

PROBLEM RESOLUTION: PERSUASION AND COMMUNICATION

Everyday we all use various methods to try to persuade other people. Praise, hugs, education, indeed, everything we say, in one way or another, is an attempt to affect things around us.

The most important way we try to persuade is by communicating. Think about it for a moment. People who speak without influence might as well be jabbering to themselves. As ombudsmen, we have clear communication goals. We use communication to improve conditions for long-term care residents. We do this primarily through the power of persuasion. Persuasive communication is not just words: 5 percent is visual, 38 percent is non-verbal (tone, tempo and volume) and only 7 percent verbal. All that we are, all that we know, and all that we represent, strongly influence communication. How well do you use communication to influence others?

To answer this, it helps to understand the bases of persuasion. You can use this knowledge to enhance your ability to influence events. It will help you identify skills that will empower you to effectively help long-term care residents who are often without power and influence. This is what ombudsmen are all about.

The Problem Resolution Profile can help you determine whether or not your communication is persuasive. The *Problem Resolution Profile* is based on the following principle: communication is the response that you get. In other words, when you address issues as an ombudsman, how are people responding to you? If you don't get the response you seek, take a look at how you communicate. This instrument will help you do this. You will learn about the forms of persuasion and which ones you most commonly use. You will also identify which ones you should learn to use more often.

The Five Forms of Persuasion

1. **Legal Authority:** Legal authority refers to your legal or official power base. As an ombudsman, you hold a legal role. Others have a formal obligation to accept this role.

However, research shows that legal authority, when compared to other forms of persuasion, is not particularly strong. An ombudsman who relies solely on legal authority is only a paper tiger, an ineffective holder of an empty title. Think of your legal authority as a springboard to greater influence when used in conjunction with the other forms of persuasion.

2. **Charisma:** People like to please someone they like and admire. Charisma is emotional in nature and is triggered when others find you attractive, dynamic, charming, personable or appealing in some important way.

The charisma factor is very strong. Some people believe that you either have it or you don't. There is no question that both genetics and upbringing shape your charisma; personalities are remarkably stable and not changed. But you can increase your effective use of charisma by improving your communication skills. In fact, evidence shows that training on key communication subjects such as "*pacing*" and *active listening* can help build charisma.

3. **Reward:** The power to reward relates to an individual's ability to confer or withhold formal rewards. Managers, for example, can offer pay increases, choice jobs, promotions and other benefits to employees. The ombudsman's reward power isn't so obvious. Nevertheless, each ombudsman has it—we just don't often use it. Shouldn't we praise good provider efforts? You bet! The power of positive reinforcement is well documented. A pat on the back and a kind word can have great impact, but all too often ombudsmen forget this. We shouldn't.

4. **Expertise:** Expertise is our ability to influence others with our knowledge. The influence of expertise is very strong. Experts can influence others despite other weaknesses. For example, experts might not have legal authority, but can still be influential because they know what they are doing, at least in a specialized area. Knowledge is power!

Ombudsmen work in a field of specialized knowledge. Both formal and on-the-job learning are important means to develop ombudsman skills. Expertise is gained by learning and doing! Take every opportunity to develop your knowledge of long-term care, including regulations, residents' rights, Medicaid and quality-of-life issues. Learn all you can about conflict resolution. By increasing knowledge, you increase your expertise leading to more effective advocacy.

5. **Coercion:** Coercion is based on fear. The person who wields coercive power has the ability to inflict punishment through formal or informal means. For ombudsmen, coercion entails advising the provider that you will take your concern outside the facility (to licensing, protective services, the fire department or other relevant agency) if it is not resolved in a timely fashion. Coercive strength is based on the idea that your opponent will be more highly motivated by fear of loss than anything else.

Of all the forms of persuasion, coercion is the most often abused. Should ombudsmen use coercion? Yes, but only as a last resort. Use coercion when there are no other alternatives and only if you have a rock-solid case worth going to the mat for. You must be able to follow through-make sure you have the backing of your Deputy! Use it in situations where time is critical and the risks are high, for example when a resident might die. You also might use it when collaboration has lost its impact.

Above all, ombudsmen who employ coercive techniques should separate **style** from **strategy**. While coercive **strategies** are aggressive and threatening, the ombudsman's **style** shouldn't be. The ombudsman's personal style should always be fair, firm and friendly. You might be professionally intense, but never rude, hostile or explosive.

Be aware that coercion has high negatives. It can win battles, but lose wars. It tends to destroy relationships and invite retaliation. Coercion tends to escalate things negatively, turning specific cases into general issues. Consider your options carefully before choosing coercion!

Which Form of Persuasion is Best?

Ombudsmen should be able to use all five forms of persuasion. Work on improving your skills in each area, especially expertise persuasion, where you have the greatest potential to improve. Also work on appropriately matching the form of persuasion with the situation. After all, how effectively you use persuasion will determine how successful you are as an ombudsman. Work to develop your skills in each of the five forms of persuasion-these skills will enable you to bring about the changes that will improve the quality of life for the residents you serve!

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