the supervisor and/or manager have a good discussion with the team member as soon as possible, following the completion of the PLP. This discussion offers the leader an opportunity to learn more about the employee and the employee's needs, values, goals, strengths, and preferences for support. In addition to this, the leader is able to gain some insight into the members' experiences of filling out the PLP tool. Some important points for discussion are as follows:

- What was filling out the tool like for the member (their experience)?
- Were there areas of the tool that were familiar and/or comfortable to complete?
- Were there areas of the tool that were more difficult and/or challenging to complete?
- Were there areas of the tool that were most meaningful and/or valuable?
- Was anything new learned and/or confirmed in the process of filling out the tool?

The above questions are suggested as provisional guides for supervisors and managers and have been helpful in facilitating a deeper and more meaningful understanding of the employee and the employee's experience as it relates to his or her needs, values, and goals. It is also suggested that supervisors who utilize the PLP tool and engage in a PLP follow-up discussion with their workers utilize the communication process for *meaning making* offered in the next chapter.

The PLP is a living document and can be revisited by the employee from time to time in order to add, enhance, or even modify the information as it pertains to the employee's experience and the various sections of the tool. I encourage supervisors and employees, as key information is revealed, to make changes immediately as the discovery process is ongoing and continuously unfolding.

### ❖ ENSURING SUCCESS: THE DOS AND DON'TS OF THE PLP

In order to approximate successful use of the PLP in a manner that is consistent with the intent and preferred outcomes of the tool, there are some important dos and don'ts that require attention.

#### Preferred Leadership Profile Dos

*Do complete your own PLP first.*

This is absolutely essential for many reasons—the biggest being integrity. Great leaders do not ask or expect their members to do something that they haven't done or are not prepared to do themselves. In addition to this, one of the first questions many employees

ask their supervisors is, "Have you completed it?" If the answer is no, employee buy-in of the PLP will likely be seriously compromised, if not altogether negated. More importantly, completing your own PLP will enhance your understanding of the PLP structure and process, including your own discovery process. By completing the PLP, you will also be able to answer many questions employees may have about the structure or process involved with the PLP tool.

*Do encourage your members to see the value in the PLP.*

This was discussed earlier and is critical for buy-in and subsequent success with the PLP. Engagement, cooperation, and motivation to complete the PLP are tied to whether or not the employee sees the value in the tool. Does it have meaning? Does it hold value? Remember that it is critical, prior to expecting the staff to complete the PLP, that they be able to answer the questions, "Why am I filling this thing out?" and "What's the point?" If there is no point, then there is no point. It would be ridiculous to expect an employee to connect and meaningfully engage with more paperwork when there is no point. However, when employees can connect the PLP to the accommodation of their needs, values, and/or goals, they will be much more motivated and engaged to complete the tool. Ensure that employees understand the value and see meaning in the PLP prior to your expectation that they complete the tool.

*Do provide members with generous and flexible opportunities to complete the PLP.*

Given the fast pace and heavy workloads characteristic of most social service environments, additional paperwork is often not a priority for most workers. However, if employees see the value in it, they are more likely to do what is necessary to get it done. It is important that supervisors provide a variety of generous and flexible opportunities to complete the PLP tool. Generous and flexible means that workers are given realistic and achievable work and workplace opportunities to complete the PLP can be collaboratively considered the realities of their particular work and workplace demands. Opportunities to complete the PLP can be discussed earlier, opportunities can be found at work, on shift, at breaks, in between shifts, at home, or during allocated time off designated specifically to support the completion of the PLP tool.

*Do negotiate a completion date for the PLP.*

While it is important to offer generous and flexible opportunities, a completion date is also important. This is so because, amidst the competing work and caseload priorities, the PLP can be set aside or lost in the multifarious demands of the social service work environment. And because the PLP represents more paperwork in a sea of documentation requirements, it may be less than appealing for some workers even if they see the value in it. Therefore, be sure to set a specific check-in date and/or completion date to have the PLP tool completed and submitted. If more time is required, be sure to renegotiate this with the worker and clarify an alternate date for completion.

*Do have follow-up discussions with employees regarding the PLP.*

Following up on the PLP is an essential *do!* It is not uncommon for many workers to roll their eyes or sigh when having to engage in a new work-related practice, standard, or tool. For many workers in social services who live and work in environments that are constantly shifting and changing in terms of standards, protocols, procedures, and mandates, there are many times when new tools are introduced and not followed up or through on. This can add to a type of learned apathy around the perceived integrity and the organization's commitment to new tools. Many workers who take the PLP tool seriously are often looking forward to the follow-up part of the process. They can also be looking for a return on their own investment of the time, energy, and commitment that went into completing the PLP.

I have heard workers in situations where the PLP has been completed but not followed up or through on state, "I wish I would have never filled it out." Keep in mind that the PLP tool can create hopeful and optimistic expectations about enhancing work and the work environment overall. Due to the personal nature of the PLP tool, a worker's commitment to fill it out goes beyond time and includes a personal investment and a risk to trust the leader and the process—that it will be an endeavor that will be favorable to the employee.

Follow-up on a tool that has been promoted by you as meaningful and valuable is essential if for nothing at all for your integrity. Keep in mind that integrity is a key to quality leadership. Effective leaders "do what they say they will do." Not following through on the PLP tool will undoubtedly be a breach to your leadership integrity.

