NOTES ON THE CONCEPT OF DIFFERENTIAL REINFORCEMENT

The single most effective and efficient technique available to those who work in the field of Human Services is Differential Reinforcement. Properly implemented, it will "solve" more than 80% of all the problems that you encounter when working with people. It will allow you to accomplish this by focussing on building new skills through the use of positive reinforcement, rather than punishing existing behaviours. It is not new. It is not difficult to explain. It is <u>very</u> difficult to do, on a consistent basis. In order to use the technique effectively, it is critical that you understand how and why it works the way that it does. Hopefully, this paper will help to provide you with that understanding.

There are a number of concepts, drawn from the research on Learning Theory, that provide the basis for Differential Reinforcement. Knowing these concepts and understanding how they work and interact to influence behaviour is essential. They are:

Learning: A relatively permanent change in behaviour that occurs as a result of reinforced practise. "Relatively" is used in the definition because not all of the things that we learn are things that stay with us for all of our lives. Few of us can remember all of our teacher's names from K thru 13. "Practise" is used in the definition because there are very few things that we learn in our lives that take only 1 trial.

Behaviour; A behaviour is anything that we choose to say or do. It must be observable and measurable. You can observe and measure "walking" for example, but you can only measure things like "thinking". Behaviours are described in terms of frequency, latency, duration, intensity, and topography. Frequency refers to the idea of how often the behaviour happens.

Latency refers to the idea of how long after an event does the behaviour happen (i.e.: after supper, after getting up, after being denied something). Duration refers to the idea of how long the behaviour lasts. Intensity refers to the severity of the behaviour. Topography refers to what the behaviour looks like. Keeping all of these points in mind when describing a behaviour will minimize the possibility of confusion or misunderstanding among your colleagues. All behaviours, according to Learning Theory, occur only because they are reinforced. Some clarification on this point. In new situations, we don't always know the "rules". As a result we do a couple of things. First we may look around to see what others are doing. Second we may ask. Third, we may begin to interact with the environment in an exploratory manner. Those things that we do that have positive outcomes, we will do again. (This is called Thorndikes Law of Effect) Those things that have a negative outcome, we don't do again. Those things that have no discernable outcome are also things that we don't do again.

Reinforcement; Anything that increases the frequency of the behaviour that it is paired with is a reinforcer. It is important to emphasize the point that **anything** can be a reinforcer. It does not need to be something that is appealing to you personally! Reinforcement and reward are often confused with each other. Both typically involve giving someone something that they like in return for something that they do. A reward however, does not lead to a long-term increase in the frequency of the behaviour that it is paired with. To illustrate, imagine that you are walking along the sidewalk and you see a sign on a telephone pole that says "REWARD". Under the heading is a picture of a Dalmatian dog, together with relevant information on how you could get $100 for returning this valuable pet to it's owner. You look up after reading the sign and see a Dalmatian walking toward you. Naturally, you catch the dog, return it to it's owner and collect your reward from obviously happy owners. What you do not do is go back out looking for more Dalmatians! You have your one- time payoff for what you were "asked" to do. The likelihood of your returning "lost" dogs to their owners has not changed. Imagine now that instead of "REWARD" the sign had said "LOST" and appealed to the public to return a distraught little girl's dog. You see the dog and deliver it to the owner. Not only does the little girl shower you with hugs and kisses, but the parents are so thankful that they insist that you take $100 as a token of their appreciation for your time and effort! What do you think would be your response the next time you see an apparently lost dog? The difference between the two scenarios is the **process**. The **reinforcement** process involves giving a positive after the behaviour occurs and not in any contractual way. It is not a "You did that because I told you I'd give you this" process, but rather an "I'm giving you this because you did that" process. This may seem like a subtle difference, but it is crucial in terms of the impact that the two processes have on an individual's behaviour. I find it helpful to think of reinforcement as a "because" process and reward as an "if…then" process.

There are two processes for reinforcement, positive and negative. **Positive Reinforcement** involves giving something positive (a candy, a pat on the back, a compliment etc.). Those things that meet basic needs (food to a hungry person, warmth to someone who is cold, etc.) are referred to as Primary reinforcers. Those things that acquire their value by being paired with a Primary reinforcer (money, compliments, etc.) are referred to as Secondary reinforcers. **Negative Reinforcement** is a little more complex. Technically it involves either escaping or avoiding something that is aversive, thereby increasing the likelihood of the escaping or avoiding behaviour. Most of us have touched a hot stove at some point in our lives. Jerking our hand away is a behaviour that is negatively reinforced in that we escape the aversive heat. Furthermore, keeping our hands away from hot stoves is negatively reinforced in the future because we avoid getting burned! Theoretically, negative reinforcement results in faster learning and learning which stays with us longer than positive reinforcement. Because it requires an aversive to be present "up front" it is rarely, if ever, used in a systematic approach to teaching.

