

Learnings on the Run 16: Encouraging Forgiveness and Reconciliation

How can you help folks that are in conflict get beyond blame to reconciliation?¹

The Request. The Manager of an Office of Youth Services asked that we conduct a teambuilding event to create a more cohesive and friendly staff team. The purpose of the office was to support and advocate for youth offenders. The staff were all social workers by training and each had their own case load. There were several internal conflicts among staff, some involved case work load, others involved hard feelings over past interactions.

Larger Context. Program staff were feeling alone, experiencing a lack of support and distrust from their colleagues and leadership especially over the past year as new staff were incorporated from another program. The program was understaffed; the staff were overwhelmed by the case load and they felt unable to care for themselves. The inefficient administrative protocols (e.g., hand-written carbon-paper case notes) and lack of office space added to the feelings. Staff felt blamed by their colleagues for mistakes and issues that surfaced which created even more animosity. There was a general lack of pride in their work, especially given the work load, the multifaceted client issues, outdated administrative procedures.

Consulting Intervention. We were asked to facilitate a series of team sessions to create a positive vision of the future. The staff wanted to offer more comprehensive services, develop a set of principles that would guide more positive staff interactions and agree to professionally problem solve issues with each other on a daily basis.

An initial session was held to help staff rediscovering their passion and create a long term vision of their services. During a second session, staff began to let go of the past in order to create more positive energy for their future.

Since social workers tend to have a Myers-Briggs preference for feelings (1), we used a metaphoric process to help them process their feelings from past reactive interactions (2). They were asked to write about their feelings and issues that may be barriers to moving forward and then share these with a colleague. The questions were: 1. What typically helps you move beyond past feelings? 2. How do they help their clients to do the same? 3. How might their entire professional career help serve as a context for their more immediate past experience?

A three-part metaphoric exercise followed. Each participant copied on a single page of card stock, the phrases or words that represent past issues as well as any feelings attached to them. After each card was shredded into strips, each participant made something with the resulting strips using additional art materials. They eventually shared their creation with the whole group, reporting on any ideas that may have come to mind for reframing the past. Their colleagues reacted to whatever may have “ignited their own curiosity” or helped them see new possibilities as well.

Last Line. Participants, holding on to the past, might be able to move toward positive problem solving if given a chance to acknowledge their feelings and reframe their past experience into less blameful and more forgiving interpretations.

1. Some sources dealing with Forgiveness: Nancy Barger and Linda Kirby (In: *Type and Change*, MBTI Participant's Guide, Consulting Psychologist Press, 1997) talk about how Thinking and Feeling Types process the emotion of loss differently and offer ideas for how to work with each preference; John Kador, *Effective Apology*, 2009; Stewart Levine, *Chapter 18, Getting Current and Complete* In: *Getting to Resolution*, 2009; Douglas Stone et. al. *Difficult Conversations*, 1999; Brene Brown, 2010, http://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_on_vulnerability.html

One succinct forgiveness process is included below.

Forgiveness? She said.

Nothing to it.

Wade through the poison,

Wrestle with your ego,

Let it go.

Nothing to it.

She's such a story-teller.

Donna Bearden, *Mandala Messages*, 2012