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STAFF AND ADMINISTRATION

Listening: A neglected skill in communicating with co-workers and management

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When I sit in at a staff meeting in a social agency serving at-risk youth I am perplexed by the lack of active listening that characterizes some of the interaction. This inattention is most evident when the issue is a complex or tough and hotly contested one. Surprisingly, most if not all of those who work with children recognize the importance of listening as they seek to more effectively help these children and their families. Yet when it comes to communicating with their co-workers this skill is rarely utilized. The consequences could be hurt feelings, confusion, irritation and frustrating meetings, or worse — bad decisions!

There is probably no simple remedy for this — training for staff members in active listening at a weekend workshop for some reason rarely transfers to their subsequent interactions with co-workers after the training experience.

- One explanation of course is that what is learned in a comfortable rarified atmosphere of a listening/communication workshop with few work-related distractions is not easily transferred to the 'real' work world where there are many distractions and where habitual ways of relating to co-workers kick in or are operative making transfer of learning difficult.
- A second explanation is that the more than occasional hot topic which elicits much emotion brings out staff or management's unprofessional behaviors which prevent effective listening.
- A third explanation suggests that the norms of staff or management meetings or interactions requiring some level of paraphrasing are either not present, not understood or poorly enforced. These norms are critical to insure that good listening takes place.

Assuming that paraphrasing is a 'solution' to some of the communication problems in the agency the rest of this column will describe a paraphrasing exercise using a debate format which can be easily conducted.

Paraphrasing Exercise: A debate format

Steps

- divide the participants into trios and task them to agree on a topic to debate — seat them around small tables and provide some fair distance between the trios so that communication will not be hindered by noise from others
- list on newsprint a definition of paraphrasing*
- ask the members of each trio to self select the following three roles: debater A, debater B, and referee.

Debater A starts the debate within the trio with an opening brief statement highlighting his or her point of view on the agreed topic.

Debater B paraphrases Debater A's statement and then Debater A must explicitly respond to the attempted paraphrase with one of the following three statements:

1. " Yes, your paraphrase was mostly or totally right. You really understood my point. Now I'll make my statement and ask that you paraphrase it "
2. " Your paraphrase was partly right (specify what part is correct and what part is not) but please paraphrase that part of my opening statement that is not paraphrased correctly ".
3. " No you missed my major points — please try paraphrasing my opening statement again ".

When Debater A states that the paraphrase is mostly or totally right then Debater B can make his or her statement in the debate in response to Debater A's statement and so on ...

After ten minutes of this back and forth which the Referee monitors to ensure that the rules of this debate are followed, roles are then rotated and the referee becomes one of the debaters and one of the debaters becomes the referee. The debate (maintaining these rules) continues, either on the same topic or a new topic.

After another ten minutes a final rotation takes place and the debate exercise continues with the same rules operating.

This first part of the exercise requires only a few minutes for somebody to explain its purpose and rules and lasts about 30 minutes.

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The debate part of the exercise should then be followed by the final step which is a 'large' group discussion of conclusions and implications for putting these findings into the upcoming staff meetings. This step can be brief.

There are certain limitations in the paraphrasing technique, for example,

- its artificiality, too much "I hear you saying ... " can turn anybody off .

- its slowness — it could slow conversation and discussions a good deal making staff meetings or conversations seem laborious.
- In the hurly-burly of life in a child care agency the technique can seem burdensome and unhelpful ...

but it is a helpful illustration in making sure you understand another point of view before you begin disagreeing with it, and this is more important than moving a conversation along quickly.

A final step is to obtain agreement from participants to try the paraphrasing technique for one month and then to review its utility.

* *Definition of paraphrasing:* Stating in your own words your understanding of a statement or comment made by another person to that person — to check that you understood that person's comment or statement.