

Support Articles

Values: The Foundation of Evaluation

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Introduction

Most people who work in human service programs have a perception, from time to time, that they are not doing as good a job as they should. These reflective moments are the expression of an inner sense of standards that may somehow seem violated by what is being practiced. These intuitions are useful to cultivate because the discord between what is getting done and what "should be" can create the necessary impetus to critically appraise one's work and commitments. Staff and programs that lack this sense of "conscience" may be missing a very important (if not fundamental) aspect of service quality.

In many ways, the detail of human service work leads us to feel the need to evaluate our work. However, if we are really setting out to achieve something worthwhile, it is critical to reflect on the kinds of things that influence our work and how we come to think about it. This article raises a series of issues that should be addressed before service evaluation can begin. All of these issues focus on universal and recurring problems of service quality that are intrinsic to its very nature. They are provided as a means of assisting service providers to develop "generative themes"¹ for purposes of reflection and discussion. Perhaps, more important, they are issues that can push us to not only question what we do but stimulate us to imagine possibilities for service that we have not yet considered.

A. *The Inherent Difficulty In Achieving Quality*

The process of "serving" people well is not a function of a simple adherence to procedures or the use of a technology. On the contrary, it is a task that usually draws heavily on those involved as "servers" to be very present to, and responsive to, the person being served. It involves many elements of one's *total* person, including one's perception, insights, integrity, ability, limitations, character, values, strength, time and energy. Far from being some remote, detached activity in which all choices are objectified, it is a task which intensively engages one's subjectivity. It should not surprise us that human beings find serving others to be very challenging, if not frequently overwhelming.

The very act of trying to "be there" for another person, even in a circumscribed way, is not one that automatically leads to "good" service. For instance, one's ability to be of use will vary extensively in terms of who it is that is being served and the needs in their life that are to be addressed. Even an adequate "server" will have both good and bad days as will the person being served. Second, what "being there" for someone may mean can vary extensively from one server to another as it relates to each's experience, talent, values, perceptions and standards. Thirdly, many "servers" cannot relate equally well to all people and may, in fact, be very poor "servers" of some kinds of people.

Human beings have great difficulty excelling at things on a prolonged basis.² Many never excel nor expect to. Further, the difficulty involved in reaching *challenging goals* acts as its own disincentive to most people in terms of being able to

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push themselves towards their optimal or peak performance. Thus, it can be statistically expected that excellence in service will be extremely rare, whereas conventional or mediocre performance will be common. Put another way, it means that the quality of the majority of services will be rather ordinary, if not problematic, given that excellence is harder to obtain than are weaker efforts.

B. *Services As the Agent of Society and Other Interests*

It is clear that "services" are not merely the personal interactions between the "served" and the "server". Services are greatly influenced by a massive historical process of professions, ideologies, laws agencies, social movements, economies, politics and culture. This "context-of-service" deeply influences what "service" becomes. For instance, in some places, "service" may come to mean a least restrictive and socially integrative "community" service. While somewhere else "service" may mean "institutional living and isolation." In this rather abstract way, "services" are societal in nature and the nature of society will deeply condition the way "service" is expressed and understood.

Perhaps more ominous is the reality that services exist to bring advantages or benefits to many other interests other than those formally designated as the "client". Those involved in the process of providing human services may directly or indirectly gain something from the process. Their interests may in turn compete with other interests, including those of the clients. There are a number of competing interests present in services that involve: funders, politicians, various professionals, all levels of staff, families advocates, government officials, academics, consultants boards of directors, and many others. For instance, the convenience of staff may compete with the need for clients to get intense attention. Further, the need of boards to project a positive image of the agency may contradict the need for exposing those practices that are harmful to clients. Funders often prefer cheap or expedient programs to ones that are costly or difficult to get approved. All these things eventually affect the client and may mean that the client's interests are ignored, overlooked or minimized up against more powerful interests. Thus we have to wonder when we are looking at service quality, if the client's interests are being compromised by other vested interests.³

C *Social Values Are Reflected in Services*

A notable element of societal conditioning is the actual value accorded to the person named as the "client" of the service. Societies regulate who will be valued and who will not. ⁴ Large numbers of groups in society can well attest to their perception of being socially devalued in some way. Often they feel that their worth and dignity are held in low esteem by observing the way they are treated by others. Human service clients typically are drawn from groups struggling for a valued role in their community.

