

# Reflection of the Specifics of the Supervision Process in the Environment of Social and Legal Protection of Children

Bohuslav KUZYŠIN<sup>1</sup>,  
Milan SCHAVEL<sup>2</sup>,  
Jaroslava PAVELKOVÁ<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> PhDr., PhD., Department of Christian Anthropology and Social Work, Faculty of Orthodox Theology of Prešov University in Prešov, Masarykova 15, 080 01 Prešov, the Slovak Republic;

[bohuslav.kuzysin@unipo.sk](mailto:bohuslav.kuzysin@unipo.sk)

<sup>2</sup> Prof. PaedDr., PhD., St. Elisabeth College of Health and Social Work in Bratislava, Nám. 1. mája, P. O. Box 104, 810 00 Bratislava, the Slovak Republic;

[schavelm@stonline.sk](mailto:schavelm@stonline.sk)

<sup>3</sup> Doc. RNDr., CSc., Department of Health Care Sciences, Faculty of Humanities, Tomas Bata University in Zlín, Štefánikova 5670, 760 01 Zlín, the Czech Republic;

[jpavelkova@utb.cz](mailto:jpavelkova@utb.cz);

St. Elisabeth College of Health and Social Work in Bratislava, Nám. 1. mája, P. O. Box 104, 810 00 Bratislava, det. Institute of St. Jan Nepomuk Neumann, Jiráskovy sady 240, 261 01 Příbram 1, the Czech Republic;

**Abstract:** The article presents a selected part of the research that was carried out in 2019 in Slovakia the aim of which was to assess feedback on the perception of the supervisory process in social protection entities as offered by the supervisor. The basic set consisted of supervisors in helping professions operating under Act No. 305/2005 Coll. They are specialists with a second degree education in the humanities or social sciences who have completed an accredited supervision course in the minimum range of 240 hours and have appropriate practice. 10.68 % of Slovak supervisors participated in the research. A probing research was used, which carried elements of quantitative strategies, but has not been moved to the area of verification, comparative or correlation investigation. The secondary benefit of this study is the depiction of the structure of supervisors in Slovakia and its longitudinal development. The primary method of collecting empirical data was a questionnaire created by the authors. More than 90.0 per cent of respondents stated a positive perception of the supervision provided by Social and Legal Protection (hereinafter SLP) employees. Among the dominant themes of supervision in the SLP were clearly “relational areas”, reflection of workflow including case supervision and burnout. Our findings confirmed that active listening and its essence concentrates on an interview from a methodological point of view. According to our findings and assuming a reasonable degree of generalization, it can be stated that the supervision is primarily performed according to the established standards and codes of ethics.

**Keywords:** *Supervision; social work; social protection; current state; efficiency; helping professionals.*

**How to cite:** Kuzyšin, B., Schavel, M., & Pavelková, J. (2020). Reflection of the Specifics of the Supervision Process in the Environment of Social and Legal Protection of Children. *Postmodern Openings*, 11(1Supl1), 116-130. <https://doi.org/10.18662/po/11.1sup1/126>

## 1. Introduction

Helping people in need is one of the noblest but also the most demanding activities in human life. Hope alternates with helplessness, joy with sadness and enthusiasm with disappointment. These emotional turbulences will undoubtedly affect even the most powerful personalities. Supervision helps a person in need so that through its process it has an effect on those who dedicated their lives to their clients.

The application of supervision in practice of helping professions, have undergone certain natural development. The use of supervision was mainly the domain of psychologists. Its justification was situated mainly supervision in psychotherapy. This experience has gradually transformed into other professions, in which the focus of the attention was man who was depended on the help of a competent expert.

The beginnings of supervision can be characterized as informal interviews, in which more experienced colleague mediate experience colleague beginners. Initially, supervision found its application in psychology, later it reaches other areas of work, where the main client is man with his problems, where the main client is man with his problems. Since 1920, supervision has also started to apply in social work. As stated by Růžička (1995), these are e.g. Richmond (1922), Towle (1957), Balint (1979), Kadushin and Harkness (2014) and others. At the end of the 1990s, supervision became a recognized and professional form of counselling (Scherpner, 1999).

