

MOTIVATING RESIDENTS TOWARD UPWARD MOBILITY

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When the Department of Housing and Urban Development first issued rules regarding the Family Self-Sufficiency (FSS) Program in 1991, local agencies were permitted to utilize a variety of criteria for the selection of participant except "motivation". Motivational factors were not permitted because they were viewed as subjective and capricious. Subjective factors could not be codified in such a manner that there would be consistency in the selection process from one applicant to the next. Those running self-sufficiency programs, therefore, could use criteria such as education, reading level and prior work history in selecting applicants, but they could not use "motivation".

The exclusion of motivation from the selection process drew a cry from various agencies. Those who had run self-sufficiency programs under the Project Self-Sufficiency program spoke out because they had been able to select participants who were highly "motivated" toward self-sufficiency. These motivated participants had fewer barriers and required fewer resources from the agency. Those PSS programs that succeeded were successful because they were able to cream the best of the candidates off the top.

It was this creaming about which the authors of the new federal regulations were concerned. Anyone could be successful if they just took those who were the most highly motivated and who had the fewest barriers. What was required now was for the providers to fairly demonstrate their ability to succeed with all families, not just the best and brightest.

Given the fact that motivation is the key to success; can we fulfill the objectives of the Family Self-Sufficiency Program or any wealth-building or life changing program without selecting for motivation up front? Many housing authorities answered in the negative and stayed away from the FSS program or attempted to justify why they shouldn't have to implement such a program in their community, especially given the state of the economy, the scarcity of resources, lack of cooperation from other social service providers, and lack of funding from HUD. It was just another of those "unfunded mandates." Some housing authorities moved ahead without fully understanding the rules and implemented programs that rely heavily upon motivation to screen applicants – to them motivation was measured in terms of keeping appointments on time.

- I. What is motivation? Before we can begin any discussion about why some people complete a program and some drop out, we have to understand the nature of motivation.

Motivation from the lay point of view is known by certain outcomes or indices:

- a. Keeping appointments on time
- b. Attending classes

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- c. Follow through on assignments
- d. Enthusiasm in voice and action

Most of us can intuitively tell whether someone is motivated or not by their verbal and non-verbal presentations of themselves to us. The Reverend Cecil Williams is certainly motivational, hence, we believe him to be motivated.

If a potential participant in our programs fails to present the expected verbal and non-verbal indicators of a motivated, successful participant we tend to pay less attention to that applicant. As the staff's interest and support for the participant wanes, so also does the attendance and involvement of the participant and his or her family. Before we know it, they have dropped out of the program, informally, if not formally.

- a. We have, in other words, created a self-fulfilling prophecy.
- b. We have constructed the failure of the participant. No matter what they do, we discount it; we qualify their achievements -- "She's doing OK now, but just wait...." "Something must have gotten into her, let's hope it lasts."

If we, as case managers or coaches, don't understand the interactive nature of motivation and the fact that it is socially constructed in every day interactions with the participants in our programs, we fail to understand the dynamics of coaching and the role we play as coordinators of others life chances.

Psychologists and Social Psychologists have been researching the subject for years. Still, they do not fully understand it -- some view it as something that is possessed entirely by an individual. McClelland, for example, talks about the need for achievement which lies within the individual and drives him to perform. Atkinson similarly talks about achievement motivation but recognizes that the level of achievement motivation is related to external factors such as the rewards attached to achievement and the perceived difficulty in achieving the task.

Motivation, in Atkinson's eyes, is much more than some internalized drive possessed by an individual!

First, motivation is a function of the probability of successfully attaining something that we are striving after: People are motivated to take action to change a condition to the extent they feel that something can and will be done.

Let me be clear: Very few people I know waste time and energy in activities about which they believe nothing can be accomplished. Public housing residents have come to believe that they will get a job but not a career and not a job that pays a living wage, so they have given up on trying.

In whatever we do, we receive some kind of benefit from it. You and I may not understand it, but it has some value to the person who is engaged in the activity. It is the "It feels so good when I quit" philosophy.

People are not stupid. They act in terms of the Probability of Successful Attainment in

combination with the Rewards associated with the activities. Atkinson developed a formula that we use to help quantify and understand this concept we call motivation:

$$\text{MOTIVATION} = \text{DESIRE} * (\text{PSA}) * (\text{REWARDS})$$

Where Rewards = (1 - PSA).

If you computer the formula, we discover that if things are too easy, motivation to act is low – “I can do that standing on my head.” Also, because it easy and anyone can do it, the rewards will be low - entry-level jobs, service jobs, and dead end jobs. These are the jobs that are available to many coming off welfare and living in public housing.

On the other hand, if the task is too difficult, motivation will also wane because the probability of successful attainment will be low even though the rewards may be high. If you think you cannot do something, you will not try for fear of embarrassing yourself or failing. Motivation to try something is at its highest according to research where the Probability of Success is 50/50.

