Handout 1: The Skilled Communicator

As welfare workers our communication skills are employed on a number of levels.

There are clients and their friends, relatives, and support people. There are the general public and people in businesses that we have dealings with. There are managers, funders, peak bodies, bureaucrats, and workers from other agencies. There are our supervisors, colleagues, and those we supervise (including volunteers and students). Finally there are the people outside our work - friends, neighbours, loved ones - who we interact and share our lives with.

There are different and appropriate ways of communicating with all these people. There are rules and boundaries that prescribe our interactions. There are however, overarching principles of communication that are applicable to everyone we interact with.

Here are some.

Three dimensions, and three areas of communication expertise

There are both skill and knowledge dimensions to competent communication, as well as ‘heart’ qualities like courage, sensitivity, and compassion. The do-be-have concept applies to our interactions with others.

- Do - the skill, and practice. Do engage the client, do ask open questions. Do listen to client’s responses, do give feedback as appropriate.

- Be - the attitude, or feeling quality, which you cultivate. Be open, be attentive, be empathic.

- Have - the knowledge, and expand it. Have an understanding of what terms like assertiveness, empathy, and active listening mean.

Three areas of expertise, which include written and spoken forms, are:

- One-on-one - which includes counselling, interviewing, case-management, giving feedback, coaching and mentoring.

- Group and teamwork - facilitating discussion, conflict resolution, running meetings, giving presentations,

- Communication systems - networking, using communication technology, designing and implementing systems in the workplace.
The skilled communicator:

1. Is assertive - willing to make their own needs known, but not in a pushy or aggressive way; willing to make requests; willing to disagree; willing to go with others, rather than against; able to make a reasoned response rather than an emotional one; able to stand up for one's own rights, working with others, rather than against.

2. Is sensitive - to cultural factors; to others' needs and emotional states; to the context and situation in which the interaction takes place.

3. Is responsive - can communicate sensitivity to the needs of others; can communicate their own opinions and wishes in a way that does not arouse undue discomfort or hostility; can respond with acknowledgement to the feedback of others.

4. Is versatile - can be flexible and adapt to the demands of the situation and context; possesses a range of communication strategies and is able to select one appropriate to the situation.

5. Is willing to explore - all aspects of the situation/problem; all sides of the story; to the degree of depth required before becoming solution focused.

6. Is able to convey - opinions, information, attitudes, goals - clearly and in the style appropriate to the situation.

7. Is able to self-monitor and evaluate one's own communication competence.

8. Is appreciated and perceived by others as possessing and using appropriately the skills outlined above.

As an advanced communicator, you will need techniques for:

- Writing reports
- Dealing with conflict
- Giving feedback
- Presenting information
- Interviewing people
- Negotiating
- Maintaining networks, and friendships
- Responding to enquiries
- Running meetings
- Running groups
- Managing a team
- Dealing with people who aren't such great communicators.
Start noticing what works and what doesn't work with your own communications. Watch the techniques of good communicators and observe what skills they use to communicate with.