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That's Just Plain Silly! Channeling Outrage to Champion Change

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Have you ever heard a client story, or bumped up against a policy, that was so far beyond unreasonable it was just plain silly? Most counselors and career practitioners have. The focus of this article is to equip you to do something constructive with your frustration or outrage – to harness those emotions to fuel advocacy efforts that could result in meaningful change.

Career counselors, counselor-educators, and corporate consultants hear lots of stories. Clients tell of bullying or harassment at work or unfathomable delays in processing insurance claims. Students share their frustrations about policies which seem to make no sense; corporate managers tell of brilliant plans which were vetoed by the executive team or union. The common theme is lost hope – those telling the stories feel powerless to effect change and concerned listeners risk becoming overwhelmed. Burnout and compassion fatigue impact many helping professionals (Marcus & Dubi, 2006). It makes sense, then, that redirecting frustration and despair to fuel advocacy and empowerment would benefit helpers as well as their clients.

Advocacy Survey

In the spring of 2008, Life Strategies Ltd. surveyed members of a career practitioner's listserv in Western Canada. Respondents (n = 37) reported more than 10 different job titles, confirming the diversity within the career development sector; titles included case manager, manager, director, program coordinator, counselor, coach, facilitator, consultant, advisor, job developer, program assistant, and team leader. Yet, despite such a range of job titles, 86% of respondents considered advocacy to fit within their role and responsibilities. It was interesting, however, to find that significantly fewer respondents (68%) were actually taking action (i.e., advocating on behalf of their clients). Of those actively engaged in advocacy, more than 70% reported doing so at least once per week, half of these almost daily. Three respondents gave permission for their names to be attached to their contributions; the others' requests for anonymity have been honored, with appreciation for the candor with which they've responded.

Participants were asked for their rationale for considering advocacy as part of their jobs. Their responses clustered within four themes: linking clients to community resources, liaising with employers and the community to maximize chances for client success, informing clients of their rights and helping to correct injustices, and supporting clients to navigate political and bureaucratic obstacles.

Case Examples

Survey respondents provided case examples within each of these general themes. Excerpts from their examples are provided here to illustrate the kinds of advocacy activities that these career practitioners are engaging in.

Community Resources

One respondent reported successfully securing funds for clinical counseling services for at-risk youth. Others described making phone calls on behalf of clients to help clients connect with community services. Some practitioners actually set up appointments and accompanied their clients to those appointments, ensuring that a solid connection with supplementary resources was established. One respondent report, "When working as a career development practitioner, it is my role to advocate for people I am supporting to ensure equitable access to services that are available to the general population."

Liaison

Examples included both client-oriented advocacy (e.g., "building rapport with a landlord to have client get off the street into new digs") and workplace focused efforts (e.g., one respondent arranged a "change of team meeting schedule to include all staff"). Others leveraged their relationships with employers within the community to help clients "reach their greatest potential." Some respondents identified specific client groups (e.g., persons with disabilities) as most in need of advocacy through community connections. Karen McDiarmid, president of the BC Career Management Association (CMA), wrote, "I join consortiums with similar visions to mine that advocate for the client. Right now I am involved with several groups. I advocate by myself, when I can, to those individuals who have influence."

Client Rights

Several respondents shared examples of clients who were unaware of their rights. Advocacy examples included a client who had been denied employment insurance (EI); the career practitioner "listened to the case and informed the client of his right to appeal the decision." Another reported researching services for a client and "negotiating client's eligibility" for them. One respondent wrote, "I supported a client's claim to the human rights tribunal re: work-related violation of his human rights. Because the government has withdrawn much of the staff from this area, and the difficulties that set before my client, he abandoned his complaint. I was not pleased with the official result. However, I

did manage to get the employer blacklisted with our employment agency and he can no longer advertise for employees through us."

Navigating Bureaucracy

Many of the examples linked to this theme. In some cases. respondents' advocacy efforts resulted in simplifying a complex process (e.g., arranging for a single case manager for all members of a family). One respondent reported working with clients who were "unable to understand the representatives that they spoke with, regarding [a specific source of funding for training] application; [the respondent] met with the representatives to discuss the perception of clients and ask that they approach with kindness and understand that clients feel intimidated by government." Sometimes, however, advocacy efforts take too long to be helpful to the clients in need; one respondent shared a story of advocating on behalf of a client with disabilities "who was dying of esophageal cancer, to get nutritional supplement funds to allow her to buy the liquid supplement she required to stay alive." The respondent shared, "We got it approved! She died two weeks later… malnourished, dehydrated, confused, just before she finally got the funds [released]… The issue came from form confusion (which one?), form mishandling – lost pieces of the application by the Ministry, ineffective doctor notes at first until we were very clear with him that he had to put imminent danger to life on the notes. He was very angry about the denial of his patient."

