

Challenge, Confrontation, and Exhortation as Intentional Invitations by Professional Helpers

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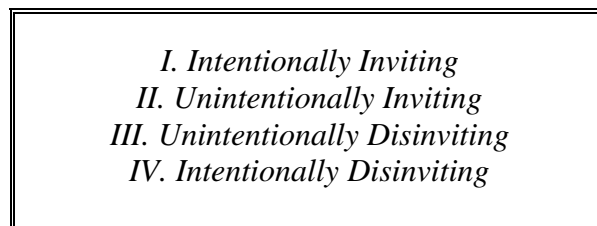
This article examines intentional invitations that challenge, confront, exhort, and otherwise persuade people to change their behaviors, take emotional risks, and reach for higher life goals. The assumption that the sender controls the "intention," while the receiver determines the degree of "inviting," is considered within the context of these provocative messages. Elements of the invitational model are suggested as a framework to create acceptable inducements in the helping process. Additional safeguards are recommended to insure the integrity and welfare of the people being helped.

Invitational theory suggests that an understanding of human behavior is attained, in part, by applying the four levels of functioning (Purkey & Novak, 1984, Purkey, 1992). These four levels are not absolute categories of behavior, but rather are broad estimates of the choices that people make when sending and receiving messages. Furthermore, invitational theory proposes that everyone functions at all four levels at some time or other. All people, no matter how generous, thoughtful, and caring they may be, sometimes behave in ways that

are intentionally disinviting toward themselves and others. By the same token, people who function at the lowest and most toxic level much of the time, occasionally send virtuous messages to themselves and others.

One similarity among people who behave predominantly at the lowest level of functioning (intentionally disinviting) and those who act at the highest level (intentionally inviting) is the conscious purpose and direction with which they choose their behaviors. In both instances, they behave with clear intention. In contrast, people who lack intentionality tend to function with uncertainty and unreliability. Sometimes, their behaviors are disinviting and at other times they are inviting, but they do not have clear purpose and direction. Thus, people create two intentional levels and two unintentional levels of functioning. Figure 1 presents the four levels of functioning proposed by invitational theory.

Figure 1
Levels of Functioning



Embedded in this four-tiered model of human behavior is the belief that while the sender creates the message to convey, it is the receiver, through his or her unique perception, who ultimately determines whether or not the message is inviting or disinviting. Consequently, a sender may intend to convey beneficial messages, but these communications may be rejected by the receiver. In such

situations, the disparity between the *intent* of the sender and the *perception* of the receiver is problematic in the development of healthy and helpful human relationships. As noted previously, this "creates a dilemma for the sender, particularly when, in spite of positive intentions, a message precipitates negative reactions and outcomes" (Schmidt, 1992, p. 43).

The conflict between a sender's intentions and a receiver's perceptions is particularly noteworthy when the messages are customarily thought to be worthwhile and beneficial to the receiver. The question for the sender remains, "How hard do I push to seek acceptance of my invitation?"

In this article, I suggest some characteristics of invitations that may bridge the gap between the intentions of professional helpers and the perceptions of those whom they seek to help (For the purpose of this article, the term "professional helper" is used in the broadest context, e.g., teachers, counselors, supervisors.). In particular, behaviors that intend to challenge, confront, and exhort others to changes their lives, reach higher goals, and excel in their endeavors are examined. Although behaviors that challenge, confront, and exhort others are not by nature invitations, when used with utmost care and respect for the individual's own unique perspective, they have the potential to help people bring about beneficial changes in their lives. To use this potential constructively, helpers first understand the disparity that sometimes exists between a sender's intent and a receiver's perception.

Intent vs. Perception

There are countless illustrations of how well-meaning and thoughtful invitations might be summarily rejected by the people for whom they are intended. We witness this phenomenon everyday in families, schools, work places, and other situations. For the purposes of this article, the following two examples show this predicament in teacher-student and supervisor-employee relationships.

Teacher-Student Relationship

Suppose that a kindergarten teacher has a mild school-phobic child in class. It is the beginning of the academic year and parents are coming to school with their children who are entering kindergarten. Many five-year-olds display some anxiety about this new venture, but a few demonstrate serious panic attacks that disrupt the learning environment. In this class, one young boy suffers severe distress and presents violent reluctance to staying at school. One morning he refuses to leave the car after his father drives him to school, and when dad goes into the building to seek the teacher's assistance, the boy locks the car doors. Of course, this protest takes the teacher, the school counselor, and many others away from their immediate educational tasks.