It is very unlikely that human services could somehow stand apart from this process of according high and low value. In fact, it is much more likely that services will mirror broader patterns of social devaluation unless they consciously choose to do otherwise. Even so, it still remains very difficult for services and service providers to actively challenge deepset tendencies in themselves and others to diminish the worth of stigmatized or devalued persons.⁵ Many service providers foster the illusion in themselves that they are somehow above participation in acts which devalue clients. Not surprisingly, other staff clients and independent observers may see things quite differently. Nonetheless, one should properly question whether devaluation exists in each of us irrespective of what we prefer to think of ourselves.

For programs and agencies it means a willingness to see whether we intentionally or unintentionally think less of clients than we do of ourselves or others. It means examining the perhaps hidden ways that we may put people down as simply as

forgetting to ask people what they think or as ugly as doing harmful acts towards clients. In another sense, it may take the form of refusing to help clients in their struggle with society for respect, justice, dignity and worth.

D: *Service As An Activity Done Without Thinking*

It is very difficult for most people to be constantly aware and conscious of what they are doing. More probable is that they will behave unconsciously through a process of "not thinking". "Not thinking" usually means taking certain things for granted or assuming that what one is doing is valid. This process of assumptions enables people to act without questioning the basis of their action. The difficulty arises when what is done is incorrect or somehow damaging to the person being served. One can think incorrectly.⁶ If the basis of how service is provided is governed by negative ideas about the client, then not being aware of the negativity of these ideas will be a problem because it will interfere with recognizing the problem and generating a remedy. Further, it will leave the server blinded to options which may, in fact, be good for both the client and the server. Thus, we all must wonder about the many moments when we are doing things without thinking. In fact, we should always be prepared to have our thinking challenged to be sure we're not off track.

E. *The Uncritical Reliance On Positive and Appealing Goals*

It is very common for service providers to develop various mission statements summarizing a wish list of desired outcomes for clients. These often include attractive phrases such as "achieving maximum potential, independence, dignity, empowerment, growth and development" and many others. These goals usually are attractive to people and are considered worthy enough to use as guiding values.

These kinds of goals, nevertheless, do have a darker side that needs to be reckoned with. Perhaps the most notable is that we can become persuaded that in adopting such lofty goals we have somehow actually lived them. In fact it is possible that we may actually be doing many things that contradict them. Thus' while we may prefer to think that our service exists "only for the people", the true reality may be that, in fact, the service may not be putting the client first on important issues. For this reason it is very important to recognize that stated goals, values and missions must always be contrasted with what is actually lived.

The second danger is the unpreparedness it creates in people to face elements of their own or the agency's character that actually contradict the official view of what they should be. In fact, all people and agencies have within them a wide array of tendencies that must constantly be held in check if the client is to receive priority. To name a few of these universal and ever present tendencies that can often damage the client's interest there are: pride, concern with power, vanity, ambition, territoriality, weak values, self-interest, insensitivity, stupidity, pettiness, etc. While the contemplation of positive goals is often uplifting, it can become self-serving if these goals do not guide in the struggle against the devaluation that the people being served face and the less than pleasant shortcomings of people doing the servicing and their agencies.

F. *The Inevitability of Program Irrelevance*

For any number of reasons, programs or activities may be offered to people that have little relevance to them. It is often true that many people will assume a service must be relevant because it exists, receives funding, is not criticized, has a good reputation or is peopled by pleasant, agreeable staff. Yet, despite all these factors, these services may still do little for those actually served. In fact, many people may be placed in programs that actually are harmful to their needs and interests. Further, even programs that may have some temporary relevance may quickly lose it if the person is not permitted to progress.

Keeping services relevant⁷ to the named client cannot be done unless there is considerable agreement on what the person's most fundamental needs are and what will actually ensure that those needs are addressed. While many assume this process to be easy, even a brief reflection on the imperfect nature of people will lead to the realization that errors, misjudgments, situational constraints, complexity, and other such factors will constantly erode the ability of people to be of service. Further, even when people in service roles accurately perceive people's needs they may still lack the ability or resources to address them adequately. If attitudinally they are uncommitted to pursuing relevant goals that address the client's fundamental needs or are insincere about the rigors of such responsibility, their "potential" ability to be of service may rapidly diminish.

G. *Building Service From and Through the Person Served*

Perhaps one of the most difficult challenges of the process of service is to place the person being served as central. It is very tempting to make people fit expeditiously into programs rather than the reverse of creating the program from and around the person. Additionally, there is the further challenge of enabling the person to identify, shape and control the service they will receive⁸ Both tasks carry with them the hidden responsibility of doing battle with those elements that constrain one's ability to put the person first. These could include limits on time, the needs of other clients, limited agency structures or flexibility, disagreement about goals or priorities, competition for resources, temptations to find easier ways out of things, etc.