Our job as coaches, teachers and case managers, then, is to *help our participants raise their perceived probability of success to this level*. Remember, people learn the probabilities of successful attainment from two sources:

- i) Past experiences and interactions
 - a) What they did in school or work in the past
 - b) Others reactions to them in various roles they played
- ii) Present actions and interactions
 - a) With significant others
 - b) With employers or teachers
 - c) With FSS staff and Service Coordinators

In other words, they learn how likely it is that they will be successful in various roles by trying it on and getting feedback from others. It is just like in football or basketball. The players practice and get feedback from their coaches and in the process gain confidence or decide this is not the position or even the sport for them.

We as friends, case managers, teachers and service coordinators act as the external judges that will help determine how participants see themselves and their chances of succeeding. And, we have to remember that our responses that cue the participant as to how well they are doing are both verbal and non-verbal. While we may be mouthing the right things, our body language often says a lot more than our voice and may be sending of the signals of how we really feel about that person’s performance.

We also have to remember that most of what people know about themselves and their probability of success comes from their past experience. Many public housing residents have been told over and over they couldn’t succeed and it has been reinforced by low grades in school, rejections for jobs and terminations from employment. Their internalized PSA is very low.

For most persons who accept public assistance, moving into public housing is confirmation of their failure and is a public degradation of the person's image in the community – “Oh, you live in Concord Gardens...” and the facial expression changes and opportunities are closed. They are stigmatized by their address and are cut off from and cut themselves off from the rest of the community. This internalized self-depreciation results in a territoriality that shows up in demands to have programs and services “in their community” even though there is a Boys and Girls Club, YMCA, Salvation Army, health clinic, GED program or after-school program just across the street from the “project.”

Residents see little opportunity for getting out of public housing. Even children growing up in public housing when asked where they will live when they grow up say they will have children and live in public housing. HUD confirms this by saying that they have little hope for home ownership except through the purchase of your public housing unit where they now live through Jack Kemp's HOPE I program.

Jay MacLeod in his book *Ain't no making it*, outlines many of the discounts used by residents growing up in public housing. MacLeod calls this discounting "**keeping a lid on hope**": The youth in public housing see little choice involved in getting a job and avoid expressing hope for fear that it will be another failure. Talking about “jobs,” Jinks, according to MacLeod, says, "I think you're kidding yourself to have any. We're gonna take whatever we can get." Boo-Boo echoes, "I dunno. I don't want to think about it. I'll think about it when it comes."

MacLeod goes on to describe the lowered aspirations in public housing:

The Clarendon Heights community, as a public housing development, is by definition made up of individuals who do not hold even modestly remunerative jobs. . . . Like most old housing developments, Clarendon Heights tends to be a cloistered, insular neighborhood, isolated from the surrounding community. Although younger residents certainly have external points of reference, their horizons are nevertheless very narrow. Their immediate world is composed almost entirely of people who have not made it. To look around at a great variety of people -- some lazy, some alcoholics, some energetic, some dedicated, some clever, some resourceful -- and to realize that all have been unsuccessful on the job market is powerful testimony against what is billed as an open society.

Even when we have examples of persons who are working in our public housing developments, the working family tends to be discounted – “*If they're doing so well, why are they still in public housing?*” “*See, they work their asses off and they don't have any better place to live than I do. They're fools to work so hard for nothing.*”

If motivation is, as I suggest, a function of the individual's perception of their probability of success, how do we increase and maintain motivation in the face of such despair?

II. Social Marketing

This is where the programs I operated in Charlotte and an article by Max Elzman on social marketing come into clearer focus. Elzman, like I, discovered Jay MacLeod's book

at about the same time. MacLeod's discussion of the "Hallway Hangers", a gang of white youths who had dropped out of society, provides the framework to understand how we can increase motivation, especially among young males growing up in public housing. The Hangers are typical of millions of uneducated and unskilled youths whose futures are at risk.

The words of the Hangers, as chronicled by MacLeod, provide the needs assessment and focus group discussions that we all need before we implement upward mobility programs or policies. They inform us, with startling precision, on how to improve the results of antipoverty and welfare to work efforts like our family self-sufficiency programs. They tell us what we have failed to do to maintain motivation after the young people and potential participants in our programs discover that school is not all that they have expected, that training is taking longer than expected, that their friends and relatives are making demands upon them, that no matter what they do it will make little difference.

To understand this, you have to understand the concept of social marketing. Every successful marketing executive knows that to sell their product they have to find a mix of services and products that are already desirable to the customer or which can be made desirable to the customers and society alike.

