



Relationships Matter

Stop a moment to consider: You have succeeded well enough that you want to “give back” – to share some of your resources with others less fortunate.

Before you stop to lend a hand, or stroke a check, think for a moment: Why have you succeeded? Why are you in a position to give back? What about your background or circumstances prepared you for life and perhaps supported you when things were not going so well?

If you reflect on it momentarily we think the answer will be clear: one or more people were committed to you, loved you unconditionally but yet insisted that you take responsibility for yourself, guided and supported you, taught you right from wrong, imbued you with constructive values and positive attitudes, challenged you to raise your expectations, taught you essential life skills. Without such a person you would have been lost, disoriented, ineffective...and unable to see any way to build a positive, meaningful life for yourself.

Research has shown that the many if not most people who fail to build constructive lives – or as children have few prospects for doing so – have not had such people to love, guide, challenge, support, and instruct them. They come from conditions of wrenching poverty; inferior schools that had no commitment to them and taught them little; neighborhoods where peers who look successful often are in gangs or involved in criminal behavior and where the traditional signposts of success (strong grades, excellent school attendance) are often ridiculed; single parent families with teenaged, overwhelmed mothers; foster care systems where they get shuttled from one placement to the next; stays in institutions where violence and abuse are endemic. At best they are numbed and forsaken...at worst traumatized and themselves potential predators.

And so they need social services to help them overcome these circumstances and to invest constructively in themselves – to acquire the values, attitudes, skills and capabilities they need to build the kind of fulfilling, self-sustaining lives most of us take for granted.

Most social service agencies find that simply providing remedial classes, workshops, trainings, counseling sessions, and referrals for medical and other debilitating conditions (such as homelessness, mental health issues, or substance abuse) are not enough. The people we are discussing rarely are able to organize or motivate themselves sufficiently to make use of services that are offered to them in an uncoordinated, grab-bag way. And so case-management, often practiced by para-professionals with little to no clinical training, is viewed as the key to successful service delivery. The vast majority of human service organizations providing service to disadvantaged populations have some kind of formal or informal case-management component.

The problem is that, for the most part, case management is defined in terms of a service coordination role rather than what these people need more fundamentally. Often, the “case-manager” is the person



designated to document the various services received and current status of participants at various intervals with little of the necessary engagement to spark real change in those being served. It takes corrective emotional experiences for disadvantaged populations to begin the internal transformation that is a precursor to long term, sustainable change. I must begin to trust human relationships and the power of accepting necessary help before I can begin to see a different future for myself. They need a person who assumes responsibility for helping, an “agent of change,” who makes a long-term commitment to do so, is a reliable guide, non-judgmental, caring and competent, yet with high expectations and the commitment to be constructively critical. The same kind of person that comes to mind as we reflect upon our own success. A case manager who understands that people will fail repeatedly yet will not abandon them, who is there time and again to offer a helping hand.

And so, the most important instrument of effectiveness in the hands of case-managers is their ability to build multi-layered, transformational relationships with those whom they serve. We have found that human service organizations that openly acknowledge that this relationship is the real “engine” that drives their programming and outcomes achieved for participants have generally become more skilled at this work. Furthermore, where a system is in place to measure the quality of that relationship building work, and management protocols exist to evaluate case-managers and their overall effectiveness in this key area, the results on participant outcome achievement are dramatic.

Almost anybody can be helped to improve his or her life...and this approach to case management works with people who are, in the jargon of social services, the most “at-risk” or “hard to serve.” And as is demonstrated in the growing body of case management outcome data, case managers who work in this way generally have the best results.

The Superstar Foundation is devoted to identifying, rewarding, and promoting the work of case managers across the country that intentionally build transformational relationships with their clients and thereby help them succeed. We do this out of a conviction that such case management is the most humane and effective way for helping people who have had the cards stacked against them become responsible, self-respecting, and constructive adults. Our society needs this. Desperately.

We hope we can count on your support.