Given the level of anxiety this boy suffers, the question for the teacher and the school is how firmly do they insist on the student's attendance at school, which they believe to be in his ultimate best interest? In essence, they wonder how much discomfort to expect the boy to tolerate, and what safe-guards should they put in place to ensure his welfare? These questions lead the school to plan action that encourages the parents to be firm and see that the child comes to school. The plan includes parents giving the child responsibility for getting himself up in the morning, dressing himself, and being on time for school. At the same time, the school examines external factors that may unduly raise the boy's anxiety, and strives to alter or remove these inhibitors. The school counselor may schedule individual or

group sessions with the child to allow safe opportunities to explore his fears about coming to school. The perceptions the child shares with the counselor may also help the school make adjustments in school programs, policies, and processes that discourage the him from coming to school. In this way, the school evaluates the "Five Ps" (people, places, policies, programs, and processes) proposed by invitational theory (Purkey & Schmidt, 1996).

Whatever plan is designed by the school and parents, it conforms with interventions suggested in counseling and other professional literature (Schmidt, 1991; Thompson & Rudolph, 1992). In some instances, the school may decide that a schedule that permits the student gradually to enter kindergarten is most appropriate. At the same time, the teacher wants to provide avenues for the child to seek relief at school when he feels extremely anxious.

Employee-Supervisor Relationship

A second illustration of the conflict between a sender's intentions and a receiver's perceptions is a supervisor's evaluation of an employee. Imagine that Mary, a supervisor, believes that Ralph, one of her subordinates, is not performing up to his potential. Furthermore, his performance is detracting from the work of her other team members. Mary has observed Ralph, offered suggestions, and notified him of her continued concern about his poor performance. Still, he continues to execute his duties in less than adequate fashion.

As Mary reviews the situation, she realizes her choices are becoming limited. She is puzzled because Ralph has the ability to do an excellent job, yet he continues to perform poorly. In view of the situation, she decides to take firm action that will either press him to improve or request him to leave the company. For her, the question is

how firm should she be? How tough should she set the standards? She knows he has family obligations, and he has been loyal to the company in past years. These realities are difficult to ignore as she wonders what demands (i.e., invitations) he will accept in working towards performance improvement.

As part of her plan, she offers Ralph the opportunity for employee assistance counseling at company expense. Through counseling, she hopes Ralph will examine career goals and personal interests that may help him assess his career direction and make appropriate decisions about his role in the company. At the same time, she hopes Ralph may identify factors in his life or on the job that inhibit his performance. As these factors are revealed, the employee assistance counselor may help Ralph address life and career factors that need to be altered, and Ralph might help his supervisor identify job factors that can be changed to improve the work environment.

In the above illustrations, both the teacher and supervisor face a difficult proposition. What each hopes to find is a formula that enables the student or subordinate to move toward a higher level of functioning, while at the same time protecting the individual's integrity and self-worth. The four levels of functioning proposed by invitational theory offer a model for defining and describing behaviors, but alone they do not provide a necessary safety valve to monitor a person's level of comfort and continued commitment to the helping relationship. For this reason, professional helpers look at other components of invitational theory to know how to challenge, confront, and exhort people who need their assistance. Some of these components are found in the professional stance proposed by invitational theorists (Purkey, 1992).

A Professional Stance

In addition to the levels of functioning, invitational theory suggests that helpful professionals and beneficial organizations originate from a posture of optimism, trustworthiness and respect. These essential ingredients merge to form a proactive, beneficial, and dependable stance that ultimately defines one's direction and purpose in all personal and professional relationships. The inner structure that distinguishes this direction and purpose is our intentionality (Purkey & Schmidt, 1996; Schmidt, 1994). When creating invitations that challenge, confront, or exhort people to take risks, change behaviors, and alter their lives, professionals might find guidance in the optimistic, trustful, respectful, and intentional elements of the invitational stance.

Optimism

It is unlikely that any human relationship flourishes without the belief that all parties have the ability to make it happen. When involved in relationships that require firm resolve and challenge others to perform at higher levels, optimism is imperative. By presenting an optimistic posture, professional helpers maintain an unwavering belief in their ability to help the other person, and in the individual's potential to reach stated goals.