Punishment; Anything that decreases the frequency of the behaviour that it is paired with is a punisher. As is the case with reinforcement, anything can be a punisher. There are two ways to punish, by presentation and by removal. Punishment by presentation occurs when a specific aversive consequence follows a behaviour. Punishment by removal occurs when something positive is removed following a behaviour. Within this category is a technique called **Extinction**, which involves **not** reinforcing a behaviour that has been reinforced in the past.

Schedules of Reinforcement; We cannot reinforce an individual's behaviour every time that it occurs, forever. It's impractical in terms of our time. It's artificial and intrusive in public settings. Most of all, the person that we are teaching will eventually experience **Satiation**, which basically means that he/she gets "full" of the reinforcer (You may like steak, but not for every meal, for weeks at end!). To avoid satiation, and to help the individual to internalise the behaviours that we are teaching, schedules of reinforcement are used. As the term implies, these are a set of different ways that we can plan for the gradual fading out of planned reinforcement, without have a negative effect on the learning process.

Continuous Reinforcement (CRF) is the first and most basic of the Schedules. Under this schedule, every time the target behaviour occurs, it is reinforced. The ratio of reinforcement to behaviour is then 1:1. This type of schedule results in a reasonably steady learning curve. It is most often used when we are teaching a brand new behaviour to someone, or when it is considered to be critical that the person "get" the message as soon as possible (i.e. safety skills). When extinction is introduced, the behaviour rapidly disappears.

Fixed Schedules of reinforcement are an extension of the CRF concept. Instead of one reinforcement for each behaviour, a predetermined number of behaviours are required to earn a reinforcer. A Fixed Ratio of 3:1 then would mean that the individual would have to demonstrate the target behaviour 3 times in order to receive a reinforcement. In the same manner a Fixed Interval of 3:1 would mean that the person would be expected to demonstrate the target behaviour in each of 3 intervals before being given a reinforcer. Ratio Schedules refer to the exact number of behaviours that are required, while Interval Schedules refer to time periods wherein the behaviours must be in evidence. (In theory, there is no limit to how high the ratio could go.) This type of schedule produces a learning curve that has "plateaus", interspersed with fairly high rates of behaviour. The plateaus occur when the person pauses to consume the reinforcement. When extinction is introduced, the frequency of the behaviour drops off fairly rapidly, although not as rapidly as with CRF. Examples of Fixed Schedules are "piece work" (Ratio) and being on salary (Interval).

Variable Schedules of reinforcement are the ultimate goal of any intervention. Like the Fixed Schedules, they come in both Ratio and Interval form. A Variable Ratio Schedule of 3:1 means that **on the average** the person is reinforced for every 3 demonstrations of the target behaviour. Reinforcements are administered on an apparently random basis, as far as the individual is concerned. Variable Schedules produce the highest rates of responding and the most resistance to extinction of any of the Reinforcement Schedules. Examples of the Variable Schedules are Lotteries (Ratio) and hunting or fishing (Interval). Most of us have most of our social behaviours reinforced on a Variable Schedule (Think of how often you are complimented!). It can be said that these Schedules induce a kind of paranoia in the individual, who never knows when the next reinforcement is coming. The reality is that the Schedule has to be carefully set in advance in order to ensure that enough reinforcement comes often enough to avoid a phenomena called **Ratio Strain**. This happens when the Schedule of Reinforcement is set too high and the individual "gives up" before the next reinforcement becomes available. An example of this would be the person who has been paid every two weeks, whose employer decides that pay cheques will only be issued once a year. For most people, this would constitute Ratio Strain. On the other hand, if the employer gradually moved toward a "once a year" pay schedule, most people would be able to adapt. Moving through CRF, Fixed, and Variable Schedules in a gradual manner, based on the individual's abilities serves to reduce the likelihood of Ratio Strain.

