Acceptance to internship and psychological assistant positions can significantly depend upon the quality of references supervisees receive from supervisors. The inherent power dynamic within the supervisor-supervisee relationship increases the supervisor’s need to be mindful of their professional behavior and the environment they create with their supervisee. The APA (2016) Ethics Code Standard 7.06(b) states: “Psychologists evaluate students and supervisees on the basis of their actual performance on relevant and established program requirements.”

The supervisory relationship can be a powerful learning experience for students to practice therapeutic skills and develop professional identities in a safe environment. Understandably, camaraderie and collegiality often develop from working closely with one another, and some supervisors may even pursue activities with the supervisee outside of the workplace. While well intentioned and not inherently harmful, such activities can increase the potential for a multiple relationship that complicates the supervisory alliance, and makes addressing clinical, professional, and ethical issues more challenging. Like professional boundaries clinicians establish with clients to protect their well-being, boundaries created within the supervisory relationship limit the potential for unintentional misuse of authority. Standard 3.05(a) is relevant here: “A multiple relationship occurs when a psychologist is in a professional role with a person and (1) at the same time is in another role with the same person…” Standards 3.06 and 3.08 are also important to address when determining potential harm in a supervisory relationship.

Trainees may be less likely to openly question their supervisors’ clinical opinions or decision-making fearing that such a perceived confrontation could jeopardize their ability to receive an excellent reference, or negatively impact their training experience (Ladany et al., 1996). Trainees’ concerns about repercussions ultimately harm all parties involved, including clients. Supervisees’ silence can rob them of opportunities to shape their clinical judgments and prevent supervisors from learning alternative perspectives that may better serve clients’ interests.

What are some options supervisees have when there are problems in a supervisory relationship? First, see if the graduate program or training site specifies a process to follow. If not, Standard 1.04 indicates speaking with the supervisor to find an informal resolution to the issue. If a direct conversation is not wise or the situation does not improve, supervisees might consider speaking with the site administrator, the graduate school training director, and/or the CPA Ethics Committee. Finally, supervisees should be sure to document the situation, actions taken, results, and their thought processes.

Research shows that concerns about negative reactions from the supervisor, a poor supervisory alliance, and higher levels of personal anxiety (Ladany et al., 1996) are the most common reasons for supervisee nondisclosure. Conversely, supervisees’ perception of a strong supervisory alliance has been found to be associated with greater willingness to disclose information in supervision (Mehr et al., 2010). Therefore, increased attention towards creating an open, safe, and welcoming supervisory alliance can go a long way towards reducing consequences stemming from the inherent power dynamic. Inviting supervisees to provide feedback about their work together (APA, 2014), increasing transparency by openly discussing relationship dynamics, and empowering supervisees by demonstrating trust in the supervisees’ clinical abilities are steps supervisors can take to optimize supervisor/supervisee relationships (DeStefano et al., 2017; Porter & Vasquez, 1997).

Complete references for this article can be found at www.cpapsych.org – select The California Psychologist from the Professional Resources menu.