

Best of the NETWORKER

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The Northwest Youth Networker; newsletter of the [Northwest Network for Youth](#), edited by [Jerry Fest](#) of the [InterNetwork for Youth](#)

June 2009, Issues 56-59

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The Faux Saboteur

By Jerry Fest

I facilitated an exercise recently that involves having a group of people lay a light-weight pole across the tops of their index fingers and lower it to the ground. It is a deceptively difficult task. The pole seems to want to magically rise instead of descend. While there is a solution, it takes a tremendous amount of focus, collaboration, and problem-solving to successfully lower the pole.

In this case I added a new element. Before starting the exercise I informed the group that I had asked one of them to, without being obvious, make it as difficult to complete the exercise as possible. In other words, *there was a saboteur*.

The result was interesting. The group spent at least as much time trying to identify the saboteur as they did trying to solve the problem. Almost every difficulty was initially blamed on the saboteur and perceived as evidence of the saboteur at work. The initial solutions proposed were not about how to lower the pole, but about how to identify the saboteur; specific people were accused, motions were made to vote people out of the group, and an “honesty” test was implemented requiring each member to publicly state that they weren’t the saboteur, forcing the saboteur to either confess or live with the fact that they had lied to the group. The fact was, however, that I was the one who had lied to the group ... *there was no saboteur*.

This was a classic example of seeing what you believe. Because the group believed there was a saboteur, when things went wrong it was easy to perceive that as evidence of the saboteur’s existence. If you believe something to be true, you will see evidence that supports your belief wherever you look. This is why, when working with young people, it is critical to check our beliefs.

If you believe the young people in your program (classroom, etc.) to be manipulative, un-engaged, difficult to work with, uncaring, incapable ... whatever ... you will not be wrong. You will be able to see, cite, and document evidence of your belief every single day. Yet none of these things is what we want for or from young people. We want them to be engaged, excited about learning, caring, compassionate, and a million other more positive traits. So we keep working and waiting to see those changes take place in them. I’d like to suggest that we’re putting our energy into the wrong effort. Instead of looking for changes in *them*, we should be working on changes in *us*, and specifically in what we believe about and *expect* from young people. If we want them to be engaged and caring, it starts with us *believing* that they already *are*. Because if that’s what we believe about young people, we will see evidence that supports our beliefs and we will begin to respond to them differently ... and the difference in our response will provoke different reactions from them. This is the [Pygmalion Effect](#) in action ... where young people live up to (or down to) our beliefs and expectations about them (it is also the theory behind “High Expectations” in terms of a resiliency Protective Factor).

Youth work is often perceived as the difficult job of helping young people change their lives. It is actually a job that is much harder than that, because in order to help young people change their lives, we have to begin by changing *ourselves*.

“If we treat people as they are, we make them worse.
If we treat people as they ought to be, we help them become what they are capable of becoming.”

~ Johann Wolfgang von Goethe
Also attributed to Dr. Haim Ginott



Are young people deaf or do they just not care what you're saying?

By Jerry Fest

Have you ever heard (or said) anything similar to:

They just don't listen.

I told (him/her) and they ignored me.

They should know, they've been told.

There's a sign clearly posted, they just don't care about the rules.

Or, the ultimate in frustration ...

Geez! Do I have to keep telling them over and over?

Well, since you asked ... yes, you do.

I'd be willing to bet that while there may be some “kill your TV” readers out there, a good percentage of you spend some time in front of the tube. Have you ever noticed how you keep seeing the same commercial over and over again, sometimes even more than once during the same commercial break? Why? Is this just poor planning on the part of advertisers? Are they just wasting their money? Or is it possible that they are keenly aware of something of which we should all have greater awareness? A formula, perhaps? Maybe something like *seven plus or minus two* (7 +/- 2).

Seven plus or minus two (or, another way to think of it is five to nine) was first referred to in a 1955 paper by George A. Miller titled *The Magical Number Seven, Plus or Minus Two -- Some Limits on Our Capacity for Processing Information* ([read the paper here](#)). Miller proposed that the human capacity to process information was limited to 7 +/- 2 “chunks” -- and that “chunks” beyond that limit were not retained in short term memory. Since that time, 7 +/- 2 has also been proposed as the number of times the human brain needs to be exposed to information before it begins ... *begins* ... to “stick.” Why do you see the same commercial repeated over and over? Because advertisers know that it takes *repetition* to get information across to people.

