

# SHARED REFLECTIONS ON TRANSFORMATIVE PRACTICE: FROM CHALLENGES TO CLIENT EMPOWERMENT IN WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

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It is Friday morning and I am sitting at my desk preparing for two very important meetings scheduled for Tuesday with one of my major funders (Foundation X). My contract with this funder requires that I, as a program administrator (PA) in workforce development, move low-income individuals toward self-sufficiency through employment. I am bewildered because there are so many variables that come into play when I think about the tasks I have been charged to accomplish.

In preparation for the meeting, I meet with my two employment specialists (ES) to inquire about the number of "placements" for the past two months. This will inevitably be the funder's main concern. This is how the meeting unfolded with my employment specialists:

**PA:** Okay you guys, how are we looking with our number of placements?

**ES1:** Well, it is rough. We have placed ten individuals.

**PA:** That's not good, our target is 100 by the end of the contract year (July 31, 2009) and we are four months into the contract. What is going on?

**ES2:** For one, the economy is bad, and also it is challenging to find placements.

**ES1:** We have completed two two-week long intensive pre-placement job trainings, but the supply (jobseekers) outweighs the demand (employers).

**PA:** What about the two gentlemen you placed in construction four weeks ago?

—Silence—

**ES1:** One gentleman had a verbal altercation with his co-worker and was fired. The other gentleman quit because his car broke down and he was unable to obtain reliable transportation.

**PA:** Wait, something does not sound right. First off, were you guys following up with these gentlemen to head off these problems?

**ES1:** We try to talk with the clients at least bi-weekly, but the first guy in our conversation gave no indication that there was a problem. When he came in looking for another job, I asked him why he didn't talk to me about being fired. He said he felt he could handle the situation himself. The second guy's phone had been disconnected and when the case manager went to make a home visit, he was never home.

**PA:** What about the employer? Did you reach out to the employer?

**ES2:** Yes, and he said he does not want to work with our agency because the last two guys did not work out.

**ES1:** So there is a good relationship with an employer being destroyed.

**PA:** Did we screen these guys?

**ES1:** Yes, these were two of my better candidates. They had successfully completed the skills training for construction. They also successfully completed our job skills pre-placement training and they genuinely seemed motivated to work.

**ES2:** Our clients have serious challenges regarding employment, and it takes a lot of work to get them past the interview stage, to be considered for employment. Once they are placed, that is only half the battle. The next challenge is keeping our clients employed.

**PA:** You know guys, I hear you and I truly understand your frustrations. But ultimately, our funders are going to want to see our numbers. We need to come up with a better

strategy in screening and getting our best clients placed.

**ES1:** If we are going to focus primarily on our best clients then we are creaming. What happens to those who require more assistance?

My journey in the field of social work has evolved into multiple roles as a social worker. I have worked as a case manager, therapist, consultant, and currently as a program administrator. I must add that my work as a program administrator has been, as I have begun to describe above, by far the most rewarding and challenging. My responsibilities consist of managing the day-to-day operations of a program designed to serve low-income individuals who once lived in Chicago's public housing developments. These public housing developments have undergone a massive overhaul. Families have transitioned into newly built or rehabbed housing. In light of this change, programs have been designed to assist families with their transition by providing services that will help them maintain their housing and move toward economic self-sufficiency. My social work values of self-determination, empowerment, and genuine concerns for the betterment of humankind have girded my commitment to workforce development for the most vulnerable population. In this narrative, I will write about the transformative nature of this work as part of the collective reflections.

Along with my responsibilities of making programmatic decisions regarding the implementation of services, I am responsible for meeting performance outcomes required by various funding entities. Here lies the challenging component of my job. The challenge is navigating the needs of the populations served while meeting the requirements of my funders. First, I would like to preface my comments with the clear understanding that without our funding, we would not be able to provide services to our families so desperately in need. I also want to add that I wholeheartedly endorse the need for program accountability and evaluation. However, I digress by saying that when dealing with the lives of individuals who have

“complex” needs and issues, meeting performance outcomes also become a “complex” task. I claim that it is complex because our performance benchmarks required by funders are often not reflective of the realities of the time and efforts needed to assist families.

The reflections presented here describe the challenges faced by each of the authors, including the administrator’s perspective (Vorrícia Harvey), a direct service worker’s perspective (Keweli Kwaza), and a social researcher’s perspective (Philip Hong). These reflections denote the need for transparency when communicating with funders, and the bridge between practice and research to inform funders of best practices from the client perspective. The reflections are presented in the context of the collaborative work that is being done to empower low-income individuals in their paths to achieving economic self-sufficiency through employment.

