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Giving and Receiving Feedback

Introduction

A critical aspect of developing your skills as a competent counselor involves learning how to give and receive feedback about what you're doing. You will want to give information to your student colleagues about how they're doing their counseling practicing, and you'll want to hear what they have to say about your developing skills, as well.

The expression, "giving feedback," means telling someone, quite specifically, what you've seen and heard her doing and your ideas about what she's done. This is like any supervisor telling someone about her work performance, and in counseling, supervision should always be available to help us determine what is effective in our work. Generally, the counseling supervisor will help you talk over your work with a specific client, perhaps brainstorming future courses of action and reflecting on those counselor actions that seem to be most helpful in moving things along. In this kind of counseling supervision, the supervisor is not acting in an evaluative role, but rather in a collaborative, mentoring fashion.

For our purposes, you will be primarily concerned with giving and receiving feedback with your student colleagues. You will serve as their counseling supervisor, they as yours. You will want to do this in a way that is mutually helpful and instructive. In order to be most effective, your way of giving information should use language that reflects your ideas in a way that you think the other will be able to receive the information without becoming defensive and guarded. The bottom line is that you want the person to whom you're giving feedback to be able to receive it and integrate it.

There are some general principles that will be helpful for you to know about as you begin to contemplate this whole business of learning how to give effective feedback.

Watch and Listen Carefully

When you are serving in the observer/supervisor role, looking on as your colleagues are working on their counseling skills, watch and listen closely as the counselor interacts with her client. This may seem obvious, but this is a different kind of observing and listening than you may be used to. These are not casual, social conversations. You will want to catch every counselor intervention

(the things the counselor says) and note the impact on her client. Does the interaction following these interventions become more personal and important, or do things shift away in irrelevant or less important directions?

Watch the nonverbal behaviors of both the counselor and client. Is the counselor use of nonverbal behavior promoting intimacy and open communication, or do the nonverbal behaviors—facial expressions, voice tone, eye contact, body posture—suggest inattention and distraction, or guardedness and protection?

Everything the counselor you are observing does and says is important. You will want to take it all in, maybe even making some written notes about what you observe, and then prepare yourself to share what you've seen and heard.

Share What You've Observed: Keep It Short and Simple, and Keep It Behavioral

When a counseling session is over and your observation is complete, you'll want to share what you've seen and heard. You will most likely be really interested in the things the client has been talking about, and you may be tempted to share your perspectives about the issues that have been discussed. While there may be time, at some point, to do that, remember that your primary responsibility in these learning situations is to provide feedback to the counselor about skills development.

Share what you've seen and heard with the counselor, sticking to directly observable behaviors, the actual things that were done or said. Be as concrete as possible. Talk about what you saw and heard, and about your ideas related to the impact those things said and done had on the client. Do what you can to be non-evaluative, nonjudgmental. Try to avoid words like "good" and "bad" when giving feedback, for those imply judgment. Focus on those counselor behaviors, verbal and nonverbal, that seemed to have the most significant impact on the client.

Support, Support, Support

Always bear in mind that your feedback is designed to assist your colleague in doing a better job, to improve her skills. The primary focus of this counseling skills practice is not on resolving client issues, rather on counseling skill development. It is certainly not your job to be critical or punitive. Your feedback will best be heard and truly taken to heart when it is perceived to be coming from a place of positive support. Try to find ways to be encouraging.

People learn best when they feel safe, but when there is an edge of anxiety. The learning situation itself, the observed counseling session, typically carries ample anxiety, so whatever you do to be supportive will help create an optimal learning environment. Your feedback, then, will be given without evaluation. It will simply state the facts, what you saw and heard happening. "When you said this and this," for example, "this is how your client responded."

Sharing Your Thoughts and Feelings About What You've Seen and Heard

It is possible, and sometimes helpful, to add your thoughts – including your feelings – about something the counselor has done. You might share your observations about something the counselor said, and then take a stab at guessing why the counselor said what she did. This should be done tentatively, in a spirit of mutual inquiry. Similarly, you can share your feelings (sad, mad, glad, scared, etc.), as if you had been on the receiving end of what the counselor has done . . . as if you had been the client, in other words.

Supervision and Counseling as Parallel Paths

Much of what you will do in your role as observer/supervisor is exactly like what you will do in your role as counselor. As a counselor, you want your client to feel understood, respected, and valued. This is exactly what you want the counselor to experience when you are supervising her. Empathy is a key ingredient in counseling relationships – so, too, in effective supervisory relationships. The more that you can experience the therapeutic world through your counselor's eyes, the more productive your supervision will be.

Just as the counselor is striving to achieve a working alliance with her client, you are also trying to build a supervisory alliance with your counselor. Where there is trust, when you are experienced as truly being invested in the counselor doing well, good things can happen.

Example: Giving Constructive Feedback

Consider the following situation. Your student colleague is playing the role of a school counselor. She has the following interchange with your student colleague who is in the role of the parent of a high school age boy:

Client: I don't know what to do. My boy wants to drop out of school. He's only 16, and he wants to drop out. His teachers give him a terrible time. Nobody here cuts him any slack. I just don't know what to do.

Counselor: Maybe you could just review with him all the reasons he should stay in school. I know that you know dropping out is a bad idea.

Client: Well, yeah, sure. I know that dropping out is a bad idea. But I don't know how to convince him. He's stubborn.

