



Paul Burke Training Group

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Beyond training: Looking at learning MI in a whole new light!

Thoughts on Improved Practice (TIP) #1501



After providing workshop training to more than 7000 people in the past dozen years, I know that not everyone can do motivational interviewing. I know that some don't want to. Some don't need to. And some, simply put, just can't. Some people can't (or won't) unlearn the stuff that gets in their way when the work requires cultivating motivation rather than providing a fix for that which needs to be fixed!



So, I'm beginning the 2015 training year with a new thinkseed. Whereas some folk believe in New Year's resolutions, I'm thinking more along the lines of a *New Year's Revolution*! I've got my head planted firmly in the clouds so that I can daydream about a time when Motivational Specialists will be just as common and just as accessible as diagnostic interviewers, employment interviewers, and assessment interviewers. It's a wonderful place to be. There will come a time when clients are all being served, each according to his need, including those who need help to enhance their own motivations for positive change, but who aren't ready for "service".

Many people who work away at improving their MI skills come to understand the approach as something of a "special skill". I hear statements to that effect at almost every workshop I facilitate. Such was the case at a Peer Coaching session that I facilitated in Fredericton. We invested some time at various points



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throughout the week to isolate and then name a variety of “special” characteristics that make MI seem especially important (and challenging) to learn.

All of that talk about the special features and special nature of the MI approach got me to wondering. What kind of a difference might it make to the overall efficacy of behavior-change work if every agency had a few “Motivational Enhancement Specialists” on staff? What if MI were a specialty practice that was readily accessible to a variety of practitioners who could make immediate referrals when motivational work was required before the more action-oriented helping work kicked into gear?

Many helping professionals invest many years and lots of student loans to develop specializations and to get very good at what they do. They develop a specialist practice in CBT. Or SFT. Or DBT. Or EMDR. Some specialize in client advocacy and others in case management and in “psycho-education” and in narrative work. All over the world, helpers specialize in Commitment Therapy, Occupational Therapy, Emotionally Focused Therapy, Physiotherapy, Addictions Counselling, and ...

So, then, me wonders, why not a specialty in Motivational Therapy? (You know, where the therapy was targeted at the motivation itself?)

Imagine if every helping agency and every professional helper had a specially trained and highly skilled Motivational Enhancement Specialist on staff who worked away at getting clients ready (and willing and able) for the help that works best when clients have developed their own, intrinsic reasons for pursuing such help? What if we never had to turn anyone away because they were not ready for the action that our agencies are turbo-charged to promote? What if action on motivation was action enough? How much time and money would it save everyone involved, if chatting a few times with the in-house Motivational Specialist was a common practice for those who need help to pursue the help they need?

All over the world, organizations are learning that employee recruitment interviewing is a specialty skill. They don't hand over that task to just anyone who's dabbled with a little exposure training during a few workshops here

and there. In fact, entire companies now exist that contract to provide the specialized interviewing expertise that can only be honed with years of practice and with mastery of technique.



Diagnostic interviewing is also a specialist skill. Specially trained folk who know the art and science of assessment interviewing tell us that assessment interviewing takes specialist skills that not everyone has – just because they took a workshop or two on the subject – once upon a time. Forensic Interviewing takes time to learn. There are standards and principles and criteria to meet.

And it's the same with MI.



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Some people take to MI as naturally as ducks take to the water! Others are more gifted at working on problems after the client's motivation is already in place. I've seen people who have to work very hard to develop even a teaspoonful of MI savvy and a half-cup of partnership skill. Such folks often seem to struggle every step of the way to overcome the reflex reactions that may otherwise be a gift when action steps have been activated and the pursuit of change is in play.

There are many good therapists who excel with the therapy end of things who are sort of "not-so-pretty-good" when motivational enhancement is the goal! Working toward repair of a pathology is an entirely different thing than when therapy is required on readiness, willingness, and ability to change. Helping someone fill out a request for subsidized housing, or modify their daily exercise routine, or establish a relapse prevention plan are entirely different skills than helping folks find their own, internal reasons for making a specified change.

So, this year I'll be writing from time to time about what might be required of someone who wanted to work as a motivational specialist. For now, I'll say that it would take more than just attending a workshop! Certainly, it would require demonstration of the ability to practice MI, with competence, to a standardized measure of fidelity.

I've heard too many people who are brand new to the practice of MI say things like "there's really not much to this whole MI thing! Jiminy Whiskers! I do it all the time!" Hence, my thinkseed. *What if 2015 is the start of a conspiracy that legitimizes motivational enhancement as an interviewing specialty? What if we find a way to better explain why some people can do MI and some can't – or at least that some will and some won't? How would it change our capacity for professional development if we could help our organizations to understand why competency development in MI takes specialized knowledge, practice, supervision, encouragement and feedback from clients.* That would, indeed, be a New Year's revolution!



This year, let's find ways to go beyond the workshops. Let's work to nourish the culture that says that MI is a specialized competency. It's core to so much of our work. Many of our clients need it. Let's put our skills to the test!

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Paul Burke".