Supervision in Slovakia has been continuously keeping its firm position. After the embarrassing beginning, it has developed into a respected system of support of helping professionals. It is part of the legislative system, the educational curriculum of social workers, as well as the evaluation of the quality of provided services. In spite of this, we do not find many research studies in this sphere that would approximate and generalize the current state, implemented processes or possibilities of streamlining supervision. Currently in Slovakia Béréšová (2018), Gabura (2018), Hunyadiová (2018), Kuzyšín (2018), Mátel (2018), Schavel (2018) and others are engaged in the issue of supervision.

According to (Beddoe, 2011, p. 210) supervision is a complex, multifaceted process, which occupies contested space between the employing organization and the employed professional social worker. It is supervision that is at the core of practice for service-based professionals, where a sense of shared responsibility for the effectiveness and safety of the practice is essential.

Supervision also has a more clinical definition, which Morrison (2003, p. 11) points out as: „ a process in which one worker is given responsibility by the organisation to work with another worker in order to meet certain organisational, professional and personal objectives”.

Ponea and Sandu (2011) consider that the supervision process helps practitioners improve their skills of reflection, narrowing the gap between theory and practice.

Muntean (2007) even stated that supervision is a professional meeting held in an organized environment and negotiated by the parties.

We believe that our analyses will contribute to a deeper discussion in this respect.

## 2. Research methodology

The present study is based on positivist and non-positivist paradigms. The orientation of the research is predominantly quantitative and exploratory. We used this approach, recognizing the impossibility of preferring manifested symptoms in the sense of commutation ideas and facts that can be considered social facts; likewise, without the effort to dogmatize and fetishize methods, or to state the objectivity of standardization. We also draw attention to the distance from the subject of analysis and the partial loss of contexts, as is often the case with each quantitatively oriented social analysis (Ondrejko $\check{c}$ , 2005).

We approach the quantitative paradigm in the sense of Blumer's perception - as categories of thinking that are given both in the natural and social sciences. The categories allow cognitive approach of empirical sciences to the objects of their research; therefore, we consider them as a thought expression of relationships. They unite the epistemic and ontological dimensions (Hanzel, 2009).

The primary method of collecting empirical data was questionnaire of our own provenance. This choice was mainly related to ensuring the anonymity of the respondents, economy and efficiency of the method. The questionnaire was designed and distributed with the help of electronic instrument ProSurvey. The structure of the questionnaire corresponded to methodological standards (Gavora, 2001).

For statistical evaluation, we used a chi-square test of good compliance -  $\chi^2$  test.

Conducted pilot research was not shifted to the area of verification, comparative or correlation research. Its character is defined in exploratory, respectively descriptive terms, for which it is important that it does not

present hypotheses and observe one primary variable (Gavora, et al., 2010; Ritomský, 2004; Škodová, 2013). This was mainly due to the following:

- The necessity to reflect the current state of the issue of supervision in the SLP

- No such research has been carried out in the past
- In the fund of scientific knowledge, we have not found a sufficient basis for formulating answers to the research questions asked

- Methodologically, we proceeded not in an "explanatory" but "understanding" way to the phenomenon under investigation

When choosing the research strategy, we used the methodology of socio-psychological research (Ritomský, 2004). We have defined the following research objectives:

- To record feedback on the perception of the supervisory process in SLP entities as it is offered by the supervisor

- To diagnose perception of importance of selected moments in supervision: dominance of supervision topics and preference of used techniques

### **3. Structure of supervisors in Slovakia and selective sample**

The basic set consisted of supervisors in helping professions who have or had experience with the supervisory process for entities operating under Act No. 305/2005 Coll. They are specialists with a second degree education in the humanities or social sciences who have completed an accredited supervision course of at least 240 hours and have the appropriate experience and practice. They should also be, or have been, registered in the list of physical persons who have completed the professional accredited training of a supervisor in the field of social work or counselling – the list of supervisors. It follows that it is difficult to precisely estimate the basic sample.

Using the data available, we were able to make three lists in July 2019:

- List of individuals who have completed the accredited training of the supervisor in the field of social work or counselling – list of supervisors registered with the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family of the Slovak Republic (total records of 169 names)

- List of supervisors registered with ASSP (326 names in total);

- List of graduates of accredited training supervised by the Institute of Further Education of Social Workers of the College of Health and Social Work of St. Elizabeth (total records of 241 names)

All in all, we managed to identify a total of 599 supervisors, of which 451 (75.3 %) are women and 148 (24.7 %) are men.

