Handout 8: Factors Influencing Effective Interviewing

Rapport

Rapport facilitates clear, two-way communication. At its best it means to 'click' with somebody - to quickly be able to talk in a frank but friendly way. Both people feel a willingness to discuss matters. When interviewing we are seeking high levels of trust, openness, and cooperation. Rapport helps us establish the positive communication climate necessary to achieve these levels. It does not mean to be 'nice' all the time, in fact, it is only when we have the trust that rapport provides that we are able to challenge and confront without having the client disengage.

Be sure not to kill off rapport immediately by saying inappropriate things, or worse, antagonising people. I knew a youth worker who, as a conversation opener, would always ask young men if they preferred Fords or Holden’s. This question instantly alienated a young gothic man who saw such a question as 'Ockerish' and demonstrating a profound ignorance of everything gothic! The message conveyed was perceived as: "Hi, do you realise we have nothing in common?". Antagonism, the opposite of rapport, is found in questions like 'When did you last have a wash?' or 'Why do you people always manage to turn up when we’re really busy?' or 'You have the right to remain silent'.

Rapport is present where there exists a willingness to cooperate to achieve shared goals. You can practice 'rapport spotting' anywhere where there are people. Watch for people smiling and nodding in a relaxed way, whose body postures often mirror each other, and whose gestures and degree of energy or animation appear to match during the course of a conversation. Similarly, matching your own non-verbal cues with those of your interviewee can quickly build rapport.

Expectations

Interviewees may have had negative experiences in similar prior situations of interviewing. They may have had unsuccessful application interviews, or 'useless' counselling sessions followed by relapse. Such experiences can cause negative expectations, leading to responses as diverse as anxiety, withdrawal, resistance, or hostility. You need to bring an attitude of positive expectation to the interview. By assuming the client will be open, cooperative, motivated, and powerful, your confidence in them can 'rub off', reinforcing these attributes as your interviewee picks up on your belief in them.
Appreciation

In some interviewing situations we can't offer much to motivate the client because there simply may not be anything in it for them. Research and investigative interviewing are examples of types that are much more for the benefit of the interviewer than the interviewee. In these situations we need to acknowledge our appreciation of clients’ altruism (helpfulness) and goodwill by encouraging and thanking them. 'This is really helpful', or 'Thanks, this is great stuff you're giving me' are the sorts of appreciative comments you can make as you go along.

Encouragement and empathy

Sometimes the person will falter or struggle as they move into territory that is uncomfortable or upsetting. At these times it is important to 'stay with' them, by acknowledging their feelings and showing you that care about them. Allow time for them to process these emotions, and encourage them to continue. 'That must have been really upsetting... can you tell me more about it?' and 'I can see this is hard for you, let's keep talking it through' are examples of appropriate statements. Make sure you mean them genuinely - formulaic or evaluative statements (‘Wow, you're so brave’) will sound inauthentic and patronising.

Ventilation of feelings

The interviewee may have been waiting for an opportunity to express the emotions around the issues you are focusing on. To 'get some things off their chest' or 'let off steam' are phrases that suggest a sense of relief and satisfaction when emotional tension is reduced by a climactic release of it. The interviewee may relish the opportunity to show anger safely, or have a good cry, and again you need to 'stay with them'. Don't dampen down their expression just because you are feeling uncomfortable. The feelings of satisfaction and increased trust that follow such expression are allies in the interviewing process.

Setting

Interviews may be conducted face-to-face or by telephone, formally or informally. In the welfare work sphere power relations are de-emphasised. This means you will probably not be interviewing while dressed in suit and tie/shoulder-pads, sitting in a plush chair behind an oak desk. Consider the characteristics of the client and their corresponding needs. A recently arrived refugee may feel uncomfortable in a sterile office - it may remind them of immigration procedures. A young person living on the streets may also prefer a less formal setting. Balance such needs against those of privacy and the need to minimise interruptions. Other types of people and situations will require a more formal setting, and would find an outdoors or at home interview inappropriate and unprofessional. If it is appropriate to offer a choice of settings then do so.
History and context

A suspect, and ex-prisoner, being interviewed at a police station; a job interview before a panel; a young person applying for accommodation at a service they were evicted from; a counselling session with a trusted therapist. Imagine being the interviewee in each of these four contexts. How open and honest/cooperative/motivated are you likely to be? How could previous experiences in similar situations affect the quality of the interaction? As with setting and expectation factors, the relevant history and context can greatly impact the tone of the interview. It may be necessary to name the influence of these factors, for example: 'I know you've not had much luck with welfare workers before. Would you like to talk about your previous experiences to start with?'

Consequences following the interview

In the above section possible consequences were: freedom or imprisonment; a new job, or not; accommodation or homelessness; feelings of progress, or frustration. Sometimes the rewards or otherwise may not be so obvious. Perhaps the client will be motivated if you point them out: 'If we could explore your frustrations with the situation you may be able to contribute to some changes'. Consider ethical issues if you are reminding people of possible consequences to motivate them. Don't: promise things that can't be delivered; take advantage of their willingness to cooperate by asking inappropriate questions (such as marital status in a job interview); chill the communication climate by threatening them if they do not cooperate.