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The Art of the Case Plan: More Bob Ross, less Jackson Pollock

Joseph Arvidson

Probation officers are working in an interesting era. Their vocational shift continues, from that of a compliance officer to that of change agent. Against a growing body of knowledge as to the efficacy of evidence-based practices, probation officers have at their disposal a plethora of research and training opportunities to better serve their clientele. These disciplines run the gamut from effective communication approaches to proper assessment, to the most effective interventions. The denouement of all of these interrelated practices, though, is arguably the case plan.

Case planning, or case management, occurs in a variety of disciplines. And it works in a variety of disciplines. "Case management works because of the relationships developed by case managers between themselves and the clients, and between themselves and other agencies involved in the service system (and needed to assist clients)" (Gronda 2009, pg. #). Successful case planning is predicated on a good relationship. That in and of itself, though, may be an issue in the world of Corrections. As stated, the field is evolving. Many veteran staff see themselves more as law enforcement officers than social workers. Having a relationship, at least one based on wanting what is best for the client is foreign to many probation officers.

Some contend that a strong and healthy working alliance trumps the very interventions themselves. An approach taken with adult populations suffering from both substance abuse and mental illness is known as strengths-based case management or SBCM. This method endeavors to assist clients with identifying and achieving personal goals by placing emphasis on the case manager/client relationship (Arnold, Walsh, Oldham & Rapp, 2007). Strength-based and client-centered approaches are at the heart of most modes of communication being adopted by today's evidence-based practice models of supervision.

Motivational Interviewing Case Management or MICM was recently examined in a study involving individuals residing in sober living houses. The scope of the study involved persons on probation or parole who entered 49 sober living houses. Residents were randomly assigned to revive MICM OR business as usual. At 6-and-12-month follow-up, both study conditions showed significant improvement relative to baseline on substance abuse, criminal justice, HIV risk, and employment outcomes (Polcin, Korcha, Witbrodt, Mercile & Mahoney, 2018).

Effective communication, though, is but one impediment to successful case management in the world of Corrections. Quality Correctional case plans are rooted in quality assessments. There continues to be a struggle to convince staff to utilize the assessment and case management tools currently at their disposal. One of the predominant tools currently in use around the world today is the Level of Service/Case Management Inventory. For agencies which are structured around adherence to the prevailing correctional principles of Risk, Need, and Responsivity, it is a means of operationalizing those concepts. Yet despite the robust predictive validity of the LS/CMI, case management plans developed by probation officers generally reflected poor adherence to the RNR principles (Dyck, Campbell & Wershler, 2018).

Sadly, strict adherence to these proven principles may simply be a matter of attrition. Whereas younger officers appear more likely to embrace these progressive approaches, veteran staff are more obstinate. A study of probation and parole officers examined the influence of professional characteristics, including job burnout and stress. How did this affect their adherence to incorporating assessment results and its risk and needs recommendations? The results

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reflected "noncompliance with case management tools is fairly common. Staff with greater tenure and heightened depersonalization and emotional exhaustion exhibit greater odds of assessment noncompliance" (Schaefer & Williamson, 2018)

With the advent of fourth generation assessment tools such as the LS/CMI, there was hope that the nexus would be strengthened between assessment and case management. To review, a first-generation assessment consisted merely of the eyeball test. Probation officers would literally simply give their client the once over, and assess the level of risk and appropriate supervision strategies. Second-generation tools utilized static factors, such as criminal history. Static variables are significant at predicting risk, but afford the practitioner little in the way of case plan options. The advent of third-generation risk assessment tools introduced dynamic variables. These included such things as employment factors, family dynamics, companions, and of course, attitudes and orientation. Because these were dynamic in nature, they presented ideal targets of change. Reduce the risky dynamic variables, reduce the risk of re-offending. Fourth-generation tools, such as the Level of Service Case Management Inventory (LS/CMI), introduced a case management component. Here though, the jury is still out. "Interestingly, a lot of research is available about the quality and use of risk and needs assessment, whereas studies about case management plans are scarce" (Bosker & Witteman 2016, pg #).

Let us focus on the current state of affairs as to assessment and case plan adherence. Ideally, a correctional case plan should be anchored in criminogenic needs. The agreed-upon goals must be centered on those crime generators which correlate with recidivism. The field has made great strides in adherence to risk and needs assessment among correctional practitioners. Have we thought, taken our eyes off the goal line prematurely? Have we settled for assessment completion as the end goal? Or, is there a need to introduce more structure to the process? Does the use of risk assessment tools by probation officers ensure that the client's high needs (criminogenic needs) are being addressed?