A similar research, carried out in 2013 (Kuzyšin & Schavel, 2014), identified 345 supervisors. We can therefore estimate that the number of supervisors has risen by more than 57.0 % over the past 6 years.

In terms of gender structure, there were 283 (82.02 %) women and 62 (17.97 %) men. We can therefore state an increase in the number of male supervisors by more than 6.5 %.

**Table 1.** Gender structure of supervisors in 2013 and 2019 based on period estimates

|      | Men     | Women   |
|------|---------|---------|
| 2013 | 17.97 % | 82.02 % |
| 2019 | 24.7 %  | 75.3 %  |

n = 944; p = 0,016;  $\chi^2 = 5,74$

Source: Kuzyšin and Schavel (2014)

A total of 64 supervisors participated in our research. As we mentioned above, it is not easy to estimate the proportion of respondents in the basic sample. Taking into account the basic file identified by us, 10.68 % of all Slovak supervisors participated in the research. It should be emphasized that the condition for participation in the research was our own experience with supervision in entities operating under the SLP. In this case if we derive the base file with regard to the list of supervisors, registered with the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family of the Slovak Republic, so our file would consist of 37.87 % of supervisors who are listed and are therefore eligible for our supervision in SLP.

In the context of the gender differentiation of the file, we note that the proportion of participating women was 73.44 %. Men accounted for 26.56%. This selection is consistent with the basic file structure.

#### 4. Research results

We will show the results of the research in accordance with the goals set:

- Satisfaction with supervision from the supervisors' perspective
- Supervisory topics in the entities operating under the SLP and their dominance

- Preference of techniques used in the entities operating under the SLP

**4.1. Satisfaction with supervision by from the supervisors' perspective**

The basic question was posed to respondents at the very beginning of basic questionnaire items. We were interested in how supervisors perceive feedback from supervisee regarding the performed supervision in the entities operating under the SLP.

**Table 2.** Perception of supervision by the employees of the entities operating under the SLP through the eyes of supervisors

|                                       |         |
|---------------------------------------|---------|
| <b>Perceived extremely positively</b> | 17.19 % |
| <b>Perceived mostly positively</b>    | 75.00 % |
| <b>I cannot judge that</b>            | 6.25 %  |
| <b>Perceived negatively</b>           | 1.56 %  |
| <b>Perceived extremely negative</b>   | 0.00 %  |

n = 64; p < 0,001;  $\chi^2 = 123,9$

**Source:** The authors own conception

The table clearly shows that more than 90.0 % of supervisors got positive feedback. What is more, just over 17.0 % of respondents assessed the supervision extremely positively. Neutrality in statements and negative evaluation are discussed in only 5 recorded responses. Thus, we can state that the feedback from the supervised employees of the entities operating under the SLP moves the assessment of supervision to positive levels.

The variability of thematic areas in the supervision process is broad-spectrum. Nevertheless, we can estimate their relative preferences. The ideal situation is when the topic of the supervisory meeting is chosen by the supervised or the group chooses it. The supervisor's task is to determine the order and priorities of the presented topics (Kadushin, 1992). Topics offered in supervision can take the form of group relationships, workplace relationships, process of working with client, team communication, worker competencies, group self-knowledge, worker social skills, and other (Bährer-Kohler, 2013; Havrdova & Hájny, 2008).

We performed analysis of the preferences of thematic areas at two levels: comparing the evaluation of their presence and estimating thematic dominance.

