

Eight Factors Influencing “Life Skills” Program Success for Incarcerated Men and Women

I. Holistic approach to program design

- A. It's critically important to give attention to both the characteristics of offenders and the re-entry destination; most only focus on the offender (Kubrin & Stewart, 2006): offenders returning to disadvantaged neighborhoods recidivate at a much greater rate than those who return to more affluent communities. This may seem obvious but an Oregon study, reported this year, adds weight to the argument.
- B. Success of the reentry transition depends largely on integrating a continuum of services and programmatic interventions starting at the point of sentencing and admission to prison through confinement and carrying through to discharge from parole or post-release control. The manner in which these linkages are formed must, of necessity, support the maintenance of offenders' social and community ties even during the period of imprisonment (Wilkinson, 2002).
- C. This represents a different way of thinking. Here is what Dr. R. A. Wilkinson, Director of the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Corrections had to say on this topic in 2002:

At the heart of our Reentry Initiative is the notion that reentry represents a “philosophy,” not a program. To commence such a redirection in philosophy, it is vital that reentry planning become an essential component of the initial reception assessment process. Accomplishing this will require that planning for reentry be conducted in an administrative manner equivalent to the classification process, medical, educational and mental health screening, and the issuance of clothing and personal hygiene items. Reentry planning at this stage redefines the way the mission of corrections is conceptualized to the point where staff pose the question, “What is needed to prepare this offender for successful reentry?” In Ohio the average time served in prison prior to release is approximately three years (Martin, 2000). For many offenders the term of confinement is even less. The critical need to begin active reentry planning upon admission is evident.

II. People compared with Programs

- A. Research indicates that current rehabilitation programs reduce recidivism on the average of 10-12%. (Mcguire, 2002) That is an *average* over all rehab programs, including those which don't even work. But the point is that any program will never be found to be the “magic bullet”. It should be both encouraging and sobering to know that just about anything you try will make a difference, if you pay attention to the “What Works in Corrections” literature even a little bit. So if a program curriculum can only be shown to account for a modest reduction in recidivism, what else influences change success for an individual?
- B. The relationship between staff and an incarcerated man or woman has a greater degree of impact on change than any program. For the programs I mentioned at the beginning, it is important to identify the desired personality characteristic of those being hired or assigned to these programs. Studies have shown this to be true in probation (Clark, 2005). It is just as true for other corrections staff. It would

be unfortunate to develop strong programs only to have them weakened by miss-assigned staff.

III. What makes up Behavioral change (Hubble, Duncan & Miller, 1999)

- A. 40% Client factors (internal: motivation & readiness for change; external: family support & community of residence).
- B. 30% Relationship factors (empathy, congruence and acceptance).
- C. 15% Hope and Expectancy
- D. 15% Specific techniques for supporting change

IV. Know the Stages of Change

There are identifiable stages a person goes through in changing a behavior, attitude or action. Knowing them, and how to discern where a particular student might be on the Change Continuum, increases the possibility of movement. The stages are:

1. Not Considering A Change
2. Considering A Change
3. Preparing For A Change
4. Taking Action
5. Maintaining The Change

A Program needs to clearly describe where, on the continuum, it has its focus. No stage should be skipped by the individual. The program design needs to accommodate slips and lapses (minor breaks in a change pattern) as well as relapses (major breaks) and be clear on the different responses required.

V. The Truth and the Fantasy about “Evidenced-Based” Programs

- A. I've undertaken scientific research in challenging places (Haiti, Cuba) and in relatively easy ones (Seattle). What I know is that any research is only as good as its underlying methodology.
- B. All information on program effectiveness or impact is useful, even the often-maligned anecdotal source information. The breakdown can come most easily in data application. One of the most important purposes of scientific research is to enable accurate extrapolation i.e., small sample size applied across a larger population. Anecdotal information does not provide that kind of confident extrapolation, but it should not be discounted – only used appropriately.
- C. Very few correctional program research studies on Life Skills enjoy a high degree of confidence. Consider this quote from a 1998 study of effectiveness of rehabilitation programs offered by Washington State Department of Corrections conducted by the Department of Criminology and Criminal Justice of the University of Maryland:

There is not enough evidence to draw conclusions about the effectiveness of life skills training programs. No studies have reported significant differences in recidivism rates between participants and control groups. Also, the direction of the effects have differed. At times, the life skills group has had lower recidivism rates, at other times the rate is higher. It varies by type of recidivism measure studied (e.g., in Melton

& Pennell, 1998; Miller, 1997) or in the type of treatment the comparison group receives (cognitive skills or probation in the Ross et al., 1998 study).

