

# **An Invitation for Social Workers to Employ Conflict Management**

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*For many years social workers have been searching for a way to reach clients who are not inclined to cooperate with any welfare program that produces change in their way of life. Social workers may use a broad base of knowledge that will enable them to incorporate invitational theory in their work. This article looks at how a social worker is able to use conflict management as described by William Purkey and John Schmidt in their book on invitational counseling in order to better engage the hardest to reach clients.*

Due to the Welfare Reform Act, social work programs have seen changes in the type of services delivered to the poor and disadvantaged. These changes have been keenly felt by social workers throughout the country. Workers often find themselves on the frontline in dealing with conflict. This paper draws on the experiences of social workers in Forsyth County, North Carolina. As the welfare roles are reduced, the social worker is faced with providing services to clients with the most barriers and/or to those who are the most resistant to change.

The data collected was from a cross section of social workers in Work First Program in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. The workers consisted of 20 female workers and 5 male workers. The social workers wrote about the problems they experienced in dealing with their clients. Each worker is the case manager for approximately 50 to 100 clients.

Workers continue to look for techniques to reach a resistant client. Active listening is imperative when trying to reach a client.

However, the workers often find communication with the client to be difficult and the result to be inadequate. The client continues to rely on information gleaned from many years of receiving public assistance. Welfare reform is forcing them to change. A client can no longer receive assistance without participation in work or work related activities. Therefore, the clients are compelled to participate, whether they desire to or not. The result is that the clients must make a decision based on what they see as the best choice. March and Simon (1981) noted "The organization and social environment in which the decision maker finds himself determines what consequences he will anticipate, what ones he will not; what alternatives he will consider, what ones he will ignore" (p.137). The social worker must remember that the choice to participate is that of the client.

The key that the social worker may be looking for to reach clients who are choosing to ignore welfare reform, may be the use of conflict management as described by Purkey and Schmidt (1996). It is important to note that social workers in the study use many of the techniques that are described in that text. However, additional insights are needed in order to reach those clients who are likely to be without income when public assistance ends. Purkey and Schmidt describe the process of conflict management as including the following: concern, confer, consult, confront, and combat. Each level will be addressed in this paper as a guide for combining social work with invitational theory to reach the desired goal.

## **Concern**

Concern is the first step in the intervention when frustration or conflict begins. The social worker must try to discern if the clients are frustrated because they feel they cannot participate due to barriers. In this case, listening to the client, expressing genuine concern for the client's view, and offering alternatives at the proper time may help the worker gain the client's confidence at this lowest level. The client must be receptive to the ideas. If the social worker tried to present the program to clients when they are angry

or upset then the timing will have foiled the best attempt to assist the client. Clients must not feel that their concerns have been trivialized. Their concerns are real. If the social worker can assist by finding the resources and support necessary to help the client, the social worker may be able to help the client down the road to self-sufficiency without proceeding to the next step of conferring.

### **Confer**

Conferring means that a client and the social worker will have a one-to-one conversation. Positive interaction must be part of a meeting between the social worker and the client. The client should not be preached to but greeted with a genuine smile, eye contact, and firm handshake (Purkey and Schmidt, 1996). Many social workers have been conferring with the client as a natural part of their caring service. However, welfare reform pushes the worker to meet specific goals within a time limit. That time limit is important but the greatest concern should be on what a client needs to say. Clients may confide in the social worker that they are in an abusive situation or that they have a substance abuse problem. The social worker then uses positive interactions to help the clients identify their concerns. The process of conferring includes these elements: (1) ameliorating the concern through informal, private, one-to-one discussions; (2) establishing that each person has a clear understanding of the nature of the concern; (3) determining whether or not both parties know why this situation is a concern; (4) agreeing on what both parties want to happen for the concern to be resolved; and (5) determining where there is room for compromise (Purkey and Schmidt, 1996, p.134.). When the social worker uses these skills, many issues often are resolved at this level. However, the worker may find that the client still may not respond. If the problem is not resolved then the next step should be pursued.