*Do expect some resistance to the PLP tool.*

I have introduced the PLP tool to approximately 1,000 supervisors and managers. Many of them have gone on to introduce and utilize the tool with more than 7,000 social service employees in a variety of sectors. To some degree, all of the leaders experienced resistance with one or more of their employees. This is common, and it is OK! While resistance and opposition will be elaborated on more thoroughly in Chapter 7, it is important to highlight some of the common reasons for resistance and or opposition to the PLP tool and the process overall.

The most common reason contributing to PLP reluctance has to do with issues regarding trust. Sometimes it can be difficult for workers to trust that the PLP tool will be used within the context of the spirit and intent with which it was developed, introduced, and explained. Unfortunately, in the past, workers have been asked to fill out tools, assessments, questionnaires, and/or surveys with the intent to enhance quality and/or efficiency of individual performance, team functioning, organizational development, or client outcomes, and their experience following completion or engagement was less than positive. In some instances, little to nothing was made of their efforts, meaning there was no follow-up or follow-through.

For some employees, their experiences may have ranged from neutral to negative after the completion of a document that held personal information, including their perspectives and opinions. I have heard many stories of workers who stated that they were reprimanded following the sharing of their opinions. Others social service employees have shared stories of confidentiality breaches and/or negative repercussions from supervisors after sharing personal opinions and perspectives regarding various aspects of the work.

Another major reason that contributes to reluctance with PLP completion and engagement in the process has to do with whether or not workers see the value in the tool. As stated above, it is critical that workers can answer the two questions, "Why am I doing this?" and, "What is the point of this PLP?"

### **Preferred Leadership Profile Don'ts**

*Don't forget to follow up or follow through on the PLP tool.*

Although this is covered in the *do* section above, it is critical to mention again. Forgetting to follow up on the tool may seriously

compromise your leadership integrity and the level of buy-in and commitment of employees on the team. In addition, not following up or through on the PLP may also jeopardize the leader-member relationship and be perceived by employees as “more of the same” social service rhetoric, further perpetuating and impacting a negative view of you the leader and the work environment overall. Not following up or through on the PLP actually has the opposite effect for which it was intended.

*Don't use the PLP as an evaluation or performance tool.*

The PLP tool contains a wealth of personal and professional employee information all in one place. It can be tempting for some supervisors to want to use the PLP as a means of performance evaluation or performance management. The PLP was not intended or developed to be used as such. The PLP is a tool for discovery of important needs, values, goals, strengths, and other key sources of motivation. Information pertaining to goals and strengths from the PLP can indeed be used and integrated into performance evaluation processes and frameworks. However, when the PLP is used as a performance evaluation tool, it does not fit, and it can be confusing and awkward for both the supervisor and the employee. In addition to this, most performance appraisal and evaluation processes are often less than inspiring for most workers, and utilizing the PLP in this manner may result in a worker's experience of the PLP and the process around it to be less than positive and engaging.

*Don't use the PLP as a means to discipline employees.*

The reluctance that many workers have in engaging with and completing a tool like the PLP is often tied to a not-so-good experience with a similar tool or process from the past. Unfortunately, for some workers, the professional or personal information has been held against them in some manner; sometimes information is judged, criticized, or even delegitimized in the context of a verbal and/or behavioral response from their direct supervisor. I have heard terrible stories wherein workers have been reprimanded, faced consequences, and/or experienced repercussions as a response to the information they have shared in the PLP tool. In some instances, when employees have been involved in a disciplinary situation, information from the PLP has been brought into the meeting to be used to support the disciplinary action and/or to help build a case for disciplinary action. This is not what the PLP is

intended for, and if utilized in this manner, it will undoubtedly result in implications that are diametrically opposed to the spirit and intent for which the PLP tool was developed.

### ❖ SUMMARY OF IMPORTANT POINTS

- Leadership is determined to be effective and high quality by the individual perceptions and experiences of each worker.
- Workers who perceive their work environment as positive, meaningful, and supportive experience greater levels of job satisfaction and organizational commitment than their coworkers that don't.
- Worker perceptions and experiences hold the key to worker preferences for effective supervision and quality leadership.
- Supervisors and workers can have very different experiences of the same situation.
- Worker perceptions and experiences of supervision have significant impact on optimism, morale, job satisfaction, and workplace climate.
- Effective supervision and quality supervisory support can buffer workers against stress and challenges of a particular work environment.
- All workers have a variety of diverse and unique Key Performance Motivators.
- When supervisors and managers get to know the needs, values, goals, strengths, and preferences for support, they are better able to enhance and sustain motivation, engagement, and optimal performance.

### ❖ PERSONAL LEADER REFLECTIONS AND CONSIDERATIONS

- Consider your own preferences for effective supervision and quality leadership. What do you need? What do you value most? What do you hope for?
- Consider asking your team members to share their preferences for effective supervision and quality leadership. What are you doing well? What might you need to work on?

- Review the Key Performance Motivators list. What stands out as important and/or meaningful for you?
- Consider sharing and reviewing the Key Performance Motivators Scale with one or more team members.
- Review the Preferred Leadership Profile. Consider what areas stood out for you as most meaningful.
- Consider introducing (in parts or as a whole) the Preferred Leadership Profile to team members, individually or as a group.

## ❖ REFERENCES

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