You can use this knowledge to help young people process and retain information. First, when conveying information, make sure it is packaged in “chunks” that fit the 7 +/- 2 guidelines. And second, when conveying information, make sure it is conveyed once, then again, then again, then again, then again -- and realize that you are now at the *minimal* number of times that information needs to be conveyed. The better you are at proper chunking and repetition, the less you'll wonder why kids aren't listening to you.

Change through “Social Marketing”

By Gary Hammons



Jeffrey Jordan of Rescue Social Change Group provided an interesting presentation at Bellevue College on Monday, June 1st, sponsored by Washington After

School Network, the college and the Gates Foundation. The overall theme was “social marketing” and Jeff provided in depth analysis and comparisons with business and social dynamics of young people. Using practical research, his group was able to identify a number of factors related to teen behaviors and lifestyles. With this information, dramatic reductions in teen smoking rates were achieved in Nevada and Virginia, two states with very high tolerance for tobacco use.

More important, his research and analytical approach to life style changes for young people provides empirical data that can/should change public policy and attitudes. Using commercially proven techniques from advertizing and media, he showed the audience effective and economical ways to induce “social branding.” Jeff’s work should be extraordinarily useful in helping social service agencies attain their goals and streamline their programs. For more information, visit [Rescue Social Change Group](#).

Common Questions

By Jerry Fest

I present in front of many different audiences, but often get very similar questions. I thought I’d share my answer to one of the most common questions I receive; *What’s the best way to approach sensitive issues, such as sexual abuse or rape?*

My response:



This is a difficult aspect of working with young people -- particularly for those who are new to the field. It can be an extremely uncomfortable experience to sit with an adolescent -- perhaps as young as 12 or 13 -- and discuss very grown-up issues such as sexual abuse or rape, or even less weighty but equally sensitive issues such as hygiene. It is a natural instinct to want to soften the issue by speaking indirectly, or peppering the conversation with kind euphemisms. The reality, however, is that doing so is really an act of protecting *ourselves*, not the young person we are working with.

Remember why you are having the conversation in the first place. The reason is that the sensitive issue you are discussing is a part of the young person’s experience. It may be unfortunate that they have had such experiences, but -- bottom line -- they have. When we talk to them about these issues we are not discussing some abstract concept, we are discussing their *lives*. By speaking indirectly or using euphemisms,

we end up communicating two messages that we may not intend.

The first message is that what has happened to them is so horrible that we can’t even discuss it. The likely result is that we leave them feeling tainted, damaged, and shamed. That’s not our intention -- we want to make things better. But these issues are now a part of them. If we can’t even talk about it, what does that say about *them*?

The second message has to do with what it says about *us*. When we demonstrate that we can’t even say the words, we inadvertently communicate that we can’t handle the reality of their lives. Young people will quickly pick up on this, and begin to ‘protect’ us by not sharing the parts of their lives that we’ve shown an inability to

deal with. Instead of becoming a resource and support, we slowly become a burden -- someone who they need to take care of by being careful about what they share.

Sometimes we may add anger to the list of emotions that they are dealing with. We once had a streetwork team dealing with a recent rape victim. The team accompanied her to the hospital, and waited with her for a rape advocate to arrive. The whole time they were with her, one of the workers kept euphemistically referring to the rape as 'the incident' -- were you injured during *the incident*, did anyone witness *the incident*? Finally, the young woman lashed out in anger, shouting; "Damn it! I didn't have 'an incident.' I was *raped!*"

I am not suggesting that you callously use the most graphic terminology available to you. I am suggesting, however, that you confront these issues in a direct, straightforward manner. Remember that you're not talking about anything that they haven't *lived*. If you communicate that you can't even say the words, you're unlikely to be seen as someone who can help.

For more tips on dealing with issues like this, visit the Online Library at the [InterNetwork for Youth](#) and read the article "Tough Talk."