

Role Clarification: Why Fuss Over It?

Since Dowden & Andrews' 2004 meta-analysis on effective staff practices, the corrections field has been on notice that staff approaches that are fair, firm and transparent get better outcome results. This is not surprising and consistent with the American Psychology Associations' findings at the beginning of the new millennium: they translated what traditionally had been referred to as 'unspecified therapist factors' into a rather extensive set of principles that are now referred to as 'common therapeutic factors'. People change, heal and grow more readily when they are engaged in relationships that are fair, engaging and have clear structure, regardless of the population or the intervention type.

In the last 10-12 years, other researchers have begun investigating these general principles more explicitly in the context of staff working with non-voluntary clients.

Role Clarification, a practice originally defined by Chris Trotter (2002; 2006) is a deliberate process practitioners engage in, typically at the outset of a supervision session, to create a more balanced foundation for the session based on shared expectations. This involves briefly checking-in with each client on any one or more of several dimensions of the working relationship:

1. The mission, values and goals of the agency;
2. The potential roles and expectations of the client;
3. The potential roles and expectations of the practitioner;
4. The limits of practitioner's authority - what things are negotiable and what isn't;
5. Confidentiality.

The received wisdom behind Role Clarification is: in relationships with non-voluntary clients it's probably not safe to assume their agenda, nor on the other hand, is it safe for non-voluntary clients to assume what the practitioner's agenda is. Thus routinely clarifying the above aspects of the relationship has been found to be beneficial and indeed, is associated with better outcomes (Trotter, 1996; Trotter, et al, 2012; Trotter & Evans, 2012).

What the Research Doesn't Show

Recently J-SAT began training a model for mid-managers to coach and apply skill-training with their direct reports. Obviously drawing the lines between voluntary and non-voluntary participation wasn't so clear. Nevertheless, we felt role clarification was worth incorporating into the 20-40 minute monthly sessions between supervisors and direct reports. We asked supervisors to record and submit tapes of their 1 on 1 supervision sessions for our review prior to having our own independent coaching sessions with each supervisor. Incidentally, in our coaching sessions we would always attempt to

'mirror and model' the use of the same coaching model, beginning each session with role clarification.

We learned that in clarifying their roles with their direct reports, who in many instances the supervisor had been supervising for many years, the supervisors could immediately begin engaging their direct reports genuinely and in a manner that reduced tensions. It appears there may be an aspect of involuntary participation in these sessions after all. Furthermore, with practice the supervisors learned to adapt their role clarification techniques so they could effectively foreshadow shifts they wished to take in their roles with their direct reports and become more active coaches.

Traditionally, many supervisor/ direct reporting officer relationships are based on a form of 'roll call' in which the officer reviews and recounts case problems and decisions since their last meeting. This process seems to be a holdover from the period when officers undergo their initial year or two and are still learning the ropes. If the latter conversations stayed within boundaries and didn't expose any significant competency issues, it remained a safe venue where the supervisor and his or her report talked anecdotally ABOUT supervision practices. The problem is this process can become boring and provide only limited learning to either person.

Role Clarification appears to be a very useful tool for disrupting conventional supervisor meetings so that the actual learning edges of both the supervisor and the direct report are more readily exposed. This shifts the learning dramatically in two ways: 1) the focus is more apt to involve the here and now; and, 2) there is greater interest and openness to exploring adaptive versus technical change issues. Paradoxically, role clarification helps both supervisor and direct report transcend previous roles and find more options for co-creating new roles.

When a supervisor shares exploring new roles and ways to enhance the conversation they are going to have about managing change, they are signaling something potentially significant. However, when they further disclose their own expectations for observing and identifying patterns that limit their performance versus reinforce it, they begin to set an entirely different expectation and environment for their discussion. At this point the supervisor can also invite the officer to share something about his or her expectations for getting involved in different kinds of performance discussions. What kind of structure might they need? How much permission and support from the supervisor would be helpful to feel safe and productively engaged? Finally, the supervisor can then refer back again to his or her role(s) and what they might try to better support some of the positive sides of the officer's current expectations.

Needs are at the heart of the above conversation. Direct reports have needs for safety, clarity and purpose. The supervisor has many of the same needs, along with needs to systematically explore direction, progress and growth concerning staff alignment with EBPs. Both the supervisor and his or her direct report also have fundamental needs for

recognition and respect. When role clarification is routinely practiced, wearisome roles and facades become the first casualties. And in the absence of this baggage, both members of the dyad are enabled to be present in alternative ways. The two individuals may be empowered to ask more or different lines of questioning. Or conversely, one or both dyad members may refrain from asking questions, preferring instead to simply receive feedback, or having space and options to reflect. Either way, we frequently see role clarification result in palatable changes in the tempo, tone and rhythm of the interpersonal interactions. To sum it up, in addition to better aligning client/ officer roles, role clarification supports more 'personhood' or genuine presence in the subsequent conversation about change.

Perhaps the researchers mentioned above observed this softening and enhanced engagement as well, but only referred to it implicitly and between the lines. From a coaching perspective however, we see or hear in recorded session after session, new potential for role clarification emerging in new categories previously not previously described.

Role Clarification seems to do wonders for helping people who are having routine conversations "keep it real". It doesn't seem to matter whether they are two relative strangers or a couple of people that have known each other a long time and are stuck in their habitual pattern of communication. When done with some intention and vigor, Role Clarification helps create a safer space for real co-creating and shared understanding. To the outside observer, there is a palpable moment, after some initial exchanges about each other's roles and expectations, when the individual's personhood begins to emerge in the conversation in funny, warm, awkward ways. And this in turn invites further disclosure and genuineness. Though initially scary, it's a much better way to spend our time than stuck in stale roles, inherited more from custom and culture, than actual human needs.

ABOUT J-SAT

J-SAT, a national consulting company devoted to the successful implementation of evidence Based practices (EBPs) in corrections, has been introducing and reinforcing Role Clarification techniques with its customers for several years. Whether we're training a particular assessment tool (e.g., LSI-R; Risk & Resiliency Check-Up; LS/CMI or YLS/CMI, etc.) providing training and coaching in MI, or working with practice models (STICS; EPICS, ESP, etc.) we review and consistently reinforce the use of Role Clarification.