### **Consult**

Consulting is more formal, and an agenda is planned when the client and the worker meet. The social worker must be able to take

time to work with the client in this problem solving consultation. The biggest concern is that all involved are committed to problem solving. The problem solving consultation may use the formal process as follows: (1) an introduction phase of identifying the concern, (2) exploration phase of seeking alternative ways of handling the conflict, (3) an action plan in which the participants accept responsibilities, and (4) an evaluation phase during which the parties contact one another and express their satisfaction or discontent with progress being made to resolve the situation (Purkey and Schmidt, 1996, p. 134). Everyone involved must know the expectations and consequences that may result if the conflict resolution fails. That means that the social worker may need to conduct a formal meeting to ascertain the reason why a client is failing to cooperate (Purkey and Schmidt, 1996). If a client fails to follow through with the plan then the social work may use the conflict management model incorporated in invitational counseling by moving to the next step of confronting the client with the deficit between current behavior and needed behavior.

### **Confront**

Confronting a client is a more forceful response, and therefore, contains a greater element of risk. Confronting a client about failure to follow through may be productive when the individuals understand that the reason for the confrontation is to try to resolve the problem. In order for a social worker to have an impact, the meeting must stay focused upon the responsibilities of the person and not on the excuses for failure to follow-through on the agreement (Purkey and Schmidt, 1996). "Self-responsibility is the key; blame and excuses are counterproductive" (Purkey and Schmidt p.136). If responsibility is accepted, the social worker can assist the client in making a new plan toward self-sufficiency. A previous plan may be used if there is a chance that it will be successful. If, however, the plan is not followed, the next level is combat.

### **Combat**

The social worker is in an active state at this time. Purkey and Schmidt's use of the word "combat" is as a noun (com' bat), meaning that the situation, not the individual, is declared unacceptable and in unquestioned need of change. This is the highest level of conflict management. At this level, the social worker must cautiously focus on the situation, not the individual, in order to avoid bitterness and resentment. The social worker must be aware that some clients will be hostile and will try to use this confrontation as a defense mechanism. The client often believes that brute force will be an easy way to end the conflict and become hostile. The client may feel that the social worker is threatening his or her way of life. Again, the social worker needs to continually stress that the current status of the situation cannot persist and change must occur.

### **What a Social Worker Can Do**

Purkey and Schmidt (1996) serve as guides to explore ideas that social workers may use to talk with their client. The social worker does not want conflict. However, there is no way to avoid some conflict. The goal of the social worker is to stop conflict at its lowest possible level, ideally at the level of concern. The following guidelines were gleaned from the study's participants and are offered to assist the social worker in resolving conflict at this level, or, if necessary, at higher levels.

- The social worker needs to welcome conflict. Conflict may help the social worker get at the root of problems that have kept a client from fully participating with a plan.
- A social worker must use a sense of humor in order to prevent the client from moving to the next level of conflict.
- All too often conflict is not understood. The job of the social worker is to understand the problem that is causing the client to be resistant to change.
- The social worker must listen to the client in order to find out what areas need to be addressed in order to help the client resolve issues.

- The social worker must be empathetic. A worker cannot just hear what a client is saying, but must look deeper and understand how the client sees the problem.
- The social worker must accept how the client sees the situation and develop plans that will enable the client to change perceptions if the perceptions get in the way of the client's ability to deal with the current situation.
- The social worker must remain open and optimistic to the client. Open lines of communication means that conflict may be minimized.

Clients may have ideas that the social worker has never thought about, and the ideas may enhance the client's chance of being successful. The social worker and the client may be able to bring new ideas to the table together. The client's feedback is essential to his or her success. The ideas presented in this paper represent ideas that may allow a social worker to move away from the tradition of advising clients what to do, and inviting clients to do what best meets their true growth needs. Clients need to understand that when a plan is negotiated, the social worker will hold them to that agreement. Conflict may escalate but, by being persistent in inviting resolution (rather than tolerating poor personal life choices), the social worker may guide the client to solve his or her difficulties independently sometime in the future.

## References

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