

Is your team thriving or diving?

Judy Foster shares the findings from her research, *Thinking on the Front Line: Why Some Teams Struggle and Others Thrive*

The ability to think is the working capital of our organisations. We and our service users have to understand complex life events and relationships. I spent time with three social work teams working with vulnerable adults of varying ages and needs and found five factors that affected thinking capacity.

1 Policies and procedures
One team took hours to unravel poor policies and to prepare for contentious complaints hearings. Do you know how to implement new national policies and local procedures that follow from them? Is there a case for specialist posts?

2 Professionalism
Professionalism was strong throughout as team

leaders invested time in selecting committed and imaginative social workers who wanted to further their development through post-qualifying training. Do you provide development opportunities for all your staff?

3 Mental space
If staff cannot unpack the feelings evoked by the work, they will either leave (proactive types) or burn out (reactive types). The team with the most challenging client group provided the greatest variety of mental space: informal sharing, joint working, supervision, case discussions, team meetings, learning forums, consultancy and more. The other two teams, good at informal sharing, lacked the capacity to provide regular supervision. How does your team look?

4 Autonomy
Without autonomy there can be no creativity. You can increase safe practice through the encouragement of debate



Foster: Worked with three teams

and challenge, as happens in operating theatres and aeroplane cockpits. The team with the least autonomy (“it’s a conveyor belt here!”) had the highest turnover of staff. Does your team have any control over how they manage their work?

5 Support structures
Good support structures enhance the quality of our thinking. Competent managers and good management practice help

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communication across the organisation, to calm noisy offices and to tackle poor admin systems and lack of IT support. These all affect performance and morale. I found that the managers who held effective team meetings also provided the clearest leadership. What can you do to get things working better?

FURTHER INFORMATION

The Tavistock Centre in London runs courses for social workers and managers to stimulate thoughtful practice www.tavistockandportman.nhs.uk/knowledge

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