Section III: Building the Working Alliance

The relationship between an officer and the person under supervision has emerged as an effective tool of supervision, based on various research studies. Officers and individuals with prior experience in the criminal legal system (the “criminal justice” or “legal” system is referred to as the criminal legal system in this document) confirm the importance of a relationship founded on more than monitoring and recognize that the relationship sets the tone for supervision and affects outcomes. In therapy, this is considered the working alliance (WA), and it refers to the working relationship between a therapist and a client. WA has three main constructs: the development of *bonds*, the assignment of *tasks*, and agreement on *goals*. The WA requires all parties to share decisions regardless of their power dynamic.

A strong WA between a person on supervision and the officer may be complicated by the authoritarian role of the officer or by the mandated nature of the relationship. Since individuals are coerced into the relationship with their officer, a host of barriers must be navigated to develop a WA and set the tone for productive meetings. Some barriers include clients’ holding stereotypical views of officers as law-enforcement agents, clients’ past (traumatic) experiences within the criminal legal system and/or with other supervision officers, and clients’ lacking a voice in the supervision process. Officers must find a balance between enforcing the supervision requirements and helping individuals make decisions, including making them aware of consequences. Lovins and colleagues (2018) refer to this role as coach rather than referee, signaling that officers can facilitate success through deliberate guidance and interaction with the individual.

To be an effective “coach” or change agent, it is recommended that agencies and officers attend to four themes common in the research literature and in discussions with probation officials that will help officers develop a strong WA with their clients. The four themes are communication, transparency, acknowledging client experience and perspective, and collaboration.

Communication

- Communication (verbal and non-verbal) is critically important to developing WA.
- Officers should speak to their clients in a respectful tone that lends itself to positive reinforcement and motivation.
- Even when there is conflict, officers should never use an authoritarian communication style. This includes harsh and demeaning language such as name-calling or stigmatizing messaging (e.g., you're a drug addict, you will never make it).
- Additionally, officers should use active listening (e.g., affirmative body language, repeating statements back to the individuals under supervision) when working with clients.

Transparency

- Transparency refers to officers being open and honest about how and why various practices will be used.
- An officer can be transparent by having an open dialogue about the supervision process. This includes expectations, conditions, authority, communication, etc.
- Transparency disrupts the fear of being on supervision and the assumption that officers are simply authority figures.
- Understanding why a practice is being recommended and how that practice is intended to help the individual succeed reinforces the officer's position as a coach/change agent. This, in turn, increases trust and the likelihood that clients will turn to officers when they are having difficulties.

Client Experience/Perspective

- Client perspective and experience refer to officers being aware of how supervision processes impact their clients.
- Many aspects of supervision can be inconvenient or feel punitive to clients. Officers who allow clients to voice their concerns and affirm their perspectives are more likely to disrupt preconceptions that officers are uncaring or ambivalent.
- Hearing the client's concerns and acknowledging their perspective are essential elements for officers to demonstrate that they value the client. This is especially important when officers sanction clients or place limits on their movements.

- Understanding the client's perspective can improve officers' ability to tailor interventions to the unique perspective of their client (responsivity).

Collaboration/Shared Decision-Making

- Collaboration refers to an officer including the client's perspective in the decision-making process where possible.
- Not all aspects of the supervision process are subject to change (e.g., court-mandated conditions). However, officers can always provide opportunities for clients to voice their opinion.
- Even when the outcome is not favorable to the client, allowing them to have their voice heard strengthens the relationship and helps the client view the consequence as fair.
- Collaboration allows clients to feel a sense of autonomy within supervision. The feeling of guiding their own lives while the officer holds them accountable and supports them increases client engagement and satisfaction with supervision.

The following appropriateness statements provide useful information about how the various supervision practices can be used to reinforce an officer's role as a coach or change agent. Each contains suggestions about how officers can communicate, be transparent, acknowledge their client's perspective/experience, and collaborate within the context of using each supervision tool. These are valuable tools that remind officers how to maximize the working relationship they build with their clients. Starting supervision by laying the groundwork for a positive, productive relationship will go a long way in improving outcomes.

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