Superstitious Behaviour: This term refers to the "burst" of behaviour that happens when we, as support providers, start a new program. Invariably, the individual responds to the change by increasing the frequency of the target behaviour(s) for a short period of time. If you think about it, this makes perfect sense. Imagine what your behaviour would be like if the front door to your home was "re-hinged" when you were away for a little while. Now, instead of opening "in", it opens "out". It's probably safe to bet that the first few times that you use the door, you are going to end up "pushing" on it a couple of times, before you remember that the "rules" have changed and pull instead. Superstitious behaviour, then, is like the person "pushing" as he/she learns what the new rules are.

Consistency: This is an essential requirement for any program, and it is critical to Differential Reinforcement. It refers to the need to, as much as is humanly possible, provide the same response to the person that we want to teach. The closer that we can get to 100% consistency, the faster the teaching learning process. Consistency might also be seen as synonymous with structure.

Communication. Communication is obviously at least a two party process. One party has the intent of expressing something. The second party, by definition (or default!) must listen. There is almost an implied contract in the communication process that goes something like this. "I'll listen to you if you agree to listen to me." Invariably, the reason for communicating is to achieve a task or a goal that requires action by others. That action may be as simple as acknowledgement of what was communicated (I'm going to the store, bye!) or so complex as to require the cooperation of the person being communicated to (Can you help me lift this piano?). The nature of the task and the relationship that we have with the people that we communicate with helps us to decide what communication style to use. In a very broad sense, there are 5 different styles, which allow for differing levels of two-way communication. They are:

1. **Instruct**: state clearly what needs to be done, together with any further information which is essential to complete the task.

2. **Inform**: to be clear about what needs to be done but also provide further information such as why it needs to be done, what it is helping to achieve etc

3. **Consult**: to ask for views, which may or may not influence the final outcome

4. **Involve**: to ask for views, which will influence the final outcome

5. **Empower**: to provide a clear framework and the license for others to do what they think is best.

These categories are not mutually exclusive. You need to first inform before you can involve. They are not intended to be seen as right or wrong. Each has it's own value, depending on the purpose of the communication. For example, a Fire alarm would fit in to the Instruct category. Clearly, it would not be appropriate to respond to a Fire alarm at the Involvement level, with a flip chart and an agenda! In this field, the style that you use will be a function of the skills and abilities of the people that you are supporting and the purpose of your communication. We run into problems however when those that we support communicate with us. Invariably problems occur because they use the Instruct style, either verbally or non-verbally. ***This is what I want, I want it now, You get it for me or get out of my way!***

Now let's apply what we know to the most common cause of inappropriate behaviours, attention seeking. A typical formula, in Learning Theory, includes an Antecedent (A), a resulting Behaviour (B) and the Consequence (C) that follows. The formula is often called an ABC. In an attention seeking situation, we see the following:

A	B	C
need for attention	the behaviour	staff attention

The staff attention which follows the behaviour is invariably a positive reinforcement for the individual. How do we know? Remember that a reinforcer is something, anything, that increases the behaviour that it is paired with. It is logical then to conclude that attending to an inappropriate behaviour can and does reinforce that behaviour.

One of the obstacles that needs to be overcome in attention seeking situations is the impact of the whole process on the staff involved. From the staff perspective, the behavioural formula above looks like this:

