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VERBAL STRATEGIES THAT SUCCEEDED
WHEN JOB PERFORMANCE FAILS¹
or
HOW TO ESCHEW SOCIAL WORK
THROUGH CONVINCING CONVERSATION
(A Pocket Guide for the Weary)²

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The seemingly endless parade of literature on burnout among social service workers is the source of inspiration for this pocket guide. With the creative tailoring of some of the following vignettes to local situations, it will be almost impossible for you, the service worker, to achieve burn-out.³ Daily interactions with your clients and your co-workers can be accomplished with the greatest of ease, and services delivered with no muss or fuss. If the situation demands it, perhaps you can avoid clients altogether. With current retrenchment in social services, you have been asked repeatedly to do more for your clients and your agency with less and less resources. Here, instead, is a way you can do more for yourself without even having to secure outside funding.

The first part of the pocket guide outlines six handy ways that you can maneuver work situations to your advantage and relief, simply by opening your mouth. Part II describes some difficult situations encountered by social workers and shows you how to prevail simply by employing the verbal strategies outlined in Part I.

Part I. SIX USEFUL VERBAL STRATEGIES

Talk is a useful, free, and abundant resource for mediating complex agency and client situations. The purpose of the talk outlined here is to align the social situation to your advantage without having you look irresponsible or selfish (Stokes and Hewitt, 1976); indeed, the most effective application of the following strategies can bolster others' perceptions of you through no additional effort of your own.

1. Account. Accounts help bridge the gap between what is expected and what actually happens (Scott and Lyman, 1963). There are two types of accounts that can be employed: excuses and justifications. These differ with respect to the issue of responsibility. An excuse denies responsibility, projecting it onto someone or something else (e.g., "I'm only following the rules"). On the other hand, a justification accepts responsibility for actions but denies a sense of wrongdoing; a justification may even assert the positive aspects of the act (e.g., "I'm sending you to another agency for your own benefit").

2. Last resort. Used alone or with accounts, last resorts justify the implementation of extreme actions (e.g., "I'm hospitalizing you as a last resort; there's nothing more we can do for you here under the circumstances"). They should be grounded in the apparent failure or exhaustion of prior remedies and/or accompanied by the anticipation that no other alternatives are available or that they are too costly (Emerson, 1981). This strategy is best used within an atmosphere of crisis. (Note: If a crisis atmosphere is not already present, then you will have to create it yourself.) Invoking last resorts is a risky matter, so only use them as a last resort.

3. Quasi-theory. Some seemingly overwhelming problems can be simplified through the use of quasi-theories, or your own interpretations of what's wrong (e.g., "If you'd just tell me the truth, this situation could be worked out"). You should employ this strategy with some restraint: banal constructions that generalize the situation are most successful (Hewitt and Hall, 1973). Also, because your quasi-theory sets terms within which problems might be solved, you may be held responsible if progress is not made in eliminating the problem. So the fanciest mouthwork of this sort is that which locates the problem in other people, not in yourself. (See Singer, 1978, on shifting the burden of responsibility to the victim.)

So far we have shown you how to clean up social debris by reconstructing problem situations once they've happened. The aforementioned strategies require no precocity, no anticipation, no proactive posture. The two strategies that follow enable you to repair a situation even before it has happened, defying clients and co-workers to locate blame on one so protected as you.

4. Disclaimer. Being ready with a disclaimer is like carrying a good luck charm. Under the spell of the disclaimer, others will hold their challenges in abeyance. The trick of the disclaimer is that it allows you to say something outrageous, absurd, uncharitable, or offensive without appearing outrageous, absurd, uncharitable, or offensive (e.g., "I know this will disappoint you, but we will have to put you on the waiting list.") (Hewitt and Stokes, 1975). Proper use of the disclaimer allows you to deal sharp blows through sleight of mouth.

5. Self-mockery. By calling attention to their own shortcomings, users of this strategy disarm others while simultaneously affirming the rules they have broken. The introduction of such humor into the activity under consideration moves it from a serious to a non-serious framework. If done correctly, self-mockery is likely to evoke positive sentiments among participants (e.g., "I'm so stupid--I keep making the same mistake") (Ungar, 1984). Because self-mockery involves the alteration of your status, be sure before you employ this strategy that your status is high enough to endure depreciation.

All of the above strategies require some modicum of analytical effort to be employed appropriately. The final verbal weapon does not require much concentration and is almost reflexive in nature. It is especially recommended for use toward the end of the work day when needed relief from mental fatigue precludes the task of choosing from among the preceding social lubricants.

6. Refocusing of attention. You may have noticed that the flow of most conversations, like ping pong balls, shifts from one court to the other as participants refocus talk upon themselves (e.g., "If you think you've got problems, wait 'til I tell you about mine") (Derber, 1979). This strategy enables you to diminish the significance of others' concerns either by (a) talking about your own difficulties or (b) shifting the entire topic of discussion to something you'd rather talk about. The success of this strategy is dependent upon the user's proclivity for constant attention.

