

Tri-County Batterer Intervention Provider Network Meeting Minutes: 4/24/01

Present: Patty Waford (Private Practice), Paula Manly (Private Practice), Margaret Langslet (PSU), Michael Davis (Changepoint), Guruseva Mason (Transition Projects), Devarshi Bajpai (ASAP), Chris Huffine (Men's Resource Center), Songcha Bowman (Private Practice), Marc Hess (Sage and Multnomah County Community Justice)

Minutes by Margaret Langslet and Chris Huffine

Discussion Topic: Addressing Our Own Power and Control Issues

-Providers teach men about power and control issues and there is a mistaken assumption that providers are above that in their own lives. While it is important that we "walk our talk", this can be challenging at times and we may fall short. What are some of the most common ways our own power and control issues may manifest themselves in our work? What are some of the most common ways we see other parts of the DV community manifesting power and control issues?

-Providers are trying to get across a value-laden curriculum and the tensions from trying to convey this to men who may not be particularly receptive can bring out power and control issues. We may try too hard to "convert" men in the group to our perspective, becoming controlling in the process.

-There also may be some "one upmanship" that occurs where we view ourselves as being much better than or superior to our clients. We need to watch out in making comparative statements.

-Facilitators have privilege because they are the ones giving assignments and assessments, writing reports to probation, and determining whether people can remain in the group or have completed the program. Like any type of privilege, it can be difficult to realize the benefits from having it. This can also lead to unwitting power plays. Another way this privilege can manifest itself is an overly narrow or rigid interpretation of the rules without taking into consideration a particular client's special needs or issues. It's important that we see our clients as individual men rather than grouping them all together as being the exact same with the same needs, abilities, etc.

-One common form of oppression that sometimes comes up is classism. There is not enough sensitivity to men who are impoverished and cannot afford certain requirements such as a polygraph test. They may also struggle to pay fees not because they are being manipulative, but because they truly are struggling with having enough money to live on. To address this issue, one provider offers a community service option in substitution of payment, which gives the community benefits while also being sensitive to the man's limited financial resources. She has found that most people who can pay do and the men who need it are the most likely to take advantage of it. Providers can also talk about money and budgets during groups.

-Another area where power and control issues may show up in the court system is the applying of no contact orders and determining when they should be lifted. The victim may not be consulted on whether she does or does not feel safe with the perpetrator. Oftentimes no contact orders are applied indiscriminately, without consideration of the particular needs of that family or the relevant cultural issues. However, there may not be enough time or energy to individualize a legal response, which is why it needs to be applied fairly indiscriminately. Counties also differ greatly in their policies and philosophies concerning no contact orders. A point made concerning lifting them too quickly is that the people in charge don't have the ability to predict recidivism and severity and should err on the conservative side for safety. Women have to face the choice of either being homeless with a child or be the victim of abuse and institutions fall short in dealing with this sort of problem, with the no contact order issue being just one example. There was a little further discussion concerning no contact orders, but it was agreed to defer this discussion to when this particular topic will be discussed at an up-coming meeting.

-Another factor that may lead to a sense of feeling controlled is a misperception among the men about the role the provider fills. They may mistakenly believe the provider is there primarily to help them and be on their side. In truth, the primary goal of providers is to increase victim safety. That is their first commitment. Likewise, there is a continuing relationship with the mandating agency (e.g., probation or SCF) to keep them informed and to work with them. It is important to make this clear to group members so that they don't misperceive the priorities of the provider (which could then be viewed as a misuse of power).

-Providers need to treat clients as peers. The provider and client have different roles and responsibilities, but equal worth. It's easy to lose humanity and the clients are guilty of that as well. Providers should show their humanity to the clients and this tends to raise respect levels. That doesn't mean extensive personal disclosure, simply being genuine and present in the moment. Providers should work with the men, not "treat them like criminals". Yet providers have to recognize that there is a power differential between themselves and group members, which needs to be acknowledged. It's important to be mindful of this difference without abusing it. It's similar to the relationship between supervisors and employees. While supervisors have certain responsibilities they need to take care of and may have an allegiance to their superior and/or the company, they should still try to work with their employees, treating them with respect and consideration.

-Passion about an issue—when a person feels very strongly about an issue—can be misperceived as a power play by others. But what is the difference between "passion" and a power play? There can be personality differences (e.g., one person, by nature, tends to be more verbally expressive and enthusiastic, in general with everyone), cultural differences (e.g., some cultures tend to be somewhat louder and more overtly expressive when communicating), etc. How to sort out what is simply that person's personality/culture vs. a power play? One key is to look at the style of interaction rather than the specific behavior. Is a relational value being embraced (e.g., while loud or gesturing, they are clearly interested in hearing from the other and become concerned if the other is uncomfortable) or a power over value being embraced (e.g., the goal is

to get the other to submit to/agree with the perspective being shared, regardless of what they may think). Over time, viewing the larger context and intent, it becomes more apparent whether there is a power play going on.

-Any time one's world view is being challenged that person is going to experience a certain amount of fear and anxiety. But if there isn't a power play occurring then there is still a feeling of alliance, of working with rather than working against. Is the fear a by-product of the interaction or is it being used as a tool for control?

-Another way our power and control issues can manifest is when we put forward our personal truths as universal Truths. When we believe in something it is easy to believe that it is true for everyone and everyone should agree with it. When we start working and talking with others from that assumption, without being willing to tolerate and accept and respect disagreement we become controlling. One example of this is how a model of intervention that may work with Caucasian men may not be as applicable to men of color. There isn't one single, right way of working with these men, but many right ways. As we become more sensitive to cultural issues, this becomes more apparent.

-In assessing whether a colleague is doing a power play it is important to consider the social context of their action, not just the individual person in that moment. The larger situational context may shed light upon the person's behavior. In some situations this may help clarify that what may have initially appeared to have been a power play was not, once the larger circumstances are known.