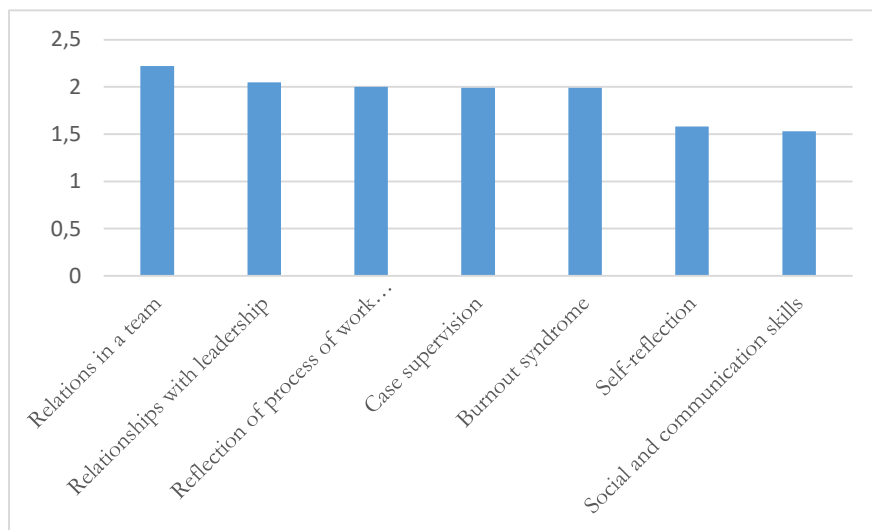
**Table 3.** Presence of thematic areas in the supervision process of employees of entities operating under the SLP

|  | <b>Very often</b> | <b>Often</b> | <b>Less often</b> | <b>Never</b> |
|--|-------------------|--------------|-------------------|--------------|
| <b>Reflection of the process of work with a client</b> | 28.13 %           | 48.44 %      | 18.75 %           | 4.69 %       |
| <b>Case supervision</b>                                | 31.25 %           | 39.06 %      | 26.56 %           | 3.13 %       |
| <b>Relations in a team</b>                             | 42.19 %           | 39.06 %      | 17.19 %           | 1.56 %       |
| <b>Relationships with leadership</b>                   | 32.81 %           | 40.63 %      | 25.0 %            | 1.56 %       |
| <b>Burnout syndrome</b>                                | 32.81 %           | 39.06 %      | 21.88 %           | 6.25 %       |
| <b>Self-reflection</b>                                 | 14.06 %           | 35.94 %      | 43.75 %           | 6.25 %       |
| <b>Social and communication skills</b>                 | 12.5 %            | 35.94 %      | 43.75 %           | 7.81 %       |

n = 448; p = 0.0021;  $\chi^2 = 40$

**Source:** The authors own conception

From a methodological point of view, each respondent evaluated the frequency of the thematic focus of supervision. In this case, we can see that the respondents did not evaluate the presence of individual topics homogeneously. Some of the topics in supervision of employees of entities operating under the SLP are more often preferred than others. We get a clearer understanding if we give the verbal answers their numerical equivalent: very often (3), often (2), less often (1) and at all (0).



**Source:** The authors own conception

**Figure 1.** Dominance of thematic areas

We can read from Fig. 1 that the dominant topics in the monitored contexts are relationships in the team and with the management. As a supervisory topic, team relationships ranked first (score 2.2) and relationships with leadership ranked second (score 2.05). Educationally focused supervision occurs the least often in the entities operating under the SLP: self-reflection (score 1.58) and social and communication skills (score 1.53).

#### 4.2. Preference of techniques used in entities operating under SLP

In analysing the preference of techniques, we proceeded in a similar way as in the previous case. We compared the preference of their application and evaluated their dominance. We also made the choice of the techniques offered on the basis of pre-research activities and consultations. Three supervisors, who used the opportunity to supplement their own technique or method emphasized the use of projective techniques, working with sand or in sandpit, sand play, solution-oriented approach, narrative approach, work with life stories in the context of survival, loss and trauma, techniques of mediation, or discussion of applied conclusion of contracts (Hay), reflection in action, reflection after action (Shon), simulation, video analysis or audio recordings.

