First in a Series

Strength-based Practice: The New Paradigm

By Michael D. Clark

Editor's note: *This is the first article on Strength-based Practice. The second article in this series will detail specific methods and techniques for finding strengths among juvenile offenders. It will appear in the June 1997 issue of* Corrections Today.

When someone commits a crime and enters the criminal justice system, two questions beg to be answered: "How did he or she get into the mess?" and "How can he or she get out of it?" More than 100 years ago, psychology decided that the first question was the most important one.

Consequently, much of the history of offender rehabilitation has focused on causation — specifically, finding the underlying cause for an errant behavior and then looking for ways to fix it.

Only recently have a growing number of criminal justice workers begun to focus on the second question, on identifying and encouraging strengths and healthy behaviors. This new movement of strength-based practice requires us to look less at what is wrong with the adolescent and his or her family and more at ways we can exploit their strengths to enable them to eventually exit our juvenile justice system.

Failure and Causation

Problem-focused (problem-solving) models dominate the criminal justice field. Focusing on the problem and trying to fix it has created an industry of causation. This field applies deeper meanings to a problem, such as the role of the past, behavior dynamics and unconscious motivation. Field workers have been told that these deeper meanings are important, and workers who consider them are thought to have an edge. These may be grist for university writers and federal think tanks, but they become obstacles for line workers. Once a case leaves the courtroom and is assigned to line workers for case planning and services, the continuing focus on causation does not serve us well.

A double-cross awaits those who allow themselves to be seduced by deeper meanings. Family therapist David Waters says these constructions encourage the thinking, "I'm this way because of my childhood (my situation, parents, anger, etc.)," which then becomes the real problem. If repeated too many times, these limiting self-conceptions become almost impossible to escape. Problem-solving makes it tougher to introduce realities that are optimistic and allow change.

The double-cross is completed when problem-focused models do not encourage workers to separate the offender from his problems. "He is a thief," is a much different view than, "He steals things." "He is a thief" points to an underlying character flaw, which would require a change in personality to correct. "He steals things" suggests the problem would have a solution if he stopped stealing things, a much more achievable goal for fieldwork.

For a profession that places responsibility for one's actions squarely in the bull's eye, we consistently miss the target. Consider an idea forwarded by child psychologist Donald Jacobs. In the field of sports psychology, when an athlete has performed poorly, little time is spent reviewing the error or fixing blame before corrective work begins. Accountability and responsibility for a negative performance is assumed when the athlete begins to change his performance. However, in the corrections field, the problem-focused model and its emphasis on getting the offender to own up to his past does not hold the offender responsible for change in the future. Too much of our limited time and energy is spent in determining the causal relationship rather than expecting and demanding changes.

Strength-based practice believes the responsibility an offender owes to the victim, the community and even to himself is realized from action and behavior change, not passive admittance.

Early experts on youth problems expressed an optimism that contrasts with contemporary writings, report Larry Brendtro and Arlin Ness, two administrators of juvenile facilities. "These professionals developed interventions based on strength-building rather than flaw-fixing; and they achieved what appear to be remarkable results. . . . These reformers were powerful advocates of positive youth development as the foundation of both prevention and correction. But if these pioneers were on the right track, why didn't their model endure? Perhaps they were too far ahead of their times."

Perhaps there is another plausible explanation for why these models did not endure: There was never an effective extension from philosophy to practice. The philosophical first step is to believe that a juvenile offender has strengths and past successes that can be used to stop delinquent behavior. Just as important is the second step of having practice methods to identify and marshal these strengths for the necessary behavior changes.

Strength-based Practice

Strength-based practice begins with a new way of thinking about offenders and their problems, coupled with techniques borrowed from the brief, solution-focused therapy model that originated in the family therapy field. This combination now offers the "one-two punch" of philosophy and practice methods. Out of the many assumptions that define this approach, there are four that are important to review:

1) A focus on strengths and mental health. The cornerstone of strength-based practice is the belief that all offenders possess talents, abilities, capacities and past successes that can be discovered and marshaled to help them leave our court systems. We must, however, believe that they exist in those with whom we work before they can be found. Our field often suffers because we consider offenders to be "damaged goods" — people with big problems who are different from us. The strength-based approach asks us to set aside the "us versus them" distinction.