Current social program design is much different than this: Social policy makers focus on their definitions of the "needs" of the poor, *not their desires*. We do needs assessments by focusing on deficits from some middle class standards, not by engaging the client in visioning about what they would like. As a result, we talk about literacy, parenting, academic and job skills instruction, work readiness preparation, high school completion and a litany of needs that the client is assumed to have

To the resident of public housing, the programs appear about as desirable as a dose of castor oil:

- (a) The message is bitter
- (b) No immediate payoff
- (c) Instruction is tedious
- (d) Hours are inconvenient
- (e) Outcome is not assured

The program's title usually implies that they are deficient or failures. One of my staff persons was talking about starting a literacy program and the word went out that she thought the residents were stupid. I was talking to a young mother of 8 who had five her brood in foster care about attending a parenting program and she laid into me that she was not a bad parent, she just didn't have the income to care for them they way others thought she should.

On the other hand, we start programs with titles that are so nondescript that no one knows what it is about. What is family self-sufficiency? Why should I join that? The title really says nothing about the fact that when one pays rent they can also being paying themselves if they are working.

Some claim that marketers are only concerned about making the castor oil taste better. But, in fact, marketers are also obsessed about making it work better. **This involves talking with the customers themselves and discovering what results they want, what visions they have for themselves, and what they are willing to pay to reach those visions or wants.**

We need to be doing market research! Whether it is interviews with each participant or focus groups, we must talk to and discover the visions that people have for themselves and what they want from the program. One's visions guide one's actions. If one perceives a chance for a college education, that person will take care of today by studying and preparing for college.

We also need to understand what people are experiencing as participants in the program. ***You can't keep people motivated if you are not keeping your promises or if it is not working the way either you or they expected.***

People drop out of our programs because ***they do not perceive the value of the program to be worth the time and trouble.*** This happens because we are focusing too much on *our* needs and not on what people are actually experiencing

How, then, do we give clients a meaningful voice in molding programs that achieve the goals they view as valuable, not what social service professionals think they "ought" to want?

(1) **Step 1: Market Research**

We must ask them what is it they want out of life? Then, What is it they expect out life? Their answers may not be what we want to hear. In MacLeod's study, the Hangers want good paying jobs, but expect "shitty jobs picking up trash, cleaning the streets". They disdain the semi-skilled dead-end jobs that most employment and self-sufficiency programs prepare people for. At the same time, they believe that the good jobs are not for them. They have lowered their expectations for themselves.

If you listen to the residents and youths in our developments you discover

- i) They want a place of their own outside the "projects"
- ii) They want to get their families out of the developments
- iii) They want a good education
- iv) They want a meaningful job
- v) They want a future

(2) **Step 2: Program Design**

Our job is to design a program that helps the families reach their desires and goals. In our Gateway and Stepping Stone housing programs, we tour neighborhoods where new affordable housing is being constructed. We bring in developers and bankers to talk about what it will take to own their own home.

We set up home ownership and employment development plans that aim at

obtaining the minimum incomes necessary to purchase one's own home. We chart the success of each participant and use group pressure to keep him or her motivated.

Each activity or step in the plan is built around increasing the probability of success. We are *not case managers*, we are **coaches**. Case management is too often concerned with defining client needs for them and controlling their choices; **coaching** is concerned with enabling others to alter themselves in order to increase their capacity for learning and taking effective action

Case management not only designs the plays but sends them in from the sideline every play during the game; **coaching** is helping the team design the plays off the field, practicing the plays, modifying the plays as a result of practice and then turning it over to the players to execute.

At every meeting we do not allow their dreams to fade. Every program discusses home ownership. Every program features one of the families who have purchased their own home on the private sector and where they are today. Everyone describes their dream house and what it feels like to live there. Those who graduate are mentors to those who remain.

(3) **Step 3: Outreach**

Whether the name is "Move Mama from the Projects" as Elsman suggests; or "Mama Says" in Chicago; or "Mother Read", "Stepping Stone" or Gateway in Charlotte, we must use names that sell the program. Similarly, we conduct outreach with catchy fliers and ads that show families in their new homes.

We hold up the Lisa Arrington's who came into the program homeless with four children and a high school drop out. Lisa will graduate in November in Physical Therapy and has already had four job offers with a minimum starting salary of \$26,500.

III. Conclusion

Motivation, we have argued, is a function of one's feeling that they have a probability of successful attainment of the goals they have set for themselves. We must help the client redefine experiences as success related.

To do this, we need to insure that the resources are present for each activity to insure success, but not do it for them. We need to be incrementalist in this, taking small steps that lead to success, rather than large steps leading to failure.

Goals must be ones the participants' desire, not ones the service coordinators or case managers have set for them.

We must involve participants in program design and delivery.

We need to view our role as that a coaches -- encouraging the players and helping to design plays that are progressively more sophisticated and intricate.

We need to market our programs just as any other successful marketer would do -- what is it that people want and are willing to pay for?

In doing these things, in become coaches and social marketers, we will encourage a new generation to break the cycle of dependency and become economically and socially independent.

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