



Paul Burke Training Group

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

Thoughts on Improved Practice (TIP) #1725



When working with others to guide their pursuit of change, we have four choices:

- 1. be helpfully honest**
- 2. be harmfully honest**
- 3. be brutally honest**
- 4. be dishonest**

A few years ago, I was in Calgary training a group of Social Workers who work with marginalized people in some of the poorest areas of that city. It ended up being a great learning experience for all of us – and also one of the strangest travel experiences of my life! The city was hosting a “Global Oil Show” – which was all very exciting for Calgary, and for the province. Thousands of delegates from all over the world stampeded into Calgary to spend three days marveling at the latest and greatest achievements and gadgets in the field of oil and gas. It was less exciting for me however, when I went online to book my room only to discover that there was not a single hotel room to be had anywhere within 50 miles of that lovely city! (I ended up commuting more than 60 miles in and out of the city each morning and evening!)

To be honest, I was not a happy camper. To be brutally honest, I thought it was a stupid time of year for a city to host an Oil Show – right at the same time as an important MI training event was going on!

The hotel staff throughout the city were stretched to the limit, and were tired at having to turn away so many people given that hundreds of calls were pouring in from desperate hopefuls all panicked and begging for a place to hang their hats for a few nights. While I was on the phone to about the twentieth Calgary hotel on my search list, the woman at the front desk said “well, Sir, I hate to tell you, but we are



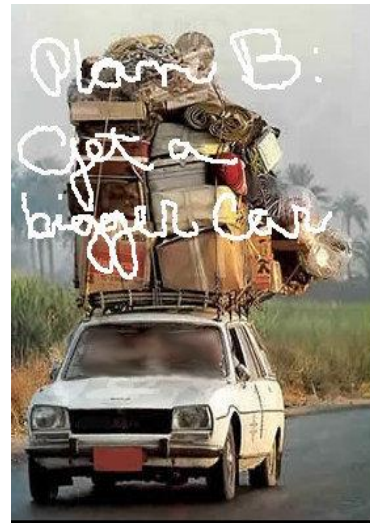
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experiencing the Mary and Joseph Syndrome here for the next few days! Even if you were Jesus, I'd have to tell you that there's simply no room at the Inn!" Then, she laughed out loud (thinking I would be amused) and she added a question. "Can I be brutally honest with you here?", she asked. I assured her that she could and she said "I might be able to help you out if you were willing to make your own bed for your stay". Given the desperate nature of my situation, I quickly assured her that making my own bed would be no problem at all. "Good", she replied. "In that case, just bring a hammer and nails and whatever kind of lumber suits your fancy for the bed posts and we might just be in business!" Then, she laughed like a Hyena whilst I debated whether I'd be further ahead to laugh, cry, or scream.

After I got off the plane in Calgary, I had to wait a bit while the attendant brought my rental car around to the booth at the airport. They'd had a rush on cars. Seems there was an Oil Show in town. Eventually the attendant looked up from his desk and said "oh – here's your car now!" I couldn't believe it. There it was, sitting waiting for me, both doors, and the tiny little hatch-back wide open. A brand new, Herring Blue, 2-door Suzuki Swift! A cute enough little car, I suppose – for those who can handle "little" and for those who aren't travelling with two HUGE training cases of over 50 pounds apiece, a briefcase, and two other large bags for my clothing and the like! To be honest, the car wasn't really "little" at all. It was TINY. The car wasn't big enough for me and a cup of coffee let alone for me and my travelling classroom! I had ordered a mid-sized car with 4-door. A "Chev Malibu or Similar" the computer had promised me when I made the booking. The rental attendant was able to read my reaction well – but he intervened quickly, before I could say what was on my mind. "Don't worry", he said. "You're one of the lucky ones! A lot of people just won't be getting cars today at all. We're overbooked with the Oil Show and all. Plus – this little baby is really good on gas"!



"To be honest" I said, "I don't think all my luggage is going to fit into that thing even if I wedge it in with a crow bar. That car is just simply too small."

"Well, to be honest", he replied, "I think you might be right about that!". And then, without even so much as a blink, he continued. "But I suppose, to be brutally honest, we could just say that it's not the car that's too small, it's just that the driver has too much stuff! Maybe you should have rented a moving van!" As he beetled away all proud of his wit, I started to cram the smaller cases in behind the passenger seat.

Finally, I got underway and settled in for the one-hour trip to Sundre where I would be spending the night before the one-hour trip back into the city to teach the next morning. I turned on the radio to see if that might sooth my rattled nerves a little and was surprised to find a local talk show where the topic was drug addiction in the inner city. "To be brutally honest", the host professed, "I think it's high time



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we quit mollicoddling these drug addicts and put the blame where it belongs!” He ranted for another minute or two and then he said “to be brutally honest, somebody just needs to hold a mirror up to their faces and have the guts to tell it like it is!” Then, as if he was the one holding up the mirror for his addicted victim, he continued. “Have a good look at yourself, you idiot! It’s as plain to see as the nose on your face. You’re a mess. And nobody is going to do anything about it because nobody can do anything about it – except you. You’re the one. You either decide to get on with it and get some help, or decide to pack it in. It’s up to you. Your choice. If you decide not to get help don’t come whining and complaining to me, or to the government to rescue you from yourself. Step up – or step out.”

By that time, I’d had about enough of the “brutally honest” approach to being helpful. It reminded me that when working with others to guide their pursuit of change, we have four choices: 1) be helpfully honest. 2) be harmfully honest. 3) be brutally honest, and 4) be dishonest.

With MI work, it has been my experience that it is best to try the first approach. It involves finding ways to be **helpfully honest**. **Brutality has no place in helping**. I have never seen it enhance anyone’s motivation for change. In fact, it seems to me that brutality probably serves to diminish motivation more than any other single intervention.

Few could argue that honesty is a virtue in almost all situations. It’s wholesome, and good, and full of nutrition for the soul. It’s as if we hope that some of the goodness contained in honesty will compensate for the some of the hurt that is intended when the approach becomes “brutal”. ‘Brutal honesty’ as a helping concept makes no more sense than ‘violent love’. ‘**Helpful honesty**’ should be the goal of the MI helper.

Don meets with his MI Helper to discuss his medical test results. The situation is not good and Don asks you for your honest reaction to where things are at with him.	
A “brutally honest” approach	A “helpfully honest” approach
To be brutally honest, Don, I guess I would have to tell you that, yes, I think you’re kidding yourself here. I think your test results speak for themselves. You’re in a crisis here. You’