Optimism is guided and sometimes tempered by the helper's knowledge of the people being helped and understanding of human development and behavior. In this way, helpers accept the limits of human potential, accurately evaluate the strengths of individuals, and accept the uniqueness of each person involved in the helping process. These conditions translate into two additional qualities that support and encourage the helper's optimism: confidence and perseverance.

Confidence. Challenging others towards higher levels of functioning begins by establishing a level of self-confidence that exudes a "can-do" attitude. Without this belief in their own capabilities, it is difficult for professional helpers to convince others that they too have the competence to conquer fears and improve their performance. This skill of transferring one's confidence to another is an enabling stance that allows inviting professionals to repeat their successful relationships time and again (Schmidt, 1994). An abundance of educational and psychological research verifies that repeated successes contribute to increased self-confidence. This gives credence to the belief that as helpers persevere and encourage others to do likewise, they establish mutually beneficial relationships.

Perseverance. If helpers believe in themselves and their potential to overcome seemingly impenetrable barriers, then they persist in marching towards their therapeutic goals. This principle of perseverance is played out in countless ways in everyday experiences. What seems clear is that people who persevere are able to reach their goals, not because they are any more intelligent or more talented than others, but because they *believe* they can do it.

In both illustrations presented earlier, the teacher and the supervisor begin from a position of optimism. The teacher believes the child will survive his separation anxiety, and the supervisor knows the employee has the ability to perform successfully. When inviting others to take risks and overcome obstacles, professional helpers are correct to persist if their knowledge confirms that clients have the capability to handle the challenge, and the clients, in turn, demonstrate faith in the helper's commitment to their welfare. This trustful demonstration of faith is another important ingredient of the professional stance.

Trust

Taking a persistent course of action without cultivating a trustful relationship might be detrimental to one or both parties involved. People who have difficulty in their lives do not benefit from challenges and exhortations that emanate from positions of mistrust. As with optimism, trust is a condition that begins with the helper's knowledge and understanding of the individuals needing assistance. It is extended by a willingness to share one's self openly, a commitment to keep confidences when appropriate to do so, and a belief in the integrity of the individual.

Arceneaux (1994) introduced several sources for developing trust in helping relationships: reliability, genuineness, truthfulness, intent, and competence. He surmised that "Trust is regarded as all that is conveyed by these five sources" (p. 36). As such, a truly helpful professional: (1) exhibits reliability through consistent behaviors, (2) genuinely relates to those he or she attempts to help, (3) is truthful in communicating the challenges inherent in the relationship, (4) maintains a beneficial purpose, and (5) works within the limits of one's competency. By adhering to these five requisites, professional helpers are better able to establish a posture in which challenge, confrontation, and exhortation have a chance of being accepted. On the other hand, when helpers compromise these sources of trust, their relationships falter and people are less likely to accept provocation in the helpful spirit intended. This failure to establish a consistent posture of trustworthiness also compromises the respect that is equally important in helping relationships.

Respect

Respect is an essential condition of all helping relationships, and its importance is magnified when challenging the perceptions of others. Moreover, respect is a two-way proposition. Helpers win the

respect of people they seek to help when they demonstrate unequivocal regard for the welfare and best interest of their clients. Such regard is best established in relationships founded on equal collaboration and mutual responsibility.

Collaboration. Encouraging people to accept challenges, confronting them about inappropriate behavior, and exhorting them to excel in their endeavors will most likely achieve success when helpers become equal partners in the professional relationship. This means valuing the opinions of others, listening to their concerns, and responding genuinely. It also means recognizing the expertise people bring to the helping process. As Purkey (1978) noted, "In the final analysis, the individual is the world's greatest authority on that individual" (p. 49). Denying or minimizing such expertise decreases the likelihood of a successful collaboration. In contrast, by accepting a person's self-knowledge as an important aspect of collaboration, helpers take responsible action in their professional relationships.

Responsibility. When challenging and exhorting others, helpers assume a position of responsibility. This means that they understand their role, its scope and limitations, and the inherent duties accepted in this capacity. Among the charges of being a helping professional is the clear responsibility to protect individuals from harm, and to ensure that the strategies chosen and the expectations decreed are appropriate to the task and reasonable to achieve. In this way, the optimal execution of responsibilities is connected to the helper's knowledge and understanding of the person or persons being helped, and the professional's level of skill.