- D. The lack of research does not equal lack of effectiveness. Again, from the University of Maryland study:

...a lack of research does not mean a lack of effectiveness. Merely because a program has not been properly evaluated does not mean that it is failing to achieve its goals. Previous reviews of correctional programming research, especially in the area of prison rehabilitation, have made this error. Programs can not be discredited by the lack of evidence, but only the presence of negative evidence.

- E. Work to see the context. Only in the last few years has any research focused on external factors to a particular program that might enhance or reduce its impact. External factors could include multiple types of programs. A constellation of programs might be the cause of positive impact whereas a single program would not show much impact at all. Another external factor, mentioned already, has to do with the social or economic features of the communities where the offenders will live. Offenders and programs do not exist in isolation and a complete picture of effectiveness can not be gained until program evaluators are able to adequately measure the context within which participants live and programs operate (D. L. MacKenzie & L. J. Hickman, 1998).
- F. The biggest challenge to scientific research success in the criminal justice and corrections field is the difficulty in accounting for all possible variables potentially influencing research results. This is often the reason why a study receives a low score on the Maryland Scale.

VI. Allocation of Resources

Putting money where the risk is highest is connected with the concept that those who need to be in programs don't want to be in programs. The "risk principle" has been validated over the years and again substantiated with a 2002 University of Cincinnati evaluation of Community Based Corrections Programs in Ohio. Simply stated, resources should be dedicated to moderate to high-risk offenders and limited or eliminated for low-risk offenders. The programs evaluated demonstrated a positive difference in outcome for higher risk offenders while having a counter productive effecting on low-risk offenders, specifically an *increase* in recidivism. (Wilkinson, 2002). Incentives are one of the most effective ways to attract unwilling program participants. In the Bureau of Prisons Residential Drug Abuse Treatment Program, they offer a one-year sentence reduction for many of those participants who complete the nine-month long program. Many of the participants come into the program calling it their "one-year off program" and have little, if any, intention to change their behavior. In spite of that perspective as they enter the program, many participants do change.

VII. Readiness for Change

No one walks out a prison gate saying, "Boy that was fun; can't wait to get back!" How many times have we heard, "I'm never coming back!" Only to see that individual back inside a few weeks after being released? There is a gap between a desire to change and the capacity to do so. There is a long list of studies available on this topic.

The whole point of categorizing people in stages (see IV above) is that people respond best to messages and strategies specific to their stage. So identifying a person's stage can be very helpful in figuring out what kind of questions to ask them, the type of information they need, the kind of advice and experiential exercises they may respond to best.

VIII. Explore Other Places for Ideas

- A. Other States. Maryland, Florida, Ohio, Texas, Oregon & Washington all have either programs worth examining or have conducted research within the last five years which has added to a better understanding of offender rehabilitation.
- B. Check out other disciplines for some "out of the box" ideas. There is one that I am interested in and believe has powerful implications for successful offender engagement in their own rehabilitation from the start of their incarceration. Motivational Interviewing (MI) is an interactive approach used in case management and counseling based on the principle that all human behavior is motivated. It acknowledges that many people experience ambivalence when deciding to make changes – they both want and don't want change. It also acknowledges that people can perceive both the advantages and disadvantages of changing, or continuing, with their current negative behavior. The aim is not to immediately focus on the action of changing, but working to enhance motivation to change.

The UK has mandated it for their parole and probation programs. In its "Evidence-Based Policy and Practice" Initiative, the National Institute of Corrections includes MI among its eight principles of effective interventions to reduce risk:

"2. Enhance Intrinsic Motivation – Research strongly suggests that "motivational interviewing" techniques, rather than persuasion tactics, effectively enhance motivation for initiating and maintaining behavior changes." http://ncic.org/WebPage_380.htm

I'm working with one of the pioneers of MI's use with Probation and Parole systems. I've been talking with him about the feasibility of moving MI to the front of the individual's incarceration.

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