

Consulting Skills for *Preventionists*

By Carol Johnstone

One of the major challenges that substance abuse prevention providers face is helping communities build their capacity to do more prevention. Community capacity building is defined in the Strategic Prevention Framework for Illinois as the ability to mobilize and/or build a community's ability to assess, plan, implement and evaluate successful substance abuse prevention efforts. It also involves identifying and preparing stakeholders and champions to develop strategic plans for prevention and implementation of evidence-based prevention.

Consulting skills can help you direct service providers in expanding their efforts to build community capacity in the prevention of substance abuse. As a prevention consultant to a group, school or service provider, you can focus the majority of your efforts on developing relationships, providing technical assistance and acting as an advocate for best practices in alcohol, tobacco and other drug (ATOD) prevention.

- The requester has the ability to analyze and solve problems. The consultant's role is to assist the requester in solving problems.
- Problem-solving requires valid data.
- Effective implementation of programs and projects requires commitment on the part of the requester.
- Working collaboratively between consultant and requester reaps the most benefits for both.

There are three major goals for each consulting experience.

Goal #1: Work in Partnership With the Requester

By demonstrating collaboration through words and actions, the consultant sends a powerful message to the requester. Seeing this collaboration demonstrated may make it easier for the requester to adopt a collaborative approach with others.

When consultant and requester work in partnership, expectations of each other and the consultation will be clearer. The resources available to both parties can be maximized.

Goal #2: Develop Requester Commitment for the Work

The requester of the work is often the person responsible for implementation. The requester determines if the organization will take and follow through with the consultant's advice. Given this situation, the consultant needs to consciously work to develop the requester's commitment. Completing each of the five phases of the consulting process increases the possibility of developing the requester's commitment.

Consulting is a process or event where one person tries to influence others and move them in a direction without having direct power to make changes or implement programs. Every time you give advice to someone else who is in a position to make a choice, you are consulting.

Peter Block in *Flawless Consulting*

CONSULTING ASSUMPTIONS AND GOALS

In a collaborative consulting relationship, the consultant and requester combine their respective knowledge and jointly determine the need or problem, what will be done, how and when. The following assumptions underlie the collaborative consulting approach:



Goal #3: Transfer the Ability to Address Needs and Solve Problems to the Requester

Consultants often talk about successful efforts resulting in working themselves out of a job. Clearly there is much work to be done in ATOD prevention. When prevention specialists focus on empowering others, the work of prevention is further spread across organizations and people.

CONSULTING AID: ENTRY QUESTIONS

Asking questions allows consultants to begin to find out more about the request. When possible, it is always preferable to meet in person to begin the process of assessing the need for service. Encourage the requester to arrange a meeting as a follow-up to a phone conversation. Typical questions to ask are:

1. What objectives or outcomes do you want to achieve?
2. Why are you requesting this now?
3. What is the history of this effort?
4. How is this request connected to your overall prevention plan or effort?
5. Who else should be involved on determining the need?
6. Does your organization support this effort?
7. What is the timeline?
8. How will decisions be made?
9. How will you measure your success?
10. How will you measure my success?

MANAGING RESISTANCE

Despite your best efforts, it is likely that you will encounter some resistance either to the feedback or recommendations provided. Resistance is a natural and predictable emotional reaction to:

- Making a difficult choice.
- Taking an unpopular action.
- Confronting some reality they have been trying to avoid.
- Feeling their own inadequacy to solve a problem.
- Losing control, being vulnerable or getting hurt.

How do you know when a requester is being resistant? One way to recognize resistance is when you hear yourself explaining something for the third time.

Sometimes Requesters Say... When They Really Mean...

• I don't understand it.	• I don't like it or I don't agree.
• I'll get back to you.	• I don't want to do it.
• Let's get more information.	
• Let me talk it over with my staff, team, committee.	
• Nothing	• I don't understand.
• Why don't you think it over and get back to me?	• Do as I say.

View resistance as a sign that you are on target. Don't take the response you are getting personally. Don't play therapist and interpret the resistance. Let the requester have as much control over the procedure as possible. Minimize elaborating or explaining. Show confidence. Make simple, direct statements and avoid extensive details.

As you work to sustain prevention efforts and build capacity within your communities, consulting can provide you with an additional tool to advance your prevention goals.

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