

Research in Brief

Communication Tools

Source Document: Taxman, Faye S., Eric S. Shepardson, and James M. Byrne. 2004. *Tools of the Trade: A Guide to Incorporating Science into Practice*. National Institute of Corrections Publication, pp 36-48.

Communication Tools

Key Words: communication, role model, rapport, behavior management, motivational interviewing

Summary/Conclusions

The article is part of a larger document that includes a number of useful tools for offender management. It includes ideas to build rapport and trust between the probation officer (PO) and the probationer. This improved communication, in a safe and predictable environment, can increase the compliance and success of the probationer.

Limitations of Information

The article includes a great deal of information on motivational interviewing (MI) techniques. The reader is reminded that developing MI skills starts with structured training.

Caveat: The information presented here is intended to summarize and inform readers of research and information relevant to probation work. It can provide a framework for carrying out the business of probation as well as suggestions for practical application of the material. While it may, in some instances, lead to further exploration and result in *future* decisions, it is not intended to prescribe policy and is not necessarily conclusive in its findings. Some of its limitations are described above.

Communication between a probation officer (PO) and a client can mean the difference between a struggle and a partnership. Communication is a tool, which can motivate an offender for change. To begin, effective communication is influenced by the PO's actions and office environment. Staff should minimize distractions such as phone calls and interruptions. The offender should feel safe and know the conversation is private (not necessarily confidential). Once the office visit or interview begins, there are three stages for an effective meeting.

~First, the PO "sets up" the interaction. This includes telling the probationer what to expect. "All explanations should be general, positive, and in layman's terms." Allow the probationer to ask questions, so he knows what to expect. During this "Set Up" stage, create a positive tone to relieve some of the probationer's anxiety.

~The next stage is "Gathering Information." Using a mix of motivational interviewing skills, the PO gathers new information and updates previous data. The PO should learn as much about the offender as possible. This information is important to creating incentives, discovering triggers, and avoiding relapse. Throughout the meeting reward and affirm the probationer for progress; however, respond immediately to violations. Using reflections "can help reduce the offender's defensiveness" and assist in building rapport. Reflections include a skilled repeating or restating of the offender's words.

~The last stage of a meeting is the "Close Out." Summarize the meeting, attending to discrepancies in the proba-

tioner's perception. Feedback is critical. This phase should include "Hot Cognitions." "Those thoughts or ideas that are pressing, important, and usually require some form of decision or action." Also use "Magic Questions"; "open questions geared to help offenders shift their frame of reference."

Practical Applications

- ✓ *Model pro-social behavior by being prompt and respectful.*
- ✓ *A PO's office should be as inviting and comfortable, as PO safety allows.*
- ✓ *Minimize distractions by turning off business and personal phone ringers, turn off radios, ask for no interruptions.*
- ✓ *"Set up" the meeting by telling the client the purpose and how long the meeting will last.*
- ✓ *Avoid arguments and build rapport by using MI skills like open-ended questions, reflections, summarizing, etc.*
- ✓ *Don't give advice but point out discrepancies for them to solve, always providing feedback.*
- ✓ *Listen for important clues to what's important, as these can later be used for meaningful incentives or sanctions.*
- ✓ *Attend to Hot Cognitions-Don't let the offender leave without addressing serious issues that came up in the meeting.*
- ✓ *Ask Magic Questions like, "If things were perfect, what would your life look like in 5 years?"*