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# INSIGHTS

Offender Preparation & Education Network, Inc.

## Why Bother? Suggestions For Community Supervision Officers and Counselors

Linda Ingraham, Ph.D.

Why bother indeed! You may have had high ideals when you began working with offenders, but now...

Today was like most work days – just another ordeal to get through: Mr. A. cancelled because he had to attend his fourth grandmother's funeral. Ms. B. turned up for her appointment with a screaming baby because, once again, she couldn't find a babysitter. Mr. C's car wouldn't start. (Or this time, was it that his ride didn't show up?) Mr. D. didn't pay his fees. The excuses are endless. After awhile, you may even find yourself believing that offenders who come on time, are polite and seem to be doing well, are scamming you.

"Why bother?" is a theme that runs through many of OPEN, Inc.'s self-help

books for offenders. It's also an important question for those who work with this difficult population. The answer is that when you bother, work will be far less stressful, and you might actually make a positive difference in an offender's life. But "bothering" about your work with offenders is a tricky balancing act. You need to care enough to help people integrate successfully into the community, while recognizing that ultimately, their success or failure depends on them. Neither outcome should be taken personally.

So how can you keep a balanced perspective in a day filled with excuses, failed drug screens, missed appointments, rudeness and new arrests? Allow me to share a few ideas that are based on my experience in dealing with offenders over the past twenty years.

**First, keep your life in some sort of balance.** Make sure you take care of yourself and have interests (other than "vegging") outside of the office. In addition to work, personal errands, chores and sleep time, make time to play. Learn to make a successful transition from your workday to your personal time. If you need to vent to someone, keep it short and announce beforehand what you intend to do. (Venting is just that – it requires no feedback or suggestions from the listener.)

**My second suggestion is that you examine your beliefs about your role and about your probationers.** Whatever role you play in the criminal justice system, it's important that you remain objective. Are you biased toward any type of offender, such as the sex offender, drug dealer or drunk

driver? Do you have any racial, cultural, ethnic or language biases? Are you resentful of the wealthy offender or put off by the person who doesn't work? Be honest with yourself. Some biases may be so strong that you can't be objective, and you will need to avoid working with that particular group or person.

(continued on page 2)

## Now Available! WHY BOTHER?

Finding the Will to Carry On...

An OPEN Information Series Motivational Presentation  
See Order Form (page 4) for additional details.

**Next, understand your role.** The people you see have been granted probation or parole. The Court or Parole Board has already determined that they should have another chance. Your role is to supervise or counsel these people, whether you agree or disagree with the sentence. You are not there to further punish these individuals. When you're frustrated or stressed, you may tend to "set up" a person for failure. For example, you might set appointment times as inconveniently as possible and in such a way that the person must choose between his appointment and his job. Then when he's fired, you're on him for not working. (Clearly, some jobs are inappropriate for some offenders, and those people must find other employment.) Some officers and counselors threaten to have an offender arrested. You can't do this unless you do double duty as a judge.

**Know your responsibilities.** Whether you're monitoring an offender in the field or office, guiding him or her through a sex-offender treatment program, or fulfilling some other role, you are responsible for objectively documenting compliance and progress. It's the offender's responsibility to meet his or her obligations. You can be most effective – and the offender can be more compliant

– when you remind the person of the requirements, try to keep a consistent schedule, and give the probationer choices when possible. For example, you could let the offender select from available appointment times and try to see that person at the same time and on the same day. Remind him or her if there's a schedule change or when several appointments must be scheduled and kept.

**Look at your attitude.** Do you measure your success by how many files you send to the Court for review and possible revocation? One officer bragged to a probationer that 95 percent of those he supervised were sent to prison! In my opinion, this is an unsuccessful officer. Never mind the fact that negative psychology is ineffective with this population. You're dealing with people who already feel hopeless when they first meet you. If you're negative about their chances, they'll just give up. Try measuring your accomplishments by the number of individuals who successfully complete their requirements.

**Examine your interactions.** You are dealing with people. They're not meant to be your friends – or your enemies. It's just as easy to be civil as not. One probationer politely asked his officer, "How's it going?" He was stunned by the lecture he received informing him that it was none of his business and that he should never ask personal questions or make personal comments. I guess this officer would be offended by being wished a good day. Certainly, you shouldn't tolerate questions about your finances or personal relationships, for example. However, a common greeting (e.g., "Hi. How are you?"), brief comments about the weather, commiseration about allergies, etc. are similar to the verbal interactions you'd have with a stranger on an elevator. They're nothing more than acknowledgements of

the presence of another human being. Modeling appropriate social behavior makes it more likely that the offender will respond in kind (and a better time will be had by all).

