

Transcript

# Leadership stories: Dundee City Council

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# Introduction

This transcript was taken from the recording **Leadership stories: Dundee City Council** which is part of [Leadership stories: developing effective supervision](#)

## Transcript

Carla is a social worker based in Caledonia Council. She got involved with social work to help care for people, especially those who were excluded and overlooked. She loved working on the frontline, but two years ago it felt like the right time to take the next step in her career and now she is a Team leader in Adult Services.

Carla manages a team of social workers and support workers. Each has a caseload of up to thirty cases ranging from immigration, mental health and addiction issues to risk of offending and physical needs. With very demanding workloads, Carla knows how important good supervision is for staff support, development and growth.

The service is going through a particularly high-pressured period, when Carla has supervision with one of her team members, Sally. Sally has been in the team for six years and is one of the longest serving members of staff. Carla is Sally's third team leader, and Carla feels that she is a dependable worker. As Carla has to put forward two members of her staff for upgrade training, she explains to Sally that she would like to put her name forward. Sally is initially hesitant to take on more work but agrees in the end.

Over the next few days, Sally becomes increasingly distracted. One day she arrives noticeably late and isn't seen at her desk for much of the morning. Carla decides to speak to Sally and find out what the matter is. In Carla's office, Sally bursts into tears. She says that she is under a huge amount of pressure and has been suffering from anxiety. Carla asks if there is anything

that can be done, and they formulate a plan to delegate some of Sally's workload. Sally seems happier at first, but her demeanour remains unusually quiet. Carla is worried that Sally may have to go off sick if things don't improve, and the team can't afford to lose a member entirely. She also knows that she and the other staff may not be able to cope with the redistributed work for very long either. She worries that stress-related problems may develop further. She decides to speak to her own supervisor about the situation.

Carla is managed by Jade, a newly recruited service manager. After Carla explains the situation, Jade wants to know what has happened with Sally's caseload and reminds Carla of their obligation to meet targets. Carla starts to feel frustrated and mentions that she is worried about the team's wellbeing. Jade, despite looking uncomfortable, says she trusts Carla's experience to keep motivating people. Carla feels fobbed off, as if Jade is passing the buck and questioning Carla's professionalism. When she gets back to her desk she feels angry and doesn't know what to do next. For the next few days things continue much as they have done so far, under an increasingly gloomy atmosphere.

At the beginning of the next week, Jade calls Carla back into her office. Carla immediately notices Jade seems more relaxed and informal. She tells Carla she received an email that morning informing her of a development project coming up around leadership and supervision. She suggests that given the issues Carla brought up, she might want to go along and get some tips. Carla thanks Jade and agrees to go along.

When the first workshop of the project comes around the following week, Carla is surprised to find that it feels like a small discussion group of three team managers. The facilitators simply enable the conversation between the social work team managers from across the council. Carla realises how much she has to contribute. For once Carla feels able to really talk about the structures and barriers around supervision, without the minutia specific to her area of adult services getting in the way. The issues that emerge are very

similar across all the departments and Carla recognises that she is not giving the space to find out how team members are really coping. She is being influenced by a corporate culture that is more defined by meeting targets and deadlines. As the workshop progresses Carla feels excited and is full of fresh ideas. The group agree to keep in touch and meet again at the next workshop to discuss how their proposed actions are progressing. Carla is pleased to feel that she has their support. They end up meeting for a coffee to chat a number of times in the following weeks.

Back in her office, she calls a team meeting. She lets the staff know that she has been worried about how supervision has been carried out, and she wants to know from them how she can do things better both in formal one-to-one sessions and through informal chats. The staff have a lot to say. Sometimes Carla can feel a bit defensive, but she tells herself to take a step back, listen and see what she can do.

Carla starts to feel braver in supervisions with her team members, building on some of the thinking from the workshop on what good leaders do and how they engage. This has been bolstered by meeting other organisations who are part of the leadership and supervision project, having conversations around the leadership logic model, and getting thoughts and ideas from them others on how to take things forward. She feels able to put down the paperwork and ask more holistic questions about how people are feeling and their wellbeing. Even though the sessions can take a bit longer, she makes sure to protect the extra time it takes. Sometimes the staff themselves can take a while to let go of their own work priorities to focus on more pastoral matters. But as they become more reflective, Carla finds that she is better able to discover what is really holding people back and how she can better support them. As the team become more reflective, the culture in the office begins to shift. Because Carla is able to let go of feeling that she needs to have all the answers, others feel better able to open up about their vulnerabilities. The team themselves see how they can support each other too, and rather than feeling resentful about it, they feel empowered. This not only impacts the staff, but makes Carla feel as if a weight has been taken off

her. Instead of taking on everyone else's problems, she is now helping and supporting them to deal with issues on their own. There was always a feeling before that the monkeys on the back of her team were being passed over to her to deal with and weighing her down. Now the relationships were feeling a lot more equal, with a shared responsibility for exploring and tackling issues.

After a few weeks, Sally returns to a full workload, and is thankful for everyone in the team not only helping her out with the case files, but also really looking out for her and asking how she is doing.

Carla is hopeful that the small shifts taking place will gradually be noticed by more senior management, including Jade. Carla has already been taken aback to find out that she has more power to change the way things are done than she thought.



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