Most respondents, however, seemed pleased with the outcomes they achieved. One stated, "I recall feeling satisfied that I had advocated for the client in an ethical manner and helped him learn more about how to advocate for himself in a similar situation."

Burning Issues

Respondents identified several burning issues that compelled them to advocate. These issues also clustered into four general themes, listed in order of the number of times a theme surfaced: policy, special populations (i.e., persons with disabilities, individuals who don't fit in, youth, and pregnant women/new mothers), basic survival needs (e.g., addiction treatment, homelessness, and affordable housing), and developing transferable skills (e.g., employability and essential skills training). Given that policy ranked among the highest burning issues, however, it is interesting to note that almost 1/3 of respondents were not aware of current, recent, or upcoming shifts in policy or conditions that might impact their clients. This is a significant acknowledgement given that two very major policy shifts had recently been announced (e.g., full devolution of federal funding to be managed at a provincial level and a large new funding source for persons with disabilities).

Sheila Simard, Education Consultant, responded that her burning issue is "the advancement of transferable skills training." She wrote, "I have seen the evidence of people doing well in entry level positions in the workforce when they have these skills in place through awareness, training, and practice. It has been my vision for 15 years that all Canadians will use their transferable skills to better enhance their participation in the

workforce. Fifteen years ago I heard employers say, 'Give me someone with a positive attitude to learning and I can teach them what they need to know,' and they are still saying the same thing today."

For Darlene Foster, Youth Employment Programs Coordinator, her burning issue is that "youth that do not 'fit' need to be given some credibility as they could become contributing members of society… Low self esteem is a major contributor to substance abuse, eating disorders, mental health issues, and criminal involvement." Others also reported burning issues related to "troubled teens" and other disadvantaged clients (e.g., people with disabilities).

Ethical Concerns

Many career practitioners who feel called to advocacy are concerned about the ethical implications of sharing their clients' stories. This concern was examined in a feature article for *Career Convergence* (Neault, 2008), guided by the National Career Development Association's (NCDA) Code of Ethics. Key issues include supporting clients' own advocacy efforts, gaining informed consent, preserving confidentiality, using case examples in training and education, consulting with others, and even the self-care of career practitioners – "silencing our emotional responses to clients' stories can lead to burnout; using them to fuel advocacy efforts provides a healthy outlet and has the potential to make the world a better place" (p. 1).

In the survey, respondents were asked about their ethical concerns as related to advocacy. Once again, responses could be clustered into four major themes: individual vs. societal rights; bias, favoritism, and emotional involvement; policy and loyalty (e.g., to funder or employer), and futility (i.e., a fear of setting clients up for failure).

One of the major concerns identified is foundational to ethical discussions – should the good of an individual or the good of society be privileged in arriving at an ethical decision? Specific examples included how to support "a client with a criminal record for violence who wanted to work in a setting that could trigger additional violence. He was a client that had very deep-seated rage around religion and churches, however wanted to go to a faith-based nonprofit organization to work." Other examples involved funding (e.g., "the strength of my advocacy must be diluted to preserve future funding"). Karen McDiarmid, president of CMA but also working as a consultant, reported the challenge of learning, in confidence from an influential bureaucrat, that a particular service strategy was "not on their radar" – this change in policy would make a significant difference to one of her clients but she was unable to reveal the confidential information she had acquired.

Risks

Respondents identified several risks associated with advocacy: conflict; disempowerment, danger, and misinformation.

Conflict

The respondents' primary concern was conflict; several worried that they could become a "thorn in the side" of government or they might "ruffle others' feathers" within their organizations. One was concerned about a "backlash," either personally or against his/her agency for speaking up. One worried that advocacy might "draw unwanted attention" or "incur negative actions from interested parties." Someone else wondered if advocacy might be perceived as "biting the hand that feeds us" (i.e., government, competing agendas). The language used in many of these quotes is very colloquial – it may be symptomatic of widespread coffee-room conversations about the risks of advocacy. There was a different level of emotion apparent in the risks section of the survey than in response to other questions.

Disempowerment

Another commonly expressed concern was that advocacy efforts had the potential to take control or power away from clients. One respondent mentioned the importance of informed consent and reflected on how easy it would be to cross the line by advocating for a client without his or her knowledge or permission. Another cautioned that the advocate's own agenda or biases mustn't be imposed on the client (e.g., limiting presentation of information or choices). A few used terms including "enabling" or "not becoming self-empowered" to describe potential risks – one pondered, "Is it really for the good of the client?" highlighting the risk of the advocate's agenda taking precedence.