Counselor: You're his mother. I'm sure he'll listen to you.

Client: Are you kidding?! Do you have any kids?

As a supervisor, how would you give the counselor some feedback about this interchange? Following are three possible alternatives.

Feedback Option #1: "When you told your client that she should just be able to tell her son to stay in school, she seemed to get pretty defensive."

Feedback “Your first comment, about the mom reviewing the reasons
Option #2: her son should stay in school . . . I’m not sure it accurately reflected the gist of what she was saying. It sounded like you had some definite ideas about what she should do.”

Feedback “I heard you trying to be encouraging, giving your client some
Option #3: advice about what to do. I assume you were trying to support her, but I got a little nervous about the possibilities for you getting into a power tussle with her.”

Which of these options seems most appealing to you? Why?

If you don’t care for any of the above feedback messages, what might you say to this counselor? Create your own feedback message here:

Example 2: Giving Constructive Feedback

Here’s another situation. One of your student colleagues is role playing a client who is unhappy with his job. The student who is acting as the counselor is trying to find out more about this unhappiness, and is trying to help his client explore other options.

Client: I never wanted to sell insurance. My father sold insurance his whole life, and he finally just retired. I don’t think he liked what he did either, but he was the one who convinced me all those years ago that it was a good way to make an honest living.

Counselor: So how many years have you been doing this?

Client: 15. 15 long, long years.

Counselor: Yeah, I can tell that you really don’t enjoy this work. And you’re worried about there being another 15.

Client: You bet. I sure don’t want to go through my life just waiting to retire, like my Dad. I can’t imagine anything worse. I mean, I spend most of my waking hours working, and I’d like to spend that time doing something I look forward to. I wake up in the morning now and say, “I can’t believe I have to go that office again.” It’s awful.

Counselor: You’ve seen the future – particularly with your Dad’s situation – and it’s not pretty. You’re really fed up.

Again, as the supervisor, how would you give feedback to the counselor about this interchange? Here are three possible alternatives to consider:

Feedback I noticed that when you asked that first question you got a
Option #1: really clipped, short answer. And then when you reflected more on what this guy said about his work and his job, he really seemed to get into it.

Feedback This last thing you said . . . about seeing the future. You've put
Option #2: your client's unhappiness with his work in a different language, put a new twist on it, and I bet he'll be able to run with this.

Feedback The things you said to your client, the ways you reworded
Option #3: what he'd said, seemed pretty congruent with what he meant . . . at least he responded that way. And you really seemed to be in synch with his frustration, too. If I were your client, I'd really appreciate this.

Which of these options seems most appealing to you? Why?

If you don't care for any of the above feedback messages, what might you say to this counselor? Create your own feedback message here:

Receiving Feedback

Naturally, when you are working as a counselor – either in practice sessions or professionally – you will be receiving feedback from a supervisor. Some of this supervisory feedback may be from peers, some from instructors, some from supervisors on the job. The following guidelines may prove helpful for you in being on the receiving end of feedback, regardless of the work/study situation:

- Paraphrase what was said so that your supervisor knows that you've accurately heard what's been said.
- Try to be non-defensive when receiving feedback. You don't have to necessarily agree with everything that's being given to you, but you can at least sit with it for a while to see how much of what's been observed or suggested might be accurate. Remember, this is simply one other person's perspective on what has transpired.



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- Accept what seems to fit, reject what seems to be off the mark. This will be easier to do the more experience you have, because you'll have a better sense of whether a specific piece of feedback seems congruent with other information you've received.

Watch any one of the counseling sessions on the DVD that accompanies *The Essential Counselor*. Make some notes and think about what kinds of feedback, and questions, you might have for the counselor. Then watch the review/feedback session that follows the counseling session. Then respond to the following:

1. Did the feedback session that you viewed seem to generally hold to the suggestions that have been made in this chapter about giving and receiving constructive feedback? Was it specific, non-evaluative, and supportive?

2. What would you have added – or asked about – if you had been present at this review session?

3. Create one-two pieces of feedback that you might share with the counselor in response to the counseling session that you just watched.

4. Did the counselor in the DVD feedback/review session seem to receive the feedback in a constructive fashion? Discuss.

When you have finished reflecting on these questions, fill out the personal assessment question and comment section that follows. Finally, swap your assessments with a student colleague or give it to your instructor. This other person can add their thoughts to your assessment, and you may be reviewing theirs.

Concluding Personal Assessment: Giving and Receiving Feedback

Name _____

Which of the following statements best reflects how well you think you understand and will be able to accurately utilize these skills? Circle one:

- 1. I believe that I quite thoroughly understand these skills, and I know that I will be able to use them in my work with clients.
- 2. I understand these skills, but am not sure about how well I'll be able to use them in my counseling work.
- 3. I'm still pretty unclear about what these skills are all about, and I'm not sure about how to use them.

Comments:

Concluding Peer and/or Instructor Assessment: Giving and Receiving Feedback

Which of the following statements best reflects how well you think this person understands and will be able to accurately utilize these skills? Circle one:

- 1. I believe that this person clearly understands these skills, and I am confident that he/she will be able to use them in his/her work with clients.
- 2. These skills are understood, but am not sure about how well he/she will be able to use them in his/her counseling work.
- 3. He/she is still pretty unclear about these skills and their use.

Comments:

Reviewer Name _____