Now that you have these strategies in your arsenal of social skills, let's see what they can do when the verbal trigger is pulled.

Part II: Verbal Strategies at Work

Scenario #1

The Problem:

Your client is a widow with three small children. She does not speak or read English. You learn through her gestures that she needs housing and food for her family. The exchange with this client is consuming an inordinate amount of time, and two other clients are waiting to see you. Your supervisor interrupts your meeting with this client to complain that the waiting clients are being noisy and disrupting other workers. The supervisor is burning up; you are burning out.

The Solution: Refer the present client to another agency that has an interpreter (account; species--justification; sub-species--claim of benefit). See the noisiest client next and exclaim that if she'd just calm down, the wait at the welfare office wouldn't be nearly so unpleasant (quasi-theory). Upon dispensing with this client, invite the remaining one into your office with the following statement: "You must think I'm terrible for making you wait so long" (disclaimer), "but there's only so much time in one day to do everything that needs to be done" (account; species--excuse; sub-species-- appeal to natural laws).

Scenario #2

The Problem: You are the primary caseworker for almost 200 homebound clients whose physical needs are varied, immediate, and ongoing. Many of the clients are lonely, so you try to devote some time to their social-emotional needs as well during your home visits. Last week you were asked by your supervisor to compile data for a

funding proposal the agency is developing. The data still are not ready, and the proposal is due tomorrow. The supervisor is now asking for your work.

The Solution: This situation requires a salvo of verbal artillery aimed directly toward any compassion the supervisor might have: "You're never going to believe this (disclaimer), but I still haven't had time (account; species--excuse; sub-species--appeal to natural laws) to pull that material together for you. I've been under a lot of stress with my heavy caseload (refocusing of attention coupled with an account; species--excuse; sub-species--appeal to biology), and I just can't ignore those folks' needs (account; species--justification; sub-species--appeal to loyalty). If only we had more caseworkers around here, there would be time for paperwork (quasi-theory). I hate to do this (disclaimer), and I wouldn't under other circumstances (last resort), but I wonder if you'd help me get that information together." Of course, this solution doesn't absolve you of all of the work but it cuts in half the nasty job of making numbers look meaningful whether they are or not.

Scenario #3

The Problem: You have not had a raise in three years because of funding cutbacks for programs and personnel. It is time for your annual evaluation with the agency's executive director. You want her to know that you feel you deserve to make more than \$14,000 annually after having obtained your MSW and having been with the agency for five years.

The Solution: Maneuver the conversation as follows:
She: "You've been doing a fine job the past

year, so I'd rather use this time to tell you my plans for the year ahead."

You: "I would like to hear your plans, but first I need to say something that's been of concern to me for some time now." (refocusing of attention)

She: "I'm aware that you show more concern than most other caseworkers. In fact, here's what I have in mind to encourage them to be as concerned as you. . . ." (refocusing of attention)

You: "But I'm particularly concerned about whether I can remain in this job and send my daughter to college, too. I've inquired about loans, scholarships, and work-study programs, and I still won't have enough money to pay her tuition for a full year. Unless I can get a raise, I'll have to look for another job." (refocusing of attention; last resort)

She: "Well, we certainly don't want to lose you. I've been so busy that I didn't realize you were having so much trouble financially." (refocusing of attention; account; species--excuse; sub-species--appeal to ignorance)

You: "I know I'm only an inconsequential caseworker in the whole organization, a small fish in a big polluted ocean, but even little fish need to eat and send their babies to school." (refocusing of attention; self-mockery)

She: "To tell you the truth, I've been disturbed that I'm unable to pay you more than I do. Things like that keep my stress level high. Maybe if we can elect a new governor the agency will get more money." (disclaimer; refocusing of attention; quasi-theory)

You: (to yourself): "She's read this pocket guide, too."

These three scenarios offer merely a glimpse of what is possible in the short-term through creative verbalization. Just as you rely on your autonomic nervous system to respond to danger, so, too, can a well-honed, seemingly autonomic verbal system keep you out of trouble. If you are successful with these strategies over time, clients will begin to lower their expectations of you, organizational standards will recede, and your job will become far less demanding than it currently is (see Singer, 1978).

The utility of any of the strategies can be optimized with practice. Therefore we recommend talking to yourself--soliloquy (Gass, 1984)--before talking to others. If you can't convince yourself, it is unlikely that anyone else will be so moved, either. Next time you see co-workers talking to themselves, realize that they, too, are learning to address for success. If you can imagine interactions with your clients, co-workers, and supervisors proceeding smooth as Chinese porcelain, then you can envision what can be achieved through convincing conversation. So give yourself a split second to be both actor and audience; explore the itinerary of verbal action before taking it. Hamlet did, and he made Shakespeare famous.

NOTES

1 Idea from Edelman (1977).

2 The authors do not in fact condone the strategies offered herein. One way of managing exasperating situations, however, is through the use of humor. We empathize with the difficulties inherent in doing social work in a reluctant welfare state.

3 See Dressel (1984) for direct quotations from social service workers who employ verbal strategies to counteract job stress.

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