A	B	C
the behaviour	attend to the behaviour	peace and quiet

Remember that escaping or avoiding something that is uncomfortable (punishing) is what Negative Reinforcement is all about. What we have then, is a situation where both the attention seeking person **<u>and</u>** the staff involved are being reinforced by the process and the staff are being Negatively Reinforced, which has a stronger and longer lasting impact! We can get more clues as to what is happening in the attention seeking dynamic if we look at baseline information in a different way. Typically staff begin to document attention seeking behaviour as it occurs over time, thus developing a baseline of how often it is happening. To optimise the use of baseline data, we need to remember that, according to the theory, behaviours only occur because they are **Reinforced.** With that in mind, the baseline then tells us that, aside from all of the reinforcement that we are providing through contact and programs and aside from the reinforcement available in the environment, the individual is telling us that at **<u>least</u>** *x* (where *x* is the baseline frequency) more is required. When we decide that the behaviours that we see are "inappropriate" and that we want to assist the person to stop what they are doing (or at least decrease the frequency), what we are really saying is that we want the person to "give up" reinforcement. In the absence of a real solid understanding of the reasons for what we are asking, and that is generally not going to happen, there is not likely to be any motivation to participate. An example of this scenario might be if you decided to drop the temperature in my home from 68 degrees to 64 degrees, during the winter, to save money. Heat to someone who is cold is a primary reinforcer. If I don't clearly understand, and agree with your plan and all of it's potential benefits, I'm very likely to react negatively. On the other hand, if you go out of your way to offer alternative sources of heat (read reinforcement!**)** such as a big fire in the fireplace, nice warm sweaters and slippers, and perhaps the occasional hot chocolate, my motivation to change and accept your plans is likely to increase significantly! The same is true when we begin a Differential Reinforcement program. It is **absolutely** essential that a wide variety of reinforcement is made available, for any and all behaviours that **are** appropriate and incompatible with those defined as the target behaviours. The reinforcement that is given need not be primary reinforcers (food etc) nor does it need, always, to be time consuming. Positive comments, short interactions, even the offer to interact by playing a game or helping with a task can be highly effective reinforcers. The message that you want to give is that there are other ways to get your attention, ways that you like and appreciate. How do you know how often you should offer reinforcement? Look to your baseline information. It's a clear communication from the person concerning how often they need reinforcement. If the inappropriate behaviours are happening 25 times a day, then you will need to offer **more** than 25 reinforcers for alternative behaviours. A good rule of thumb is "The more the better". Basically, offering more means that you are providing more teaching/learning opportunities, and the more of those that you have, the quicker the process. The second component of Differential Reinforcement involves ignoring the behaviours that you do not want to see. Once again, remember that all behaviours occur because they are reinforced, therefore we can have an impact on their frequency by not providing the attention that we used to provide (read Extinction!). The simplest way to ignore a behaviour is to turn and walk away. It is also possible to ignore by not responding to what has happened at all. Instead, you behave as if nothing has happened and introduce a new subject or activity. In other words, you ignore what has happened, and **redirect** the person to something else. Activities that are chosen for redirection efforts should not be things that the person does not like. They should be things that are presented as opportunities to interact with you and not directives or compliance episodes. Not all behaviours can be "ignored", especially if they involve danger to someone. In these cases, you can intervene as much as is necessary to ensure the safety of those involved, but, do so without comment and with a neutral expression. Remember that the person that you are working with is expecting specific types of responses from you, and those responses are his/her reinforcement. If you provide something that has not been experienced before it is unlikely to meet the requirements of a reinforcer.

A major problem with the use of Differential Reinforcement is that staff members tend to focus on the "ignore" portion of the technique. It is not uncommon to see reports that detail how an individual "acted out", was ignored, continued to " act out" and was essentially ignored for a whole shift. When this dynamic develops, it is very hard on both the staff and the person being supported. Functionally, what has happened is that the behaviour is being responded to (by ignoring it) but the communication from the person goes unnoticed. The communication is a clear message, "I need attention!". If you respond to the behaviour but not the communication, you will not be successful.

Timeliness is a concept often employed during discussions about the teaching process. It is important to respond to a behaviour as quickly as possible so that the person can make the "link" between what was done and what the outcome was. When using Differential Reinforcement, I recommend that the "Theoretical" response, ignoring, be modified to include a short statement that clearly tells the person that you do not like what has just happened. A straight forward "I don't like it when you do that!" delivered in a firm voice, tells that person that something different has just occurred. One or two such responses are all that is needed. More often can result in that new response becoming a part of the behavioural chain.

In any situation that involves attention seeking, it is your reactions that are responsible for maintaining (reinforcing) the behaviour. Unless you change the way that you do things, there will be little reason for the person that you are supporting to change their behaviour.

IMPLEMENTING DIFFERENTIAL REINFORCEMENT

Attention seeking behaviour can most often be seen in the context of a behavioural chain or, perhaps, an escalation cycle. The first "link" of a chain is always a need within the person for reinforcement. The second link is the person's choice of a behaviour to get the reinforcement that they need. Important to understand here is the fact that we all make behavioural choices based upon what we have been reinforced for in the past. We do not pick behaviours that have been punished in the past. The next link in the chain is the reaction that we provide. Our reactions are, by definition, reinforcing for the person that we are supporting. They have to be, or the person would not engage in any behaviour frequently enough for us to see it as a problem.

Our reaction to an attention seeking behaviour should also be seen as the point at which change in the behaviour chain can start. If the person being supported does not get the reinforcement that they are seeking, their behaviour choices will change. Remember, no behaviour continues without reinforcement. There will almost always be an increase in behaviour in the early stages of a change effort, as the person tries to "test" the new rules. If we are consistent and work through the testing phase, behaviour change will be observed.