Danger

Several respondents recognized that advocacy efforts had the potential to be personally or professionally dangerous. Some concerns were for physical safety (e.g., if clients became overly frustrated with the process and held the advocate accountable). One respondent worried about "los[ing] face with the authority figures if the client doesn't follow through with the plan of action." Another responded, "Sometimes [there's] a feeling of 'What's the use?' since there seem to be so many roadblocks at times – mostly to do with the systems themselves but sometimes to do with the client's fears and previous experiences as well."

Misinformation

Finally, several respondents identified the risk of ill-informed advocacy (i.e., jumping to conclusions). Concerns included "advocat[ing] for the wrong person in the wrong place and not knowing until it's too late," "not being informed enough to appropriately advocate for a certain change and consequently not creating the intended outcome," and "not knowing all the facts or making an error in judgment."

Benefits

Despite the risks, however, over 85% of respondents recognized that advocacy was an important part of their jobs and over two thirds were actively engaged in it. The benefits identified through the survey clustered into four categories: opening doors,

navigating through "red tape," sparking personal growth in clients, and creating change. Examples of each of these are profiled in the following sections.

Opening Doors

Several respondents mentioned that many of their clients wouldn't get the services they needed without advocacy support; they liked the sense of "making a difference to people." One respondent wrote, "the benefits are [that] the clients you are working with may be able to secure something (a job, funding for training, etc.) that they otherwise may not."

Navigating Through Red Tape

Navigating through red tape, bureaucracy, and complex systems surfaced as an important benefit of advocacy. One respondent wrote, "The benefits are that I feel that I have helped someone navigate through the red tape of bureaucracy. It is, after all, an especially difficult task for new immigrants for whom English is a second language and also for whom government, in their countries of origin, is an authority that should not be challenged." Other respondents described the contribution of advocacy to preserving clients' rights.

Sparking Personal Growth in Clients

Advocacy was also described as contributing to clients' personal growth. Several mentioned how advocates can also serve as role models, teaching clients how to advocate for themselves and more successfully get their needs met in the future.

Creating Change

A final theme was how advocacy can be a "powerful way to initiate change." One respondent mentioned that advocacy creates "organizational, societal change that benefits those who cannot represent themselves. Another focused on the transfer of knowledge to policy developers – shaping policy through advocacy efforts.

Strategies

Survey respondents reported several advocacy strategies, relevant at various stages of the counseling process. It was clear from many of the responses that building solid relationships is important – with clients, colleagues, managers, community service providers, employers, and funders. For example, several respondents mentioned the importance of just picking up the phone on behalf of clients – cold calls become warm calls because of the advocate's relationships.

Research was another important advocacy strategy – helping clients to gather relevant information about availability of community services, eligibility for services or resources, and application and appeal procedures. These strategies suggest that many advocates go beyond finding information; they may also play a role in interpreting that information (e.g., explaining complex government forms or procedures).

Several respondents identified taking action on behalf of clients (e.g., making phone calls, writing letters, completing forms, support in negotiating complex systems, setting up appointments, and, in some cases, attending those appointments.

Another important advocacy strategy involved transfer of knowledge; many respondents saw their role as helping clients learn to help themselves. This knowledge transfer was facilitated in a variety of ways (e.g., helping clients to develop and rehearse scripts for challenging conversations, providing information, explaining complex government systems and appeal processes, developing cultural competency, modeling advocacy skills, and providing information and education to facilitate enhanced community awareness of issues requiring advocacy. In one case, a respondent reported, "I recall feeling satisfied that I had advocated for the client in an ethical manner and helped him learn more about how to advocate for himself in a similar situation." Another respondent noted the importance of follow-up, to ensure that the process initiated by the advocate achieved the intended results.

Conclusion

Although this was a small, relatively informal, survey, respondents provided a compelling rationale for the importance of advocacy to career practitioners, revealed rich descriptions of the burning issues that inspire advocacy initiatives, reflected on the risks and benefits of advocacy, and offered practical strategies for ensuring advocacy is focused and effective. The respondents provided important insights about the ethics of advocacy. As Sheila Simard, one of the survey respondents, summarized,

> If you have your homework done and your stats and facts to support your position on behalf of the population you are advocating for, and you find the decision maker(s) who are ready for implementing the change, you have a stronger chance for success. Sometimes it's all about readiness and the right time for something to happen.

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