Strength-based practice is not a Pollyanna approach of "looking for the good" or believing that things will turn out for the best. It is a sophisticated approach that many believe can move offenders and families to dismissal with greater efficiency than working from their failed side. However, focusing on offender strengths is not the same as ignoring or condoning the problems and the pain. Larceny, child sexual abuse and violence all are very real. Workers who turn to this approach still will evaluate the troubles and disorders of an offender. What we try to keep in mind is a balance.

No one should deny the assessment or diagnosis so much as rebel against how it is supposed to influence or sum up one's life. If our field must assess the damage and apply labels, then workers need to ensure the diagnosis does not become the cornerstone of the offender's identity. To avoid this, workers need to place much greater emphasis on strengths and not allow negative views to be the only views.

2) Offender cooperation is fostered by a consistent emphasis on strengths. There is a payoff for this effort. Cooperation is raised because we consider what offenders can do, not what they can't do; what they have been successful at, not what they've failed at; and what they have, not what they don't have. Nowhere is the increase in cooperation more noticeable than during the interview and assessment. My experience finds that adolescents and family members rarely refuse to answer questions or engage in the process. The inducement stems from the realization by those we work with that we are looking for solutions rather than trying to fix blame. Questions, attending to the positives, are asked with a genuine curiosity. We are met with shoulder shrugs or stony silences when we use questions that adolescents and family members quickly recognize will place blame on them.

3) Offender motivation is fostered by involving the teen and family more in the treatment plan. This important conclusion, reached time and again in motivational research, seems lost in our field. Motivation is directly proportional to how successful a juvenile worker is in giving up the "expert" role. Problem-focused approaches give rise to workers naming the problem and then telling offenders what should be done and how to do it. Motivation is lost right from the start because we often force our ideas on families without consensus. We do not give credence to their understanding and definition of the problem if it differs from ours. In many cases, our delineation of the problem may be correct. This, however, raises a central question regarding change: Do we want to be right or do we want to be successful?

If we cooperate with the offender and family, they are more likely to cooperate with us later. Most juveniles want something, even if it is to be left alone. Although we might hope the goals for behavior change would be established for more appropriate reasons, getting the court off an offender's back is an acceptable point from which a juvenile worker can begin.

A majority of workers begin their careers with a sincere desire to help, and hope to provide services in the most positive manner possible. Few would need to be convinced that incremental steps must be taken before punishment is delivered. However, most professionals work within an established, three-step process. In the hopes of raising motivation, they start with cheerleading, which is best described as one part friendliness and one part enthusiasm. The problem with this effort is that most often, cheerleading is met with passive-aggressive silence, indifference or insolence.

The failure of cheerleading ushers in the next step of control. It is here that our voices and demeanors stiffen as we tell a teen what consequences are looming for further failure to follow our lead. If his or her position doesn't change, we then move to the third and final step — punishment. Many workers will wonder how they got to this point so fast. Few will realize that the quick progression is due to the nature of problem-focused models. Strength-based practice provides us with more strategies to raise motivation and offers more increments before turning to punishment.

This model is not a "cure-all." Even with the advantages of strength-based practice, we will still need the full continuum of sanctions, and some cases will still require out-of-home placements. We must, however, never lose sight of strategies or approaches that raise motivation and lessen the need for these elevated and costly services.

4) The future is far more important than the past ever could be. In problem-focused models, an assessment is a necessary preliminary exercise to understand and diagnose a problem before action can be taken. In strength-based practice, the most important job of an assessment is to motivate the offender and family to do something regarding the problem. The most effective use of time spent with offenders is getting them to talk about the future and what it would be like without the problem. How they foresee a better future has far more utility for change than looking back. If we can help offenders imagine a future without problems, it will be easier for them to view their present difficulties as transitory rather than everlasting predicaments.

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Conclusion

It seems arrogant to place a new approach before committed and capable line workers and make the claim that this approach is the better way. If strength-based practice is an approach that will be effective for your work, it will be self-evident. There is a certain sense of freedom in practicing an approach that is truly better. It can stand alone upon inspection and workers will be drawn to it by an intuitive sense of what will help them in their day-to-day fieldwork. It is encouraging to find that we no longer have to drag offenders through the mud of their own failures to get help. CT

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