As stated in the "Notes on the Concept of Differential Reinforcement", is important to both ignore the target behaviours and to reinforce alternative behaviours. In real world settings, the ignoring part can be straightforward. The idea of responding to the message that behaviour sends can be more challenging. Once again, it is important to remember that the person is looking to you for your reaction. If you give the same reaction(s) that you always have, the behaviour will stay the same. If you give a reaction that the person is not expecting, the behaviour is not reinforced and it will eventually go away. How do you give a reaction that is not expected? You do any of an almost endless number of things such as:

- sing -dance -jump up an down -turn around -ask a question, unrelated to the behaviour
-ask a "non-sense" question, (i.e.: How come dogs don't have wings?) -Lie down on the floor -
do a combination of any of the above.

It is important not to do the same thing over and over again. If you do, there is the risk that the person will come to expect the response and just continue with the old behaviour pattern. In situations where there are two or more staff, it can be easier to use Differential Reinforcement. In these situations, the staff who is the target of the behaviour should say to the person "I don't like it when you do that!" in a firm but fair voice, then walk away. The second staff in the area should them move in to interact with the person, without any mention of what has just happened. This is not the time to "gang up" on the person. Rather, move on to new activities as if the previous behaviour did not happen. If the second staff member gets targeted with attention seeking behaviour, the answer should be the same as before, i.e.: "I don't like it when you do that!" and the first staff member should re-enter, again, without reference to anything that has happened before. This "tag team" approach can go on as long as needed. It will be more successful if the alternatives offered to the person (for interaction/attention) are new and/or known to be high priority items for the person.

In single staff situations, it is more likely to be the case that you will have to do something "weird" in response to attention seeking behaviour. If that happens, remember to avoid doing the same thing repeatedly. Try to do different things as often as you can. Leaving the area is an option. Go into another room, return within 1 minute, and again, behave as if the target behaviour had not happened. Offer interaction/attention that you know or think will be appealing to the person and keep the attention in place for a short period of time. "Break" off as naturally as you can ("I have to go to the bathroom" often works well) and say that you will be back shortly... then come back. Try to offer opportunities to interact before the person acts out, rather than after the fact.

DON'T COUNSEL

Almost without exception, one of the first recommendations that I make when I get involved with a new case is **DON'T COUNSEL!** There are a number of reasons for this recommendation. Most often, the person involved is supported by an agency and therefore has a number of support people involved in their lives. As well, most of them are adults that have been involved in support systems for a long time. Regardless of the behavioural issue, the likelihood that counselling will be helpful is extremely small. Dozens, maybe hundreds of support people over the years, have probably counselled folks who have long standing behavioural issues. If counselling were going to work, it probably would have worked by now. The chances that your particular style, your charm and good looks and yes, even your good intentions making all the difference are very remote.

Another problem with counselling an individual who is acting out is that of timing. When I'm upset, I need time to be upset. That is not the time when I want the benefit of anybody's wisdom and experience. If that were what I had wanted, I would have asked for it before I got upset.

When I'm really upset, there are a number of physiological things that happen to me. My heart rate goes up, my pupils dilate, I sweat more, the blood moves away from the surface of my skin and toward my abdominal cavity to protect vital organs and because I am male my testicles..., well, we can leave those out of this, you get the point. All of this activity occurs as a function of Autonomic Nervous System activity. I cannot control it. The literature refers to the phenomena as the "Flight, Fright, or Fight" response. It's an evolutionary thing. Supposedly it came in handy when, long ago, a distant relative was out looking for dinner and was confronted by the local Sabre toothed Tiger, who was doing much the same thing. It prepared him for immediate action needed to protect his life. He could climb a tree, run like hell, or fight it out. Makes sense doesn't it? Notice though, that amongst the options available, nowhere does "Get immediate counselling" show up. My point is that at times when we are really upset, there is an almost primitive physiological response that happens within us, that does not heighten our ability to benefit from counselling.

Most of the difficult cases that we are presented with have as a component of the problem, attention-seeking difficulties. If the person that you are supporting has difficulties in this area, counselling is not only not going to be effective, it is probably part of the problem. It is often the case that the individual has come to expect that counselling should be part of the "chain" of events that compose the acting out process. It's kind of like... "First I do this, then they counsel, then I do this, then they counsel me some more"... and so on. Breaking the chain or the pattern by not counselling can result in no escalation at all.

