

By Chandler Scott McMillin

Part Five: Maintaining Motivation

When motivation for recovery is low – as it often is – having some leverage can be very important indeed. We're speaking of leverage that is shaped by four factors:

- » There's leverage based on **need**, meaning a practical necessity for a certain outcome, along with consequences if it doesn't.
- » Leverage can be based on the client's expressed **desire** for a particular outcome – a desire strong enough to motivate some real work on her part.
- » **Alternatives** (sometimes called 'escape hatches') are ways that the client can avoid the consequences of non compliance with the Court or other authorities, such as an employer or educational institution.
- » **Timing** factors are those that create a sense of urgency in a discussion. A deadline that must be met, for instance – or conversely, the absence of time pressure.

Leverage can come from any of the above, or all four. If it helps, remember NWAT – need, want, alternatives, and timing.

Suppose the offender has been put on probation for an offense and has to comply with the terms, or face jail. That provides a certain amount of leverage.

But if the client also conveys a strong desire to get a degree or a worthwhile job, or start a family or get out of debt – these also constitute motivators for success. Steps toward such goals often build motivation that wasn't there to begin with.

On the other hand, if the offender is confident that the Court won't punish him for noncompliance, that directly decreases the leverage provided by his status as a probationer.

The importance of timing is obvious – offender motivation tends to increase right before an appearance in Court or before a report is due, and decrease when they aren't. It's just human nature to worry about immediate threats instead of distant ones.

Leverage is really about perception. If Brenda believes there will be a consequence to her actions, then it's real enough.



Let's go back to [Brenda's case](#) from Part One. A few things we've learned from her:

- a) She's not concerned about the possibility of jail if she relapses again.
- b) She does show signs of a desire to improve her life
- c) She figures if she does fail in treatment, she'll just get referred for another treatment somewhere else.
- d) She's not under any particular time constraints – no deadlines loom.

Not an optimal set of circumstances, but hey, it is what it is. Her counselor's goal is to maximize the leverage in favor of successful treatment, and minimize the forces that seem to work against it.

In pursuit of this end, he:

- » Contacts Brenda's probation officer to see if it's possible to recruit her in the effort to break Brenda's cycle of relapse; and
- » Launches a plan to get Brenda proactively involved in taking steps to achieve her personal goals.

His conversation with the PO went something like this:

Counselor: Doesn't seem like she thinks she risks jail even if she messes up again.

P.O.: Oh, she could go to jail, all right. The judge is pretty annoyed with her.

Counselor: She doesn't seem to know that.

P.O.: I probably haven't emphasized it. I just don't think jail does somebody like Brenda any good.

Counselor: Neither do I. But the threat of consequences does.

Using Leverage in Counseling the Court-Referred Client

P.O.: I'm not sure I get your point.

Counselor: You don't have to incarcerate Brenda to convince her that it could happen if she goes back to drugs.

P.O.: You think that would be enough?

Counselor: By itself? No. But every little bit helps, right?

P.O.: I'll bring her in for a talk.

This counselor knows that leverage is really about perception. If Brenda believes there will be a consequence to her actions, then it's real enough.

At his next meeting with the client:

Counselor: I talked to Gail [the probation officer].

Brenda: Yeah, I know. She pulled me in.

Counselor: What'd she want?

Brenda: She wanted me to know the judge is pissed and if I eff up again my ass is in a cell.

Counselor: That news to you?

Brenda: I guess not. She was just making a point. pause I told her I got it.

Later on in the session, Brenda's counselor surprises her.

Counselor: I think you should start school when it opens in two weeks.

Brenda: What? You think I'm ready to take that on?

Counselor: shrugs Technically, no. But I don't see where waiting would help you.

Brenda: I don't even know what courses to take.

Counselor: They have counselors to help.

Brenda: Why the rush?

Counselor: I think you need the structure. And to get moving on some of the goals you set for yourself.

Brenda: That would be cool. Plus my parents would really go for it. They might let me stay a little longer. What if school interferes with this program?

Counselor: We'll pick courses that don't.

Of course, the counselor's purpose is primarily motivational. It doesn't really matter if she aces her coursework at the community college. He gives her a push in hopes of creating a feeling of progress to offset her sense of failure.

Brenda shows hopeful signs of an addict who is 'sick and tired of being sick and tired'. If her fragile recovery can survive these first few months, she might just turn a corner.

Summary

It helps to think of the client's motivation for change as naturally fluctuating. It requires support until it has a chance to strengthen – for external motivation to become internal. Leverage is a tool that can be used for this purpose. But it requires that the clinician:

1. Identify potential leverage factors at the beginning of the counseling relationship, and
2. Take steps to develop additional leverage with that client, for use later on.

Next:

Part Six: Coping With Relapse



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