Workforce Resilience Enhancement Project

Building Trust Remotely

WREP Quick Tool #2 – Provided by Jessica Jacoby, LCSW

Restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic have moved many workforce development interactions from in-person to virtual platforms. Although the basics and importance of trust remain the same, efforts with which workforce development professionals build trust with their clients require more attention and emphasis when interacting remotely. This article will define trust, the three aspects of the "Working Alliance" as well as the person-centered approach. It will also provide tools to consciously build trust when engaging via video or phone.

Trust is a combination of the client's belief in the workforce development professional's goodwill towards them and confidence in the competence of the professional. The client believes the professional has good intent and will act in their best interest. The client also believes the professional has the skills and abilities to assist them. A trusting relationship is the context in which powerful change processes unfold and, without it, there can be little hope of moving the work forward. When there is trust between the professional and client, the client is willing to take more risks towards their goals.

The "Working Alliance" has three elements - the development of a *positive bond*, agreement on *goals* of the work and agreement on *tasks* of the work. The relationship is strengthened by the joint negotiation of the expectations and ability to execute the work. During the goal discussion, the client begins to see the equal role that they will play in the work and the professional's commitment to helping the client. A positive bond develops as two people strive together towards the same goals. The stronger the alliance, the better the outcomes.

Creating a positive bond, as mentioned above, can be further understood through a *person-centered approach*. The relationship between the workforce development professional and client is the core of the work and the attitudes of the professional towards the client is of central importance. These attitudes are **genuineness, unconditional positive regard and empathic understanding**. Genuineness means that the professional is authentic and reveals some of their own personality, instead of remaining a “blank slate.” When the worker accepts the client for who they are and cares for them no matter their actions, they are demonstrating unconditional positive regard. Lastly, empathy occurs when the professional communicates that they understand what the client is feeling. The worker is warm and understanding. These attitudes, embodied by the workplace development professionals can, and should, underscore all of the trust-building techniques discussed below. Without them, the strategies will be hollow and ineffective.

Communication

How we communicate with others can build trust or break it down. Communication with clients usually comes naturally and without the need to bring it to conscious awareness especially when engaging in the in-person work. **When doing work remotely, however, forms of communication need to be given more attention, effort and emphasis because the ability to observe the client/be observed by the client is limited.** If participating in video meetings with the client, it can be difficult to see the full range of their body language. If participating in phone meetings, body language is completely missing from the interaction. Therefore, effective and empathic forms of verbal communication are crucial to building trust with the client. These types of skills are not necessarily new for you but require review and purposeful implementation when engaging virtually. These may differ based on the mode of meeting (i.e., verbal encouragers are especially important when on the phone). See figure below.

Eye Contact	Verbal Encouragers	Body Language	Interested Silence
• Maintain eye contact	• Mild statements such as:	• Gestures that match content	• Active attentive silence
• Demonstrates interest	• "Uh-huh."	• Avoid:	• Gives client time to think & reflect
• Not a fixed stare	• "Please go on."	• drumming fingers	• Goes at their own pace
• Natural gaze	• "That's interesting."	• crossing arms	• Helps with difficult topics
• Not looking elsewhere	• "Sounds good."	• fidgeting	
	• "Yes, continue."	• checking phone	

*Adapted from Neil Katz and Kevin McNulty

Reflective listening allows the professional to demonstrate they are listening accurately and receiving the messages conveyed by the speaker. This is done by repeating, checking and/or reflecting. These methods support trust-building as the client feels heard and understood. Additionally, the client has the opportunity to correct or confirm what you have heard.

One of the most basic forms of reflective listening is simply repeating what you have heard, word for word. This is most effectively done when repeating short responses or sections of the conversation. If there is confusion around what the client is expressing, you can check whether you understand their meaning by using phrases like, “Are you saying that…?” “May I check to see if I understand what you’re saying?” See explanations and examples below.

Reflecting Content	• Reflecting the thoughts, ideas, beliefs, facts or data in what the speaker is communicating • Example:"So you have attended several interviews which seem to go well but you are not offered the job."
Reflecting Feelings	• Reflecting the emotional state in your own words either stated or strongly implied • Examples: "You feel..." "You're sounding..." "You look..." "It sounds like you were very mad when it happened."
Reflecting Meaning	• Reflecting both the content and the feeling tied together with words like "because or "when" • Examples: "You feel (feeling word) because (content)." "You feel___ about ___." "You feel___ when____." "You feel ___ that ____."