In both of the earlier illustrations, collaboration and mutual responsibility play crucial roles. For example, the teacher and others in the school, in addition to the parents, will demonstrate respect towards the child's feelings, and share responsibility with the child in making the school a safe, pleasant experience. At the same time, the

school will create avenues that help the child relieve anxiety, such as calling home during the day to make sure his mother is all right.

The ingredients of optimism, trust and respect have many related qualities that contribute to and define one's intentionality. It is this intentionality, this inner structure, that guides a helper's direction and identifies the purpose behind his or her challenges, confrontations, and exhortations.

Intentionality

Invitational theory relies on the belief that people choose some behaviors purposefully, while other actions occur without considerable thought or intent. For this reason, intentionality is an important construct for helpers to consider when challenging, confronting and using other persuasive behaviors. As noted earlier, it is the sender of the invitation who determines the intent, so this responsibility takes on added importance when professional helpers contest people's perceptions, debate their indecision, or summon their courage to excel.

Unintentional actions often lead to destructive, harmful results. When helpers are thoughtless or uncaring, they may damage relationships with people about whom they care. In relationships in which helpers challenge, confront, and exhort others, unintentional behaviors are especially risky. Regardless of how sincerely they may apologize for their negligence ("I really didn't mean it."), these actions often do more to thwart relationships than intentional misdeeds do. This is why professional helpers maintain a positive direction of knowing *what* to do and a beneficial purpose of knowing *why* they want to do it.

Conclusion

Invitational theory proposes that the ultimate goal of all helping relationships, such as those established by teachers, counselors, parents, health-care professionals, supervisors, and others, is to create and send the most beneficial messages so that all people have an opportunity to develop their full potential. In practice, these beneficial messages are received and interpreted by the people these professionals intend to help. This reality colors relationships in which teachers, counselors, supervisors, and others push their students and clients, expect high levels of performance from employees, and persuade people to take reasonable risks in their lives. Therefore, truly helpful professionals who challenge, confront, and exhort others maintain a dependable stance of optimism, trust, respect, and intentionality.

The four conditions of an inviting stance have been presented in this article as a framework for insuring the integrity, emotional security, and psychological well-being of individuals who are assisted by professional helpers. In applying the ingredients of optimism, trust, and respect within an intentionally inviting relationship, helpers might consider the following "seven safeguards" to include in the process:

1. *Form an alliance.* Maintain the highest regard for the people whom you intend to help, and let them know that you will stand by them through this challenging period. Become a true ally who is willing to join in the struggle rather than sit on the sidelines criticizing and evaluating.
2. *Minimize defeat.* Accept setbacks and disappointments as part of the helping process by demonstrating a consistently positive attitude. Let people know that you are striving for "imperfection" and will tolerate mistakes, forgetfulness, and other actions, while you encourage them to march forward even if it means starting over again. It is essential to convey your belief that they can do it!

3. *Feel the pulse.* Ask for feedback and monitor the well-being of people you attempt to help. In all relationships, and most assuredly in those that challenge, confront, and exhort others, listen for sounds of pain, hurt or other discomfort that may disable those whom you are helping. Genuine concern for their welfare is a foundation block for successful relationships. Too much discomfort may lead an individual to terminate what could have been an otherwise helpful relationship.
4. *Provide a safety net.* When designing strategies and taking action, be willing to adjust your thinking and alter plans so people can save face if necessary, regain composure in difficult situations, and keep their self-worth in tact. Flexibility is a hallmark of an intentional helper.
5. *Monitor self-interest.* Guard against becoming too vested in the outcomes of your helping relationships. Sometimes when professionals become too involved in the lives of others, they base clinical decisions more on their own self-interests than on their client's best welfare. In these instances, challenge, confrontation, and exhortation can take on brutal connotations that are counterproductive.
6. *Give credit away.* As you make progress in your helping relationships, congratulate your clients in the successes they achieve. Remember, it is the person accepting your challenge and taking the risks who should be distinguished. Take quiet pride in your leadership skill by letting your clients receive the visible accolades.
7. *Have faith.* Difficult relationships can try your patience and cause you to question your commitment to the helping process. Be persistent in your belief that if you keep the relationship on a positive footing, gains will be made and the people you help will be successful in their endeavors.

Challenge, confrontation, exhortation, and other actions that inspire, persuade, dare, and otherwise expect people to improve their lives are important invitations. When created and sent from a posture of exemplary regard, healthy optimism and genuine concern for the welfare of others, these provocative messages maintain the critical elements of beneficial invitations.

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