**Table 4.** Preference of techniques in the supervisory process carried out in the entities operating under the SLP

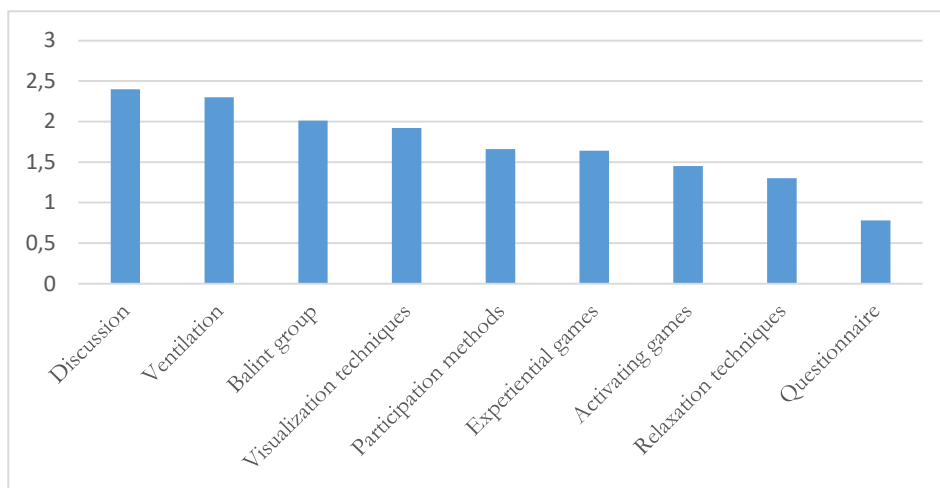
|                                 | <b>Very often</b> | <b>Often</b> | <b>Less often</b> | <b>Never</b> |
|---------------------------------|-------------------|--------------|-------------------|--------------|
| <b>Questionnaire</b>            | 1.6 %             | 14.06 %      | 45.31 %           | 39.06 %      |
| <b>Relaxation techniques</b>    | 7.81 %            | 29.69 %      | 46.88 %           | 15.63 %      |
| <b>Discussion</b>               | 46.88 %           | 46.88 %      | 4.69 %            | 1.56 %       |
| <b>Balint group</b>             | 28.13 %           | 48.44 %      | 20.31 %           | 3.13 %       |
| <b>Visualization techniques</b> | 26.56 %           | 42.19 %      | 28.13 %           | 3.13 %       |
| <b>Participation methods</b>    | 14.06 %           | 42.19 %      | 39.06 %           | 4.69 %       |
| <b>Experiential games</b>       | 17.19 %           | 37.5 %       | 37.5 %            | 7.81 %       |
| <b>Activating games</b>         | 9.38 %            | 35.94 %      | 45.31 %           | 9.38 %       |
| <b>Ventilation</b>              | 43.75 %           | 42.19 %      | 14.06 %           | 0.0 %        |

n = 576; p < 0.0001;  $\chi^2 = 192.7$

Source: The authors own conception

In this case, we measured statistical significance. The graphical form of the numerical equivalents of verbal answers reveals, as in the previous case, that this dominance is more representatives (see Fig. 2).





**Source:** The authors own conception

**Figure 2.** Dominance of techniques and methods used

We can trace that the supervisors working in the entities under the SLP prefer discussion (score 2.4), ventilation (score 2.3) and the Balint group (score 2.01). Visualization techniques (score 1.92) are also frequently used. This choice is understandable and acceptable. Discussion, conversation or active listening is the headstone of all other applied methods. Ventilation is an important part of supervision, even though it should not be the only product. And as we mentioned above, Balint group was behind the birth of concept of modern supervision.

On the other hand, the least used techniques are questionnaire (score 0.78) and relaxation (score 1.3). In both cases, it is useful to consider further why supervisors do not apply them. A properly selected questionnaire offers an efficient probe with possible diagnostic or self-reflective interference, and relaxation techniques can be a stabilizing, anchoring and soothing entry into the supervisory process.

## 5. Discussion

Every research in social and behavioural sciences has its limits, which also apply to our case. Nevertheless, let us note some valuable findings.

We estimate that over the last 6 years the number of supervisors has risen by 57.0 %, with a statistically significant increase in male supervisors. The age of most supervisors varies between 41 to 50, the length of practice

of most supervisors (more than 80.0 % of respondents) exceeds 11 years and they have been eligible for supervision practice for more than 3 years (93.75 % of respondents). These data confirm the research published in 2018 (Schavel, 2018). A total of 93 respondents participated in the studies on the importance of supervision in the prevention of burnout. Almost 80.0 % of these respondents were over 41 years old and 70 % of them had more than 11 years of experience and practice. We consider these data as sufficient confirmation of the representativeness of the presented sample of supervisors.

The respondents stated a positive perception of the SLP supervision employees; more than 90 % of them ranked this as extraordinary or positive. In 2013, slightly different results were received by Kuzyšin and Schavel (2014). The supervisors commented on their willingness to accept supervision based on their practical experience: 46.0 % of the 141 supervisors identified themselves in a group mainly having positive experiences; 8.51 % of respondents expressed their conviction with certainty and more than 11 % were unable to comment on this issue. It is possible that the positive perception of supervision has recently become more popular. Nevertheless, we consider it necessary to point out that the cited research included not only the SLP employees.