*Adapted from Neil Katz and Kevin McNulty

Development of the Positive Bond

In addition to the skills of active listening described above, there are other methods to build rapport with clients and foster trust in the working relationship.

The first approach is asking clients open-ended questions which generate more detailed responses than closed-ended questions. Can the question you pose be answered with a simple “yes” or “no?” If so, that is a closed-ended question which will limit the response and imply you are not interested in furthering the discussion. It shuts down communication and connection rather than fostering it.

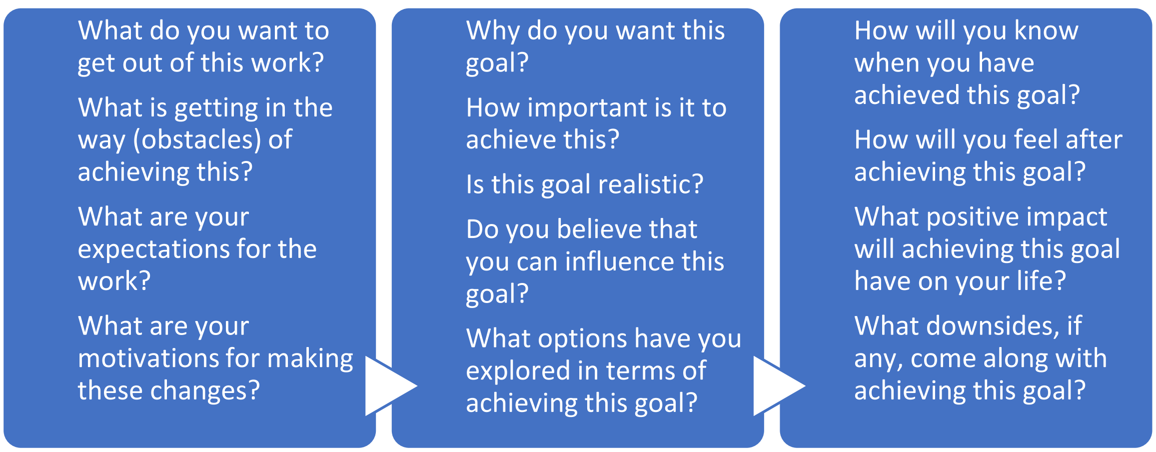
Second, efforts to create a bond should include providing expressions of hope and praise to the client. You can express both a positive expectation of client’s ability to succeed and recognition of the courage and efforts the client has demonstrated thus far. Examples include, “Wow! You really seem to…” “It sounds like ____ is important to you. You are in the right place to work on that.” “We will be able to build on the hard work you’ve done so far.”

Lastly, it can be helpful for the client to connect to you as a person rather than viewing you as the “expert.” Emphasizing that it is a human connection can engender trust with your client. This can be fostered by using humor and some self-disclosure, when appropriate. Laughter can always assist in making the client feel more at ease. Sharing your own feelings or struggles doing work virtually can normalize the hesitation that the clients may have. Prior to engaging in any self-disclosure whether it be feelings you have or information about you, it is important to ask yourself if it is in the client’s best interest to share. If the answer is “yes,” it can be a powerful tool in connecting on a level which humanizes the professional and creates a positive bond.

Agreement on Roles, Expectations, and Goals

Forming a strong “Working Alliance” requires agreement on the goals and tasks of the work to be done together. By reviewing and agreeing upon these aspects of the work, a “team approach” can be developed in which the client sees themselves as an active part in a shared journey.

Creating and agreeing upon goals for the work not only supports the “team approach” but also holds each person in the helping relationship accountable for progress. The discussion on goals is an ideal time to build rapport and trust through attending, reflective listening, and validation. Questions aimed at clarifying goals can begin more general and get more specific as the discussion moves. See the figure below.



*Adapted from Leslie Riopel, MSc.

Summarizing and asking for confirmation on the goals you have heard and agreed upon can ensure that the client feels heard. It is also a chance to clear up any misconceptions on what the work will entail. Consider adding a sense of hope about your client’s ability to achieve these goals within your time together and that they have come to the right place and person to help. At this point, you may wish to answer the question, “How do we work towards these goals? What steps do we take?” What is your approach in moving your client towards their goals? In providing an explanation of this, it allows the client to have a road map of the work ahead and lay the groundwork for trust between the two of you.