Counselling can be an effective tool for you to use, if it is used appropriately. The time to counsel is not when the individual is upset, but rather when they are calm and relaxed and receptive as opposed to defensive. When dealing with someone who is upset and acting out, use redirection, use a calm voice and a neutral facial expression, be prepared to intervene to ensure the safety of everyone, but don't counsel!

Hoarding, Rituals, Obsessions, Compulsions

A common problem, particularly in cases involving Autism, is that of patterns that involve behaviours that appear to have no useful purpose or point and yet the individual persists in engaging in them over and over again. Hoarding things (often paper), rituals (often touching things) and obsessions and compulsions (straightening things, watching specific TV programs, walking in specific places) are all behaviours that support systems find problematic from time to time. Typically problems arise due to the fact that theses behaviours interfere with other things that are happening or that are expected. When blocked from these types of behaviours, the person very often responds by acting out. Sound familiar? Let's look at what is happening in these situations and some common sense ways of dealing with them.

We know from Learning Theory that all behaviours that occur frequently do so because they are reinforced. We also know that there are a variety of reinforcers available to everyone during the course of any given day. If we look at the case of an individual who hoards paper, then we know that from a behavioural perspective there is something about that whole process that is reinforcing, even though we may not be able to determine what it is. We also know that if we ask that person to stop hoarding paper, essentially what we are asking is for him/her to give up reinforcement. It might be possible to supply alternative sources for reinforcement that would satisfy the individual in the long term, however; typically what happens is that the behaviour re-emerges in another form. In other words, the person finds something else to hoard. In the case of rituals, if you are able to block one set, usually another is quickly established. The same is true for obsessions and compulsions. Essentially there is more to the dynamic involved in these behaviours than a "die hard" behaviourist would be comfortable with. We can spend hours speculating about the underlying causes and days or weeks of effort in programming, often to no avail.

A lot of these types of problems are amenable to common sense environmental "solutions" provided that we are willing to essentially compromise with the person. Basically we give this message: ***We know that this is important to you. You can continue to do it, but under these conditions.*** Then we look to ways in which the needs of both parties can be accommodated. Hoarding, for example can be addressed by allowing a defined space for the hoarded material. Helping the individual adjust the targets of the touch in such a way as to minimize disruption can accommodate ritual touching. The focus of the touching could be concentrated to small board that afforded the textures, sensations and sounds that were represented in the original rituals.

Behavioural Rating Scale

I frequently recommend to support groups that they consider the use of a 5 point rating scale to provide ongoing information about the relative progress of an individual. It's a really simple procedure that takes hardly any time to do. It provides a database from which a lot of potentially valuable information can be gleaned. Before we look at it, let's look at what happens now.

Most of you are involved in systems that require a narrative style note at the end of your shift... right? The note is written in long hand, or maybe on a computer, but the principle is the same. You sit down and review what happened during you shift. My observations, based on looking at the information that results are:

1. There is a correlation between the size of the entry and the qualitative nature of the shift. If things went well, the entry is short. If there were problems, the entry is long. If the shift was good, the entries are often in short form ie, "Went shopping, did well, good cooperation with night time routines, early to bed". If there were problems, there will be full sentences and lots of adjectives and adverbs.
2. Reports about good shifts tend to look the same after a while. It's almost like the writer thumbs

back to see what has been said before, so you begin to see the same phrases repeatedly.
3. Shift reports tend to be done by one staff member, even though there may have been more than one person working. This means that only one perspective is recorded.
4. Shift reports are usually done in a book or a binder. When it gets full, a new one is started. The old stuff is filed away, ***and*** hardly anybody ever looks at again!
5. If the old stuff is needed, it's almost always because there is some kind of problem, so somebody has to plough through the reams of material looking for things that might be helpful.

