Handout 5: Establishing Priorities

Workers are limited in the assistance that they can offer by the guidelines of the organisation that employs them. At times the client may not have ranked their priorities in a way that enables the organisation to assist. It may be necessary to establish which of the client's priorities the worker can assist with.

Clarify the position of the other person

Check that you understand their desire or opinion. Say it back to them, and state the reason they have given for feeling this way. For example "I understand that you're feeling stressed, and would really like a cigarette." If they think you've got it wrong, keep talking about their position until they are confident you understand it. Demonstrate empathy if it is at all appropriate.

Don't put them on the defensive

It would be unwise at this point to 'hit them with everything you've got'. This will only arouse resistance and thus reinforce their position as they come up with arguments to defend it. So, don't say: "One in four smokers die from their filthy habit you know. Plus it's the worst possible role-modelling for your children".

If you sound judgmental and disapproving you are likely to trigger feelings of shame or anger in your client. They may withdraw or become aggressive, but either way rapport will suffer immediately.

State your position clearly

Preface this with another indication that you understand their feelings. "I know you're really stressed and would like a smoke. I'm not able to buy you cigarettes though. Workers here can't do that."

Clients usually understand this, and the above is actually a fairly simple example. More difficult is the situation where the client can argue that you are able to assist them as they wish, and should. "Look, you said you'd spend $20 on food for the kids, so buy them what they like - cola and lollies and cheeze-puffs. It will shut them up so I can have some peace! Don't you want me to have any peace?"
If their position is a long way from yours - go and fetch them!

Rather than polarising your positions by emphasising the gulf between the two of you, go over to the other side for a bit. Agree with their viewpoint as much as you can, then introduce elements of your position:

"I know children love sweets - I certainly did when I was a kid. They'd be delighted if we spent twenty dollars on sweets. And you'd have a break for a while, I really think you deserve a rest after a day like today." Let that sink in. You have shown that you appreciate their position. They might come up with a compromise - you've left them room by pausing, but haven't agreed that theirs is the best or only idea. If they don't have any suggestions, it's time to offer your preferred alternative:

"I really think though that your children would be happy with a meal from House de la Pizza. It would take them a while to eat it, and they'd be really full afterwards. There's a deal for $19.95 that includes pizza, a drink, and iceblocks. Do you think that would be okay?"

Note you are not challenging the underlying reasons - your client's priority is for the children to be happy and for a bit of peace and quiet. You haven't provoked hostility by mentioning the unhealthy aspects of sugar, or that it may only make the children more difficult later on. Nor have you made any bossy declarations - you have left the decision in your client's hands.

And if they still disagree

Chances are your clear and assertive approach will be accepted by your client. If it is not you will need to weigh up the costs of persisting. If you have promised $20 for food, you need to consider if changing the children's diet for one day is worth the battle. A client in crisis is not somebody to have a nutrition debate with. Perhaps you can address this issue another day. As long as the guidelines of the agency have not been breached you have not acted improperly.