Handout 2: Recognising Your Limitations

"I respect faith, but doubt is what gets you an education". Wilson Mizner

What? That doesn't sound very New Age! As we're always hearing affirmations like 'expand your horizons' and 'feel the fear and do it anyway' this may sound a bit defeatist. The reason it's important is that we don't want to make matters worse by making mistakes. Let's say you have a client who has disclosed sexual abuse, or two community groups that want you to facilitate a conflict resolution session. Are you competent to help them sort things out? You could ask yourself a few questions to check:

1. Do I lack training and/or proven experience in this type of situation?

2. In a situation similar to this, have I run into trouble before?

3. Am I unable to reliably predict a good outcome if I proceed as I intend to?

4. Are there likely to be factors unknown to me that would make my intervening risky?

5. Are there more qualified/experienced people nearby to whom I could refer this client?

6. Do I feel uncomfortable, anxious, or uncertain as to how do deal with this situation?

Answering yes to any of the above should make you stop and think about going ahead with whatever it is you attend to do. You may need to check with a colleague or supervisor, do some research, or refer the situation to a specialist. If you answered yes to 1 or 6, then read on! This room will help you improve your communication skills - that's right, communication skills are something you can learn and practice.

Reading the handout on what makes a skilled communicator (Handout 1) may have already alerted you to some aspects of your communication that could be improved. Don't despair! (Optimism is also a quality of competent communicators).

You may be thinking things like "I'm not assertive enough" or "I'm too aggressive" or "I don't know how to act with people of different age/cultural background/gender to myself". Please don't diminish your self-concept (the way you think about yourself) by labelling yourself an inadequate communicator. Please do however recognise your limitations when it comes to communicating with others. You may not yet be ready to address a conference hall full of international delegates, or by interviewing assess the needs of a traumatised refugee. Don't try, when you are
obviously out of your depth and may actually do harm if things go wrong. There are plenty of relatively safe ways to learn, practice and experiment with communication skills and styles. Before we get into that, let's first view some tips on how you might recognise your current limitations with regard to competent communication.

Recognising one's own limitations (with regard to communication)

1. Self-monitor. Realise and remember situations in which you used appropriate/inappropriate communication strategies/styles. Ask the questions:
   
   a) What strategy/style did I use? (assertive, aggressive, manipulative, lobbying and so on)
   b) What was the outcome?
   c) Why did it/did it not work out the way I'd hoped?

2. Be sensitive to the feedback of others.

   a) Is communication flowing freely and moving forward? Or is it stuck, going around in circles, or blowing up in your face?
   b) Are people opening up to you? Avoiding you? Falling asleep? Becoming defensive? Walking all over you?

3. Imagine how others might describe you.


4. Be aware of contexts and situations in which you have difficulty communicating effectively.

   Are you very shy in gatherings of strangers? Do you daydream in meetings? Do you fear addressing a large group? Could you interview a young person who lives on the streets?

5. Compare current and desired self-concepts.

   How are you now, as a communicator? How would you like to be, ideally? What skills need to improve? What situations are best avoided until this is done?

6. Use tools to assess yourself.

   Do net searches for tools like the Johari Window, Duran and Myers-Briggs models. Keep a journal and reflect on your communication practice, successes and failures.
7. Refer to specialists when in doubt.

If you suspect you are out of your depth don't hesitate to consider referring to somebody with proven skills. Sexual assault counselling, or inter-organisational conflict resolution, are not things you 'have a go' at to see if you can do them. If you may have the skills, but are not certain, check with your supervisor or coworkers for their opinion or suggestions.

Beware the self-fulfilling prophecy! If you have labelled yourself in a certain way, for example as a shy person, you are likely to act that way and others will reflect back your opinion of yourself, thus reinforcing the reality of the label. Recognising your own limitations is necessary to prevent you getting yourself and others into difficult situations, not to make you think you're a flawed communicator. It's also a handy starting point for planning skills improvement. Once you know what needs to improve, and have the will to change, you really can gain in skill level and self-concept. And your opportunity to practice is as close as the nearest person.