I would like to suggest to you that if you use this 5 point rating scale, you will end up with a lot more useful information that gives you an accurate reflection of both the good and the bad days as well as those that fall in the middle. Here's how it works:

At the end of each shift you and all of your colleagues that worked with you, rate the target person on a 1 to 5 scale. 3 represents an average day, 4 a good day and 5 an excellent day. 2 represents a below average day and 1 means poor. The "descriptors" don't get more detailed than that. In fact the more detailed that they get the less the value of the information. If you try to put in words and phrases to describe what average means, then people will start to look through the list for things to tell them how to rate. It doesn't work and it slows down the process. You simply assign the rating that you think is most appropriate and initial it. At predetermined times (usually once a week) the numbers are averaged and plotted on a graph. I often suggest that this is something that could be done by a night shift person, again, in very little time. It works, I believe, because it relies for the most part on attitudes. How many of you have kids, or spouses (or are they the same?). What was their day like yesterday? Don't think, just answer, with one of the 5 numbers. Your "rating" will be based on information that is at a subconscious level and that stays there because of the speed with which you make your decision. That information is a function of your experiences and thus a reflection of your attitude.

Here are some of the advantages of using this system:

1. If there are patterns or cycles to behaviour, you will be able to see them quickly. This is important for both the person that you are supporting and for you.

2. The data is presented in the form of a graph. It's easy to read and to understand. Because it's in the form of a graph, both the positive and the negative are represented in a balanced and non-biased manner. You can see trends in both directions, and that's important because we don't always look for good trends.

3. The process tends to reduce the impact of bias. i.e.: likes vs. dislikes

4. Because it's easy to read, it can be used to assist with things like Drs appointment, family meetings, meetings with supervisors and managers and even with the person that is being rated.

5. The information can be presented in a bunch of ways. I.e. over shifts, days weeks months, depending on what the need is.

6. It is invaluable in situations where you are dealing with attention seeking difficulties. If you have a college that doesn't understand the strategy, they will be the focus of attention seeking behaviour and will most likely rate lower. Because you are required to initial you rating, these types of problems can be detected quickly and the appropriate steps can be taken.

7. For folks whose skills are appropriate, you can ask them to rate themselves as well. If you support plans are on target, and implemented well, you should expect to see the ratings converge over time.

8. Because of the way the process works, it not a big deal if you forget to rate at the end of a shift. Simply fill it in the next time you come to work. The fact that you initial your rating, it's easy to tell who forgot.

9. Managers, you will have noticed that there are some opportunities here in terms of your role as well. If you see that a staff member is consistently rating differently than others, you have the chance to check in to see what is happening. You can then nip a problem in the bud, or you may find that what is happening is something that everybody else should be doing too.

If this system looks too simple, that's because it is. Sometimes it's the simple things that make all the difference. Often times we overlook the simple things because of the way that they look. This system is not intended to replace the narrative notes that you currently do. Those are in place for other reasons. It is intended to assist you in supporting people from a clinical and hopefully from a proactive preventative perspective as well.

Is This The Hill That You Want To Die On?

I want to spend a little bit of time talking about power /control issues. They happen a lot and the outcome is almost always not good. Usually they start off as innocuous incidents that gradually or quickly escalate as one or both parties invest more of themselves in what is happening. When we as support providers get involved in these types of incidents, without exception, the person that we are involved with gets the blame. The blame usually takes the form of a note that goes on their permanent record, regardless of whether or not they were responsible for what happened. There are a couple of points that are important about power and control situations or confrontational situations. The first is that common sense ***should*** tell us that we should not get into these things at all, ever! Why? Because we will lose! The people that we are supporting, particularly those that have difficulty managing their behaviour are almost always willing and able to escalate to a level that we cannot go to... Violence. If we know that at the outset, it seems kind of dim to start to play a game that we can only end up losing. Most of those we support, that fit in to the general category of "Difficult to Manage" do not have the same moral, ethical, or legal restrictions on their conduct that we do. Starting in with these people is kind of like bringing a knife to a gunfight. You look real silly and you get hurt. You avoid these problems by knowing the people that you are working with, by using re-direction, by not being afraid to back down or walk away, and by thinking before you speak. I sometimes suggest to folks that they ask themselves a quick question before they charge in to one of these situations. That question is "Is this the hill that I want to die on?"

The second point that relates to power and control situations is that they invariably include some kind of threat to punish as they escalate. Usually fairly early on the process there is a real or an implied threat to punish, either by applying a consequence or by removing a positive, as part of the effort to gain control. A little reminder here about reinforcement and punishment. Remember that both are processes and that both have an impact on the behaviours that they are paired with. Reinforcement increases and punishment decreases. Think a little bit more about the dynamics involved. Both come from you as support staff. Both are contingent on specified behaviour or behaviours occurring first. In a punishment situation however, you have to wait for the person to demonstrate the target behaviour, before you apply the punisher. Essentially the person is in control. They decide when to act. In effect they control the teaching learning opportunities. In reinforcement situations, you are in control. You decide what behaviours to respond to. You decide when to respond. You can generate as many teaching/learning opportunities as you wish. Going back to the power and control situation then, we see that if you get into one of these things you are a loser on two levels, the functional and the theoretical.