Consumer "empowerment" is far easier to achieve as a verbal statement than it is as a practical matter of how services are actually rendered. This is not meant to say that some measure of building services with and around people is not possible even in situations that are unhelpful or hostile. Rather, such goals will always be operationalized by degree through struggle, turmoil, angst and sacrifice. In this sense some calculation needs to be undertaken that recognizes the costs and sacrifices of siding with people who may be poorly placed to influence their own fate. In this way, the lofty goals of "client-centeredness" can be reconciled with the challenging consequences of putting clients first.

H. *The Centrality of Values and Ideology To the Well Being of Those Served - i.e., The Spirit of Service*

It may seem initially to be rather far fetched to emphasize the important role of values. In some ways matters that involve money, control, material activity and technology may seem more tangible to those with a concrete mindset. Nonetheless, what we emphasize in our personal conduct can be traced to those things which we believe to be important. This is true, even if these ultimate conclusions are not expressed explicitly.⁹ It cannot be overemphasized that it is possible to create effects in people's lives that are not good for them because we have started with a wrong view of them and their needs. It is for this reason that we can fail to recognize the loneliness of people and, thereby, devalue the importance of relationship. Alternatively, we can see the abandonment of older people and strive to reverse it through their re-inclusion into everyday life.

In each case, our deeper value premises and ideology will eventually surface in a guiding way in the nature of the choices that are made as to what "service" shall be. If we conclude that juveniles need "discipline" and "swift punishment" to learn respect, we can well foresee the growth of a punitive service practice or model. Similarly, if we recognize that a child needs love and a real home, one will rightly wonder what kind of substitute a residential treatment center will ever be for these needs.

I. *The Clarity of Purpose and Role Vis-a-Vis Those Persons To Be Served*

While the needs of people can often be bewildering in their range and intensity, it is unlikely that any single human being service or program could or should be expected to be able to meet such needs in their entirety. Moreover, few people can focus themselves to do a job if they are unclear as to why they are involved, what's expected of them and what might be a better or worse execution of their role. In this sense, there is the legitimate question of appropriate specialization of one's responsibility. It is not uncommon for people to be confused about their role or even outright wrong about what they are supposed to be doing.

It is important to recognize the distinction that may exist in regards to one's official, legal or stated mission and the relevance of that mission to those who are to be served. We need to recognize that what we are expected to do may not be helpful. Part of the process of clarifying our mission needs to be discerning the ways in which our activities are useful. Not surprisingly, many workers will recognize that their mission, vis-a-vis the client's interests, may contradict what they are expected to do. Put another way, the validity of the service mission can ultimately be evaluated by its relevance to those who are served. Thus, if we see clients not well off in our services, we must ask ourselves if we're doing the job they actually need. Equally if we're not sure what our job is, it's hard to develop a coherent program.

J. The Will To Serve Well

As service providers we may well have many advantages that in theory, position a person or agency to be of service to people, yet fail to do so because one simply does not want it bad enough. Resources, talent, authority and organizational strengths all can lose their potential relevance if sufficient resolve does not exist to enlist these advantages. As invisible as human motivation may be, its absence or its weakness will inevitably result in poor performance. Motivation and resolve are not a "given" that can be assumed to be plentiful, strong and consistent. Equally, it can be considered a maxim that agencies as well as individuals may, in effect, come to a place where they have chosen not to be of much service because their will to serve has weakened or become diluted by other wishes. It is likely that even good people will need to renew their will to do a good job from time to time.

K. The Integrity of the Server As Intrinsic to Good Service

We can do many things well by way of providing a helpful context for service. This could include the adoption of wholesome goals, the extensive involvement of service users in the guiding of service, the acquisition of authority, funds and consensual mandates, etc. Yet we could still find the service that should be rendered is not being done as imagined. Sometimes this can be explained by the lack of character of those providing the service in that they lack the ability or will to authentically adopt positive goals and nurture their fulfillment. Poorly chosen people in key roles may simply corrupt or degrade what would otherwise have been a fruitful service. "Human" service is indeed human and no program can be expected to excel if it does not have the right people for the job.