One analysis looked at 216 adolescents on probation. The question was whether the instruction of structure would improve outcomes. Business, as usual, consisted of a non-validates local tool and an

unstructured plan. What would the effect be of introducing the SAVRY (Structured Assessment of Violence Risk in Youth) and a structured case plan form? The answer: "Adolescents in the SAVRY/Structured Plan condition has significantly better case plans than those in the pre-implementation condition. Specifically, following implementation, adolescents' high need domains were more likely to be targeted in plans" (Author, year, pg. #). The authors concluded that "just as the structure can improve risk assessments, so too might structure improve case plans" (Viljoen, Shaffer, Cochrane, & Brodersen, 2019, p. 42).

There has been some debate as to the balance between concrete, extremely structured case plans, and the probation officer's discretion and professional decision making in the process. Is there a sweet spot between total adhere to the results of the assessment and the officer's professional judgment? One study took on this question by looking at nearly 300 case management plans. All plans relied on a tool for risk/needs assessment. While in one sample, the decision making was unstructured. In the other, the assessment contained a section for structured decision making. In the latter, the quality of the plans was significantly better. Specifically, better at matching criminogenic needs and goals, better at matching goals of the client and goals of the plan, a greater focus on strengthening social bonds, and a better match between the risk of recidivism and intensity of the plan (Bosker & Witteman 2016).

It would appear then, that the key lies in simply adding more structure to the equation. Do we simply give our probation officers too much professional discretion in their decision-making process? Have we unwittingly given them license to de-couple from the best practices which we have been endeavoring to get them to embrace? Or is it a matter of clarifying if not re-defining the role of the probation officer?

Lovins et al. (2018) published an insightful article in which they posit this very question. They assert that probation officers need to create a new identity for themselves. From one of being a referee who monitors terms and conditions to one of coach, who strive for behavior change. And they stress the importance of a relationship with clients. Once again, we see the importance of the relationship dynamic. That same dynamic was noted earlier as one of the imports in the case plan process.

Dr. Guy Bourgon (2011) believes that the key is in moving from traditional case management to that of "Change Agent" (pg. #). Whereas traditional case management was more about compliance with court conditions and brokering of services, "change work" (pg. #) guides the day to day practices that the Probation Officer engages in with their client. (Bourgon, Gutierrez & Ashton, 2011). From this philosophy the Strategic Training Initiative in Community Supervision (STICS) practice model was constructed (Bourgon, Bonta, Rugge, Scott, and Yessine, 2010; Bourgon et al., 2011). The STICS model was designed to be a comprehensive model that would transfer the 'what works' knowledge into the real setting of correctional supervision within the community (Bourgon et al., 2010). The STICS model has since been trained in a variety of jurisdictions throughout North America and Europe.

One component of this model is the STICS Action Plan. In a very straight forward manner, the plan funnels information from the assessment and addresses acute variables, criminogenic variables, as well as responsivity/non-criminogenic factors (Bourgon et al., 2011). And once again, we see the importance of structure in the case plan process.

To be clear, however, infusing structure into the process is not to be confused with compliance with court-ordered terms and conditions. Indeed, simply checking the boxes should not be equated with adding guidance to the equation. Recall the importance of trusting and relying on the assessment process. A case plan which channels correctional resources toward identified criminogenic need is the goal...not a case plan which checks off the boxes toward compliance probation agreement. Perhaps the key to effective case management can be streamlined into the following themes:

- Hire and promote staff who understand the importance of having a relationship with their clientele. The Pygmalion effect is alive and well in the field of community corrections. Probation officers' expectations of their client, whether low or high, translate into outcomes.
- Embrace and trust the assessment process. Setting goals are fantastic. But criminogenic needs must be addressed in a correctional case plan.

- A strong reliance on the data gleaned from assessment. Gone are the days of the eyeball test.
- Add structure to the process. It is not an infringement on a probation officer's discretion to take some ambiguity out of the decision-making process. In this case, paint by numbers may be better than abstract art.

Author Biography:

Mr. Joseph Arvidson is the Executive Director of The Paragon Group, LLC, who's the scope of services includes speaking engagements, training, and consulting as to evidence-based practices and desistance-based models. Joseph Arvidson's career in Corrections spans over 30 years. He spent the bulk of his career as a probation officer supervising high-risk clients, but in 2011 he segued into an administrative role, focusing on strategic planning and implementation. He has extensive experience training and facilitating a variety of Evidence-Based Practices ranging from Cognitive Skills programs, Motivational Interviewing, Risk Assessment, and Case Planning. Mr. Arvidson received both his B.A. and M.S. degrees from St. Cloud State University in the discipline of Criminal Justice Administration. He currently serves as a member of Concordia University's Criminal Justice Executive Advisory Board.

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