The comparison of the importance of supervision from the supervisee's perspective, which was published in 2018, seems valuable here. In this case, 260 respondents made up of social service employees participated in the research. The results showed that supervised people do not consider supervision to be a method of controlling work, evaluate it as a tool for improving the profession and development of the worker, or as an option for the prevention of burnout and optimization of processes at the workplace.

Among the dominant themes of supervision in the SLP were clearly “relationship areas”, reflection of work procedure including case supervision and burnout. We see a certain similarity again with the 2018 study (Kuzyšin, 2018). Social service employees saw the importance of supervision in the following areas (here are the 5 most relevant points of the 10 offered, in the order in which they were listed): 1) prevention of burnout syndrome, 2) new alternatives of resolving cases, 3) motivation for further work, 4) optimizing the relationships in the workplace, and 5) emotional ventilation.

As stated above, it is a well-known fact that the focus of supervision is active listening and its essence concentrates on an interview from a methodological point of view. This fact was confirmed in the context of our findings. Respondents identified discussion as the most preferred way of

interaction between a supervisor and supervised people. Ventilation ranked second, while other preferred methods and techniques included the Balint group, visualization and participatory techniques. We also consider these findings to be a verification of recent analyses, in which ventilation and discussion techniques have been identified as the most widely used by supervisors (Schavel, 2018). The order of the other offered options also was not that different. Balint groups and participatory techniques are also among the dominant components of the supervisory process (Schavel et al., 2018).

Kadushin and Harkness (2014) draw attention to the need to pay more attention to the issue of burnout in supervisory practice. There is opened space for a deeper awareness of the functions of supervision, which in his practice supervisor presents. In particular, there is a need for greater awareness of the importance of the mediation function of supervision.

Social reality has as many facets as how many subjects are involved in its co-construction (Sandu, 2016).

As stated by Sandu and Unguru (2017, p. 58), the idea of a social construct can be used in one's own social work, which represents the structural-functional unity of the process of social construction of a certain reality, being equivalent to the idea of operational definition, based on which the social actors act. According to authors, the researcher, starting from a constructivist or constructive assumption that social reality is multiple and is the result of a negotiation of interpretations, will epistemologically privilege the understanding of the phenomena as represented in the consciousness of the social actors, rather than a supposed objective, neutral axiological reality, and outside the social actors. On the basis of the facts mentioned above, it is necessary to agree with the above authors that in the supervision model, the shift from administrative supervision to formative supervision can be considered in the context of introducing supervision as a mandatory practice in social services (Sandu & Unguru, 2017, p. 55-56). This view of the authors is inspiring for the theoretical enrichment of the use of supervision in social practice.

Author Nová (2016, p. 676) points to the need for supervision within the framework of migration, which should be significantly enriched with culturally sensitive approaches within companies employing foreign employees coming from different cultures.

## **6. Conclusion**

Supervision is an extremely complex process that, in a sense, balances on the edges of art and science, or talent and knowledge. It is

therefore difficult to draw conclusions that would comprehensively assess the supervision performed by the monitored contexts or gave a comprehensive picture of supervision in general.

The submitted research was focused on the analysis of supervision performed in the field of social and legal protection. According to our findings and assuming a reasonable degree of generalization, it can be stated that supervision is primarily (from the point of view of supervisors) performed according to the established standards and codes of ethics (Pružinský, 2019). Supervised people (through the eyes of supervisor) perceive this process positively, so we can say that they feel safe. Joint and individual meetings can be used by employees for their own development (Šíp, 2017).

The supervisors must not forget that their main means are active listening, “shared moments”, and not trivial ventilation manifestations. They cannot enter the entity as pan sophisticated experts or as counsellors. The control function of supervision is secondary. Supervision is also perceived more and more as an effective and above-professional help thanks to the change in its perception.

In spite of the increasing public awareness of the positive effects of supervision, it is necessary to constantly pay attention to dissemination of information about it. Supervision is still perceived as an educational process in some entities. Management has in some cases a tendency to interfere in its own course, which obviously hampers group openness and sincerity. For the process would also benefit from greater awareness of employees about the need for introspection, as well as lifelong learning.

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