Conclusion

It is important to think of evaluation as a process whereby we develop in ourselves the ability to be uneasy with the way we do things. In this, it is not meant that evaluation can't be an opportunity to savor one's progress and accomplishments. Rather, it means being able to rise above them to a point of view where one can doubt what one has been involved in with the sincere hope and expectation that there is probably more to consider than we usually do in our day-to-day life. This

can lead us to a kind of critical appreciation of what it takes to really be of service. In this there lies the ever present possibility of being more deeply of service to others.

Examples of Some Questions to Help Think Critically About Services

1. What is difficult for us to consistently do well?
2. Are we avoiding difficult things because they are harder?
3. To what extent do we provide services in a way that benefits others more than the client?
4. What is more important in how we spend our time than the client?
5. Do we have a different or lower standard for how clients should be treated than ourselves?
6. Do we do, say, think or acquiesce to things that stigmatize or devalue the client?
7. Are there things we're assuming about clients or our programs that are simply not true or accurate?
8. Are our service habits simply habits or do they make sense in themselves?
9. Is the program what we wish it to be or is it actually something else?
10. What do we tell ourselves about our service that may cover over Problems?
11. Are there things missing from the client's lives that we do little about?
12. Are we doing things that don't really do much of importance for the client?
13. Is the person served really the reason the program looks the way it does?
14. Is the person served all that influential in what he/she gets?
15. What do we actually believe about people given what we actually do?
16. Is it uplifting to the person to be served by us?
17. Do we have a focus in how we serve people?
18. What would not be appropriate for us to do as our major responsibility?
19. What do we really want (deep down) for our clients and how hard will we work on it?
20. Do we need to be more "charged-up" about something?

21. Do we live up to our principles?
- 22 Do we follow through on what we say we're about?
- 23 Are we afraid to talk about our weaknesses, limitations and shortcomings?
24. Where do we excel and what does this say about who we serve and who we don't?
25. Would I like to be a client of this service?

Notes

1. With issues of high universality, it is very useful to immerse oneself in their depths as a prelude to problem solving. The initial "themes" generate insights and conclusions that often can be quite consciousness raising and even liberating. The term "generative themes" was borrowed from Paulo Friere in his classic "Pedagogy of the Oppressed"
2. In fact, this premise has its parallel in probability distributions. They don't predict in a deterministic way what a single person will do, but they do put in place logical parameters of likelihood given certain assumptions. See Blalock, H.M., *Social Statistics*, Chapter 2-3, McGrawHill, 1 972.
3. This is not an unusual observation, but it is a difficult one to face as it will often reflect badly on the mythologies we cling to about our own virtue. It is much easier to accept if it is recognized that many forces are at work other than merely benign or noble ones.
4. Many observers have commented along these lines. Few have taken this insight to the extent of trying to devise a way to measure social devaluation in human services. The best example of this available at present can be seen in Wolfensberger, W. and Thomas, S., *Program Analysis of Service Systems Implementation of Normalization Goals*, 2nd Edition, NIMR, 1983.
5. The broader context of services is routinely understood by evaluation specialists and researchers to be an influence on programs in the sense that programs all have social context. See Weiss, Carol, *Evaluation Research*, Chapter 5, Prentice Hall, 1972.
6. A small but incisive summary of the fallibility of human observation and thinking serves to give form to a problem that is often grossly underestimated by positivistic social engineers who do not sufficiently allow for human failing. See Babble, Earl. *The Practice of Social Research*, pg 10-16, Wadworth Publishing, 1983.
7. Sometimes the question of relevance is cast as effectiveness or efficiency. This can be problematic because irrelevant programs can be delivered effectively. See Rossi, P., Freeman, H. and Wright, S., *Evaluation - A systematic Approach*, Chapter8, Sage, 1979.
8. From an evaluative point of view, it is often quite possible to include the person or group served in shaping the key questions that guide evaluation, program development and implementation. One whole class of evaluation has evolved to address this issue. It is called "participatory research". See Hull, B., Gillette, A. and Tandon, R., *Creating Knowl-*

edge A Monopoly, International Council for Education, Toronto, 1982. See also, *Citizen Evaluation In Practice*, U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare, Edited by V Bradley, 1984, (DHHS Publications 84-1338).

9. Broader culture and history may be influential to the eventual character not only of the server and their immediate agency, but also the suprasystem that a society creates. A good analysis of the Swedish welfare state can be found in Tragardh, L., "Swedish Model or Swedish Culture", *Critical Review*, Vol. 4, No. 4, Fall 1990.

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