**Be realistic.** Meeting with you in your professional capacity is not on most offenders' top-ten list of fun things to do. They come in feeling defensive, afraid, resentful, embarrassed, powerless, confused, or anxious. They may show any or all of these emotions, plus several more not listed. Some have never had to keep a schedule before; they need help with organization and time-management skills. Others are ready to debate the merits of their case – don't do it. Still others want to play games and test you to see how much they can get away with – don't play. Many will take out their frustrations with the system on you – don't allow it. Some seek your reassurance – don't promise anything more than fairly performing your job.

**Set expectations from the beginning.** If you had to meet certain requirements in order to succeed at your job, but were never told what those requirements were, do you think you'd be very successful? Probably not. Likewise, offenders can't succeed unless they know what

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*If you had to meet certain requirements in order to succeed at your job, but were never told what those requirements were, do you think you'd be very successful?*

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is expected of them.

1. Review the conditions of their supervision (or counseling sessions) and ask offenders to paraphrase them. Have offenders read aloud if there is any doubt about their ability to read or comprehend the requirements.
2. Provide an explanation of your role in the system, including what you can and cannot do. Mention that you're going to keep an objective record of your contacts with them. If your position requires that you ask a specific set of questions each week, explain this.
3. Reassure offenders that the requirements are not difficult as long as they're taken seriously. Find out if any of the requirements will be difficult or impossible for the client to meet. For example, an illiterate person is unlikely to complete a GED in the first six months of probation, and depending on the reason for the problem, compliance may be impossible. At the same time, explain that community supervision can be very difficult if the offender has unilaterally determined that certain conditions just don't apply to him or her and therefore can be ignored.
4. Provide a list of your expectations, such as timeliness, common courtesy and civility, basic hygiene, payment of fees, general rules of conduct, etc. Explain how offenders should handle an emergency, including a discussion of what constitutes an emergency and any documentation required. Remember to use common sense. For example, don't require a doctor's excuse when it's obvious the person has a bad cold (unless you really want him or her to come in and "share").
5. Let the offender know the consequences of not following

the rules and not meeting the conditions passed down by the Court. If you're going to report a treatment failure or send a file to the Court for review, explain this to the offender. If he says he'll be hiring an attorney, realize this is his right and don't take it personally. If possible, let offenders know when they're getting into trouble, so they have the opportunity to correct their behavior. Don't threaten anything you're not prepared to follow through with.

**Keep up your part of the bargain.** One officer gave an offender the option of a 7:00 a.m. appointment. She usually waltzed by the waiting probationer about 7:05 and could be heard socializing with co-workers until 7:30 or so. Treat offenders as you wish to be treated. You can still be firm, and you can apologize for an occasional lapse without lessening your authority.

**Be fair and objective.** You are no better than anyone else at knowing when a person is lying. (Sorry, but this is what the research shows – even when a person receives training in detecting deception.) Document only what happens. For example, record that Mr. A failed his polygraph, not that Mr. A is lying. Document that Ms. B didn't show for her appointment, rather than Ms. B is probably using drugs and was afraid she'd be tested.

**Be helpful when appropriate.** Keep a list of common community-resource numbers, such as job-training programs, literacy classes, GED programs, AA/NA, support groups, etc. It's the offender's responsibility to set up any appointments, but you can provide a starting point.

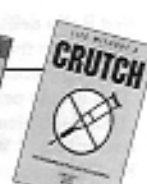
The above suggestions are based on my own experiences dealing with a criminal population. I'm fortunate in that I've been able to balance my work with this population with work with other populations and a variety of activities in my professional practice. I realize that some of you don't have that luxury, either by the nature of your job or specialty area. I commend you for your work and encourage you to please "bother."

*Dr. Ingraham has a private forensic psychological practice (with some teaching, writing and clinical work) and is the author of the Life Without a Crutch book and training program and the 99 Days training program published by OPEN. She is available to train individuals who work with the offender population. E-mail: [lmiforpsych@msn.com](mailto:lmiforpsych@msn.com). Phone: 214-219-1031.*



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