### **Employment Specialist’s Reflections**

I have worked with low wage workers for five years and have experienced some good times and some disappointing times. There are many stories in which I have helped change the lives of families. It is so rewarding to see an individual change from a once hopeless person to one who exudes confidence and hope.

One of my clients, Kathy Smith (name changed for confidentiality purpose) says she never had a place to live; in fact, she was born in prison. She has never worked a legal job. She has no high school diploma. She also has a number of felonies including drug sales/possession, armed robbery, burglary, and prostitution. When she first came to my office she solicited me (prostitution). I explained to her that I am married and I would feel as if I were disrespecting my wife, myself, and most of all Kathy herself if I took her up on her offer. I explained that I understood what it was like to not have money to provide for my family. I made an agreement with her that I would help her find a job if she would go to school to take up a trade.

I asked her, “When you were just a little girl, where did you see yourself working?” She said that she used to love watching her grandmother cook and thought that she would cook in the kitchen as well. She also explained that she has never been a good cook. I referred Kathy to Chicago Christian Industrial League (CCIL), to learn hospitality and cooking. I stayed in touch with the case managers at CCIL. The case managers at CCIL stated that Kathy had a negative attitude at first, but that she turned it all around. The longer she stayed in the program, the more her attitude improved. Before graduating from the program, the students operated the CCIL café. My coworkers and I went there for lunch and Kathy was very professional and courteous.

To tell the truth, I didn’t expect Kathy to complete the program, but she did. Now it was time for me to make good on my promise to find her a job, even with the lack of a high school diploma and all of those felonies. None of the employers I have relationships with would hire her. One day, I got into my car and was determined to not come back to the office until I found something for her. I parked my car and began to walk down Madison Street, stopping at every business on Madison. I got all the way to Austin (Chicago city limits) finishing the north side of the street and began calling on all of the businesses on the south side of the street until one business woman said, “Okay, I’ll give her a chance. But if I have any problems, I am holding you responsible.” I rushed back to my office to call Kathy with the good news. She was so excited that she went and aced the interview.

Kathy worked at the restaurant for about a year until they closed down. Kathy did not let this deter her. She was so happy that our program helped her, and her confidence had risen so that she decided to go back to school for her GED. Kathy is still attending school.

I can go on and on talking about clients who turned their lives around. Unfortunately, I can go on and on about many disappointments as well. Many of my clients have dire circumstances but not all of them have the same self-determination as Kathy. Recently, I had a client who told me that she doesn’t want to work because she doesn’t like going out in

the cold. Others with no high school diploma and multiple felonies often complain about taking low-wage jobs. Often clients will quit their jobs after a short period (less than 30 days) because they don't like the manager or they feel that they are being treated unfairly. I also get complaints of too much work or comments like, "I was only late four times," or "I only missed one day."

My biggest challenge is that I never have enough time to adequately work with clients to prepare them to interview and to work in a professional environment. The pressures of meeting contract goals can sometimes become overwhelming. Many times I have to skip parts of the preparation process in order to meet deadlines that are established by someone who doesn't understand the needs of the clients *or* the needs of the employers. I have to convince employers that my clients are ready but just don't interview well, so that they will hurry up and hire them. This rushed process has cost me relationships with employers. Although I have been recognized as one of the premier employment specialists in Chicago, I don't feel that I am truly helping most of my clients to achieve self sufficiency. I often feel that I am part of the poverty pimping game.

#### **Program Administrator's Meeting with Foundation X**

Today is the day I meet with my funder. I am concerned because I am sharing my performance. I want to share the challenges we face on the ground level without sounding as though I am making excuses. However, I feel I must be transparent with my funders to provide a clear understanding of the impact we are having with our clients on the ground level.

**Foundation X:** Well, PA, how is the program coming along?

**PA:** Well we have some successes and we have some not so successful outcomes.

**Foundation X:** Tell me about your successes and what are you doing programmatically.

**PA:** Well, we have had success in placing some of our clients. However, these are the individuals who have some work history and skills comparable to their new employment.

We have tried to enhance our assessments to place individuals in jobs they are interested in and have skills that are comparable to the work required. Examples of various employment placements are: Home Health Care, Janitorial, and Landscape. For those individuals who are not ready to enter the workforce, we have been successful in enrolling them in either GED program or other vocational training programs.

**Foundation X:** Sounds promising. Tell me more about this process.

**PA:** Well, as you know, we have case managers who work closely with our employment specialists. They have done a fantastic job in building relationships with their clients. Their work is critical and complements the work of our employment specialists. However, my case managers have been working with these clients for some time and they state that it is not an overnight process. For some, they are ready to take advantage of the resources. For others, it takes some time to click, and when it does, it happens internally. We are still learning what works.

**Foundation X:** Are these the unsuccessful ones?

**PA:** Yes, but maybe I should not label them as unsuccessful, rather those who have multiple issues we are trying to address. With this group, it is trial and error. (*I share the stories about the two construction workers*).

**Foundation X:** What do you think went wrong?

**PA:** That is the magic question. I have some thoughts on what we can do differently. We can tighten up our follow-up process with clients and employers, and screen more thoroughly. However, we thought we were doing this well. (*I share the story of Trudy whose name is changed for confidentiality purpose*).

Trudy has called me consistently for the past three weeks requesting assistance with employment placement. My employment specialist luckily gets her a job working in a hospital at \$10.00 an hour, with the opportunity to get benefits after 6 months. Trudy has excellent computer skills because she completed a computer training program through a referral from our office. I later

learned that just two days before she was to meet her 30-day retention goal, she quit her job due to a verbal altercation with her supervisor. Upon learning this information, I inquired as to what went wrong. Trudy reported that she did not like the way her supervisor talked to her. I asked her why she didn't report this to the employment specialist. She stated that she felt she had the situation under control. The employment specialist is concerned because after following up with Trudy, she gave no indication that she was experiencing a problem.

**Foundation X:** Is there anything that could have been done differently programmatically?

**PA:** This particular example raises multiple issues for me as an administrator. One, did we as the provider screen Trudy thoroughly enough? In our mad-dash to meet our performance outcomes, did we move too quickly in our placement? In our efforts to place, are we not paying enough attention to follow-up, even though we try to talk with our placed clients bi-weekly? Did we communicate enough with the employer? These are the questions I have pondered.

I feel this dialogue with funders is imperative because sometimes, in our rush to make placements and meet our numbers, we lose sight of the core mission of our work. Are the clients' lives truly transformed? Are we making an impact? What are we seeing in those clients that allow them to succeed despite multiple barriers? What are we not seeing in those who are still struggling to navigate life's challenges?

You see, I have a program in which I am required to assist individuals with multiple barriers (i.e. limited work skills, limited soft skills, low literacy rates, some criminal backgrounds, etc.) find and retain employment. When we work with these individuals, we began to uncover layers of underlying issues (i.e. low self-efficacy, low self-esteem, and hopelessness). As we begin to uncover these layers, we find that the time and efforts needed to effectively address these challenges conflict with the time constraints imposed by the requirements.

Herein lies where I have had the privilege of collaborating with a researcher who shares my commitment to truly impacting the lives of my clients. This researcher's work on psychological empowerment and employment has been invaluable to me and my team of employment specialists and case managers. His work on employment hope, in particular, addresses the very issues that surfaced during my meeting with Foundation X and it resonates profoundly with the work I am doing. I requested a meeting with him along with my employment specialist team to discuss ideas for evidence-based, bottom-up program development to better serve the needs of our clients to achieve economic self-sufficiency.

**PA:** I am so glad that you are able to work with us on how to grapple with the idea of economic self-sufficiency for our clients.

**Researcher:** Thanks for inviting me to be part of this discussion. I have worked with some workforce development agencies before and helped them understand why they were only able to meet low rates of the funders' required benchmarks on employment success. What were your experiences?

**PA:** We have been blessed to have many funders provide us with the resources and plans to achieve success with our clients. Some clients have achieved their employment goals and have moved in the path toward upward mobility, but many remain caught between multiple barriers to obtaining and sustaining employment.

**Researcher:** What is your performance benchmark? What determines success for you?

**ES1:** If I may, it has to do with putting people to work. And many of these folks are labeled as hard-to-serve and they want us to get them out of the system of dependency and get them on the path toward self-sufficiency.

**ES2:** Our job is to work with our case managers to formulate the best success strategy for each individual who has had a long history of no work or very little labor market attachment. They tend to have various employment barriers that limit their ability to keep a work-life balance.

**PA:** Our overall numbers are pretty good to the funders, especially considering the fact

that we're working with the "hard-to-serve," who don't believe in themselves or the system. Yet I really worry about the ones who don't quite make it. Because people are not numbers. Their situations are real yet we tend to be bounded by what we're told to achieve.

**Researcher:** This is exactly the challenge that many agencies are facing. I suggest working with the clients' inner strength to motivate them and then to build individualized goal-oriented path for their success. This empowerment process would not only help your agency to increase future performance benchmark, but also develop 'employment hope' for individuals and families in the community. What's most important is that this approach requires a renewed commitment to investing in human development to better their lives and well-being, and not just 'regulating the poor' for social control.

#### Social Researcher's Reflections

My research has revealed over the years that a top-down approach to pushing low-income individuals and families to achieve self-sufficiency may have good intentions policywise, but it does not adequately address the realities of our clients. Human capital development in the form of education, job training, and health is reported to be less than helpful for low-income individuals to leave poverty (Hong & Pandey, 2008). These traits tend to be deep-seated, structurally vulnerable characteristics among low-income populations (Rank, 2004) rather than simple variables to consider in policy and program development.

I have been involved in a program evaluation of a local workforce development initiative monitored by a national foundation. When approached with a question of how to deal with the issue of low success rate in achieving self-sufficiency for participants in a job training and job-readiness program, I could not help but ask how self-sufficiency was measured. The agency's definition was that one becomes self-sufficient when he or she finds employment and stays in the job for one year. This practice was justified by research that people are more likely to stay in the jobs longer and make economic advancement when they keep their jobs at least a year.

This made logical sense; but why were people not becoming self-sufficient with all these support services and training? These clients have to deal with many structural and personal employment barriers: lack of job opportunities, discrimination, lack of access to transportation, work disincentives built into social policies, limited education and job-related/soft skills, lack of work experience, criminal background, lack of affordable childcare, substance use and abuse, domestic violence, etc. It is no wonder that programs find it challenging to help clients find and keep jobs, with their overly ambitious programmatic goals given a whole host of barriers to consider in the equation.

It left me to believe that there is something that we're all blinded to by only sticking to our mainstream theories and logic and not asking the clients themselves. I proposed to conduct a series of focus groups with program participants, graduates, and some staff members to see what they believed to be the definition of self-sufficiency from their own perspectives. I recall one of the focus group participants voicing his frustration in thinking about the term self-sufficiency. This incident has had a lasting effect on my work on workforce development from a bottom-up empowerment perspective.

**Researcher:** I am a university faculty member and researcher and would like to learn about your thoughts on the term self-sufficiency. In your own words, what does this mean?

**Participant A:** I believe it is having enough money to pay for your bills.

**Participant B:** I also think it has to do with not being reliant on government, state, churches...and other people period. No free checks.

**Participant C:** Hold on, I don't mean to be disruptive, but let me ask you this. Do you believe you are self-sufficient? Don't you get help from other people?

**Researcher:** Um...(pause)...you know, in the strictest sense, no I don't think so.

**Participant C:** Then why do only poor people have to be self-sufficient? Who is really self-sufficient in this world?

Participant C's point triggered responses from other participants to move away from the outcome-based definition of self-sufficiency and imagine a rather process-oriented alternative definition. Clients commonly conceptualized self-sufficiency more as a psychological process and not an economic outcome (Hong, Sheriff, & Naeger, 2009). It is an empowerment process by which people are transformed on the path to building inner strength and developing a sense of goal-orientation and acquiring job-related skills. I call this a process of developing employment hope.

Like what Participant C suggested, economic self-sufficiency is an unrealistic goal for anyone in our society and subsequently marginalizes people, particularly the low-income groups with lack of resources. On the other hand, employment hope is what everyone in our society ought to share in our quest to achieve upward mobility. This may seem common sense to many practitioners on the ground level, but it was a significant revelation that has shaped my research orientation. This is evidence of best practice in workforce development based on how staff and service recipients together perceived success within transformative processes.

My suggestion to the agency was to measure what they actually do well—building employment hope and job skills—and break out of the dependency on job placement as the undeniable truth to success. Job placement is a function not only of program effectiveness but also of multiple employment barriers experienced by these clients and whether there are enough employers who are willing to hire them. Practice-informed research has emerged from this work and I continue to work with various workforce development programs to measure employment hope as a new concept of success for our job-seeking clients.

At present, research-informed practice is being advocated for by suggesting key foundations and notable agencies to redefine success and work toward a bottom-up change. This would involve monitoring of such empowerment process as an intermediary success measure which would ultimately lead

to economic success. As employment hope is a reflection not just of individual psychology but also of their perception on what opportunities the society offers them, the social change effort would also need to involve the business community to embrace our clients as they move into the workforce.

While a few agencies tend to be committed to this work, it remains a challenge when the current policy context continues to drive many foundations and agencies to adhere to the behavioral change strategy and rely heavily on the tangible outcomes rather than psychological empowerment. Here's what I typically encounter when talking to foundations (represented by Foundation Y) for potential research funding:

**Researcher:** Thanks for talking with me to discuss the potential funding opportunities for conducting research on client empowerment in workforce development.

**Foundation Y:** I have glanced at the material that you had sent me. So, help me remember what it is that you want to study. You say employment hope?

**Researcher:** Yes, prior research has revealed that self-sufficiency as commonly known is not something identified with by people directly affected by the policy reality. They see it more as a process rather than an outcome. It is a process of building employment hope which is a function of psychological empowerment and developing future goal orientation.

**Foundation Y:** Oh, I remember now. It is a very interesting topic as a research project but...sorry about being so direct...I think it is too wishy-washy a concept when it comes to putting this into practice. You can measure employment hope all you want, but it is not something tangible that the foundation can rely on as a concrete goal.

**Researcher:** But you know it's real. This is the story told by the very clients and many workforce development agencies agree that change starts from the inside and gradually moves to forming consistent behavioral patterns that lead to employment outcomes.

**Foundation Y:** I like the idealist in you, but when someone has to put a lot of money on something, there better be something visible

reported as a result. I believe that's what most foundations want to know.

**Researcher:** We all know that change doesn't happen that quickly for anyone. Why are these top-down changes expected to happen in such a short time interval for low-income jobseekers? Would it be possible for funders be the change agent supporting non-traditional, innovative ideas?

**Foundation Y:** One day, hopefully, but we currently have to go with our commitment to partners whose interest is to build on prior successful programs and continue to see improvement in the numbers – more people finding jobs and becoming economically self-sufficient.

**Researcher:** I understand and I truly hope that "one day" can arrive soon. All this is not about anyone else but those who live the realities of employment barriers and harsh economic conditions. I hope new collaborations will emerge to build employment hope for our clients and to restructure the

economic environment in which this hope can grow. Thank you very much for your time.

### Program Administrator's Final Thoughts

In my work as a program administrator, I have found that there are a group of individuals that seize the opportunities and take advantage of the many resources available. A common theme in these individuals is their sense of hope. Their family structure may be dysfunctional and chaotic, however their self-confidence and self-efficacy are intact. They have the internal strengths that propel them to achieve. Then, there are those who are struggling internally. Their struggles are often manifested in various ways (i.e. depression, apathy, and substance abuse).

I have found that all the trainings and pre-placement employment services are not enough to help individuals gain and sustain employment. I was talking to a young man who stated that he was heading down the wrong path. However, it was not until something clicked for him internally that he was able to move forward. I inquired as to what specifically caused the transformation. He stated it was a combination of things; particularly he felt the change had to occur on the inside. He also stated that his case manager was a catalyst in the sense that she encouraged him to take advantage of some of the resources available to him.

This all may sound cliché to many, but for me it has been a consistent theme throughout my 15+ years working in the field of social work within distressed communities. The challenge I have experienced when talking with funders is, "How do you operationalize this concept programmatically?" I strongly believe that until this is done, a critical element will be missed. If we do not address this issue, we will easily succumb to the quick fixes. This is where the bridge between practice and research becomes vital to informing best practices, for which the success could be measured up against its contribution to the transformative processes for many who have been socially and economically excluded. Investing in employment hope will have a long-



term effect on helping low-income individuals and families achieve economic advancement.

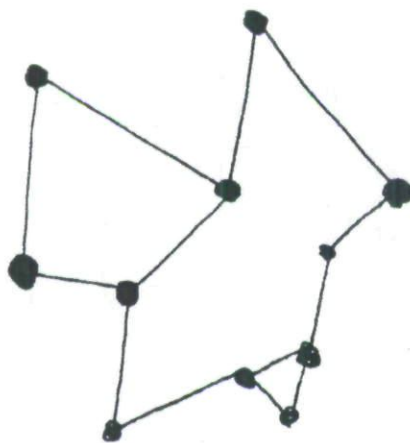
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