

Giving Effective Instructions

As Rescue Mission staff, we have the responsibility to give instructions to clients on multiple levels. From chores to room maintenance to applications to job hunts, we are frequently instructing clients on procedures. Developing skill in this area is part of respect and hospitality, as well as training. If we give shoddy directions to accomplish an assignment and the client does not do according to our desires, perhaps we need to come to understand that we may have set the client up to fail. On the other hand, if we give too much detail when giving directions, we may be seen as putting the person down. Technique and skill in this area will do much to improve both our relationship with the client as well as preventing wasted time for both of us.

In order to gain some compassion and motivation to learn this skill, remember the last time you opened a box of something that you had to assemble, and the frustration you felt with the way the instructions were written. Or consider the time when you stopped at the service station to ask directions and were given the run-around. Why did you feel irritation? Probably the same reason your client will be frustrated if given ineffective instructions.

First, we have to understand “Do Not Assume.” If you have done a chore many times, it is easy to assume that every person would know how to do it. Surely everyone knows how to mop a floor or how to load an institutional dishwasher! Really? Instead of such an inaccurate assumption, think back to the first time you had to do said chore and think about what you wish someone had told you. Such an example will give you a humorous way of introducing your verbal instruction the next time. Allow the client to understand that everyone learns things for the first time, and because you are not privy to know how much a person knows, you have developed your instructions to reach everyone. You can always respectfully say something like, “I apologize if this is something you are already skilled in, but bear with me to give you the way we do things here in case that is different from your method.”

Effective Instructions Are:

- clear
- concise
- well-defined
- comprehensive
- complete
- unambiguous
- goal-directed

Next, we need to have a clear understanding of the finished product. If you have ever tried to manipulate a wood puzzle, you know a clear picture of the end product is crucial. Giving the client a heads-up at the beginning of the instruction by describing the quality and the value of the finished project, puts even the most menial of tasks in a good light. For instance, instructing a client in how to load the commercial dishwasher correctly is prefaced by a short acknowledgement of how important proper sanitation is to the clients who are exposed to many germs in close living quarters. And, of

course, a little humor is also useful: “You may think we are training you to be a dishwasher, but in reality we are training you to be an Environmental Sanitation Expert!”

Providing other overall information, either before or after giving the steps to follow, is also useful. How long will this take? How often do we have to repeat it? How will I know if it was successfully completed? What is the worst thing that could happen if I don’t get it right the first time?

Set the training atmosphere as a safe place. Encouraging the client to ask questions and give input promotes a sense of inclusion. An important “fact” for them to know is there is no such thing around here as a “stupid” question.

Remember that your client does not like to fail and often has a fear of more failure. For most, there has been little history of affirmation for jobs well done. For these reasons, there is frequent resistance to someone evaluating the finished work, but this is a great opportunity for growth if the evaluation is done correctly.

Think of every step that must be done. To mop the floor, one step that must be included is how to prepare the cleaning solution. What step has to be done before you can do the step you are describing? To instruct a person to “take the bus” may need to be preceded with “acquire a bus route” or “discover the bus stops.”

Break down the task into short steps given in order of sequence. Sometimes, numbering the steps gives a way of helping recall.

Stay on task. It is so easy to start chattering and skip around, promoting confusion for the novice. Do your visiting before or after giving the step-by-step procedure.

Don’t mumble! If you have given the same instruction every day to new people, resist the temptation to go to “boring automatic monotone.” Use universal language. If your instructions say to use a wet mop or a deck mop when there is only one kind of mop in the closet, just say “mop.” I have long accepted the axiom that a great communicator speaks the language of the listener. If I am showing off for the trainee with my vast command of the English language, I need not expect great results.

There are three basic learning styles: visual, auditory, and kinesthetic. Visual learners think in pictures, auditory ones think in sound and dialogue, and kinesthetic learners need motion and gesture to understand. We need to learn how to give instructions that cover all three. If you have a task that you are repeatedly training clients to perform, then write down simple directions to give them. Visuals are even better.

Use caution if you are assigning the responsibility of training or giving instructions to a client. New problems arise when you ask one client to train another. Use this method successfully only if the client has already passed the “humble test,” and actually follows instructions on how to give instructions. A client usually does not yet know how to deal with resistance and disrespect.

Problems to avoid:

- Leaving a piece out
- Talking too fast
- Making assumptions
- Using language that can be misunderstood

Demonstration is best for physical tasks. Give the verbal instruction. Then demonstrate. Then give a written sequence of activity. For more mental or behavioral instruction, such as how to decide which job opportunity is best, discussion replaces the demonstration step.

Check for understanding. Ask the trainee to repeat the steps back to you. In order to keep this from the appearance of being demeaning, you can raise the level of value by asking them to tell you the steps they would list to train the next person to do this chore.

Another way to confirm understanding is to give examples of previous observations of failure and ask how to prevent that.

For example, after finishing instructions on how to mop the cafeteria floor, tell the story of some time back when the mopped floor was very sticky, and ask the trainee what part of the instruction was probably not followed.

Understand that a number of your clients for one reason or another have very short attention spans. Make your times of instruction short but repeatable, with review planned throughout. If the assigned task has two parts, stop and confirm understanding after the first before proceeding. You can say things like, "I want to make sure I did okay with giving these instructions."

Learn from your mistakes. Clients at CUM are now instructed how to carry the trash bags out to the dumpster after much experience in time-consuming cleaning of the concrete where food liquids seeped out of bags dragged across a rough texture!

Before you complete your preparation to give specific instructions, play a game with yourself. Pretend you are the person you are about to instruct and work through the steps yourself. If you can't do the task perfectly with your instructions, go back and reconstruct the procedure.

We learn to give effective instructions at the mission for three reasons:

- ✓ we don't have the time or resources to do jobs over.
- ✓ we want to give life-skill training to clients that can be transferable on the job or in the home in the future.
- ✓ we get a built-in opportunity to give affirmation and respect to clients.

*Lord, help me
to have the same perspective You have
for Your creation.*