Eavesdropping

One of the most common issues that arises in support situations is that of people eavesdropping on conversations that take place between support staff. While eavesdropping occurs throughout the day, it is especially difficult for support staff around shift changes. Staff members find themselves in need of sharing information with their colleagues, often about those being supported, in ways that respect the confidentiality rights of all. Efforts to have people move elsewhere, out of earshot, are usually unsuccessful as most often the "move" is around a corner or out of sight but not "out of sound". Parents are familiar with this phenomenon. Children are skilled at eavesdropping and parents are generally no more successful than support staff at stopping the behaviour.

Amongst the epiphanies or "Ah Ha!" moments that I have had in my career is directly related to eavesdropping. These are teachable moments! We can use the existing behaviour (much as the Premack Principle suggests) to both reinforce desired behaviour and to send messages concerning behaviours that we do not want to see. I have begun to suggest to support staff and parents that when they know that they are being eavesdropped upon, they can send positive messages about appropriate/desired behaviour by using "first person" references. For example, if John has managed well with his chores, the support staff (knowing that he is eavesdropping) tell their colleague that John did well and how impressed/pleased they were. In situations where you want to send a message concerning inappropriate behaviour, I suggest using a "third person" approach. In this case, it is not John who is identified, but rather an apparently unknown party (i.e.: "My neighbour was over to visit last night. You would not believe what he did...."). Using this strategy reduces or eliminates the probability that John is going to have a defensive reaction while at the same time sends clear messages about what you as support staff do not like.

CLOAK OF COMPETENCE

The designation or label "Cloak of Competence" is used in those cases where an individual presents to others with an apparent skill set that is far greater than their actual skill set. Typically these individuals have spent the majority of their formative years within systems (families) where they have been included in a wide variety of functions and have been taught, as well as been expected, to manage their behaviour in acceptable ways. As well, when this designation applies, the individual usually does not present with any physical anomalies that would suggest that they have a disability. Aptitude assessment profiles invariably reveal that the Verbal scores are markedly weaker than Performance scores. Within the overall Verbal skills, we often see relative strengths in areas associated with expressive vocabulary and social awareness. Areas such as receptive vocabulary, the ability to abstract, concentration and memory skills are most often less well developed.

The impact of a Cloak of Competence is significant for the individual and those that provide supports. To better understand the dynamics of these situations, we need to look at how the phenomenon "works". The individual has been taught to "fit in" and behave appropriately. Often there is a real need to be "like everybody else". We see then an individual who presents without any obvious disability. An individual with good manners. An individual with good social skills. An individual who is apparently able to follow and participate in conversation, both verbally and non-verbally. In other words, a person who can and does make a good "first impression". Despite what we all learned from our mothers, we respond to our first impressions and place expectations on the individual on the basis of that first impression. We may decide to ask that he/she do a series of three or four things (i.e.; job related) that are consistent with the judgment that we have made. Most often, the person will be able to manage the first or the last of the list of things that we have asked. When all of the requests have not been completed, we determine that the shortcomings are “willful” or “on purpose”. The person has intentionally not done what we have asked and therefore is now a problem. It has to be their fault; we are the professionals! (i.e.; Cognitive Dissonance). In some, thankfully rare cases, the individual learns that he/she can re-direct us from the challenges that we have set for them by acting out. It is as if they have learned that they cannot do those four things and they cannot admit it to us, but they know that hitting us will make us forget! The more common scenario sees a gradually more negative “attitude” develop within the support system.

Of significant concern are those cases where the person with a Cloak of Competence has their support system designed and resourced based upon their assumed level of skills rather than their actual skills and abilities. Essentially the support system makes bad decisions. When this occurs, the person is actually at risk in a wide variety of ways (physically, emotionally, financially) and is almost always made to be accountable for bad decisions made by others! Avoiding the risks associated with a Cloak of Competence is relatively simple. A straightforward assessment will tell us whether the condition exists. The assessment should include both an Aptitude component and an Adaptive component and typically takes about two hours to complete. Not really a big investment considering the potential to minimize risk.

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