



Making a First Impression

Author(s)

*Joshua Barnes, MSW Student
Simmons School of Social Work*

I was eager to make a good first impression at my first-year internship at Year Up in Boston. Year Up is a national program designed to close the “opportunity divide” between available corporate jobs and the five million young adults with only a high school diploma. 18-to-24-year-olds join a one-year training program that offers “hands-on skill development, college credit and corporate internships” (www.yearup.org). Students attend classes and workshops on professional behavior; social workers are available to consult with students during lunch and classroom breaks. Each social work intern is assigned to one floor of the program and works closely with the teacher on that floor.

The social worker, psychologist and three social work interns at the Boston Year Up support students moving towards academic and career success. They interview potential students and assess their strengths and risks. They offer advice when students are at risk of failure because of breaches of professional standards. They link students with a wide variety of resources such as child care, housing, medical insurance, professional clothing, transitional economic assistance and legal counsel. One social worker runs a parenting support group. All of the social workers offer one-to-one counseling for students who are having mental health or substance abuse problems or who are experiencing family difficulties.

There is a definite hierarchy at Year Up; students can be dismissed if they do not follow the program’s clear rules of professional behavior. However, the ethos of the program is collaborative; these are young adults whose talent, persistence and life experience are to be respected. One of the central values of Year Up is “Respect and value others.” This value meshes well with the values of social work, client self-determination and the strengths perspective. Carl Rogers says that a core condition of an effective helping relationship is unconditional positive regard, “warmth, caring, respect and a non-judgmental attitude” (Sommers-Flanagan & Sommers-Flanagan, 2011, p. 117). I kept this in mind as I described my role in my introduction to students:

As you are on this journey at Year Up, think of it as a cart on a track. Now your goal and our goal is to make sure that you are able to stay on that track. Sometimes life gets in the way. We all have some issues in our lives that can pull us a little off-track. We

understand that Year Up consists of only part of your life, and you are juggling many things right now. What I do is to help you juggle those issues while you are here, so you can focus on your studies. I am here if you have any concerns or if you just need to vent, but I am also here to listen to any great news that you have.

I thought long and hard about how to introduce myself. Miley, Melia and DuBois (2011) assert that, if social workers are to collaborate as partners with their clients, the clients should have the opportunity to know them. Sommers-Flanagan and Sommers-Flanagan suggest that congruence, the second core condition named by Rogers requires that social workers “think, feel and behave in a consistent and integrated manner” (2009, p. 114). In regard to self-disclosure, they say, “Perhaps the key point is to maintain balance; the old psychoanalytic model of therapist as a blank screen can foster distrust, reluctance and resistance from clients, while too much self-disclosure distorts and degrades the therapeutic focus” (2009, p. 115).

To introduce myself, I said,

Hello, everyone. I’m Josh, your social work intern. First, I have a map of Latin America. In college, I studied abroad for a year in Chile and Argentina, while also visiting Uruguay, Brazil, and Paraguay. I have a passion for Latin culture and can speak Spanish. If any of you would feel more comfortable speaking Spanish with me, please do so. Next, you can see the Baltimore Ravens logo. I am originally from Baltimore, and have only lived in Boston for the past month. Then, there is a picture of what I look like when I get in the pool. In high school and college, I swam and played water polo. And finally, I have a picture of Tom Welling because my friends say that he is my celebrity look-alike.

I hoped to give a message of congruence: “What you see is what you get.” I emphasized experiences and values that I shared with many students, like a love of sports and celebrities, and a passion for Latin culture and language. At the same time, I put myself in the “non-expert position” of a stranger to Boston, so that they could guide me.

It turned out that my introduction was successful. One of my field instructors said to all the interns, “Students are open to Josh on the fourth floor because of the introduction he did at orientation. Josh did a good job with that.” Although Kadushin (1998) states that first impressions are long-lasting, Miley, Melia and DuBois remind us that “the first few minutes [do] not complete the work of building the relationship” (2011, p. 134). The rest of this year has been devoted to my efforts to develop Rogers’ core condition of accurate empathy, which “requires intent, effort, a sustained intellectual and emotional understanding of the other person and his/her situation, and verbal and nonverbal skills to enable the communication of empathic understanding back to the client” (Som-

mers-Flanagan & Sommers-Flanagan, 2009, p. 119.) I believe that my introductions influenced the effective therapeutic relationships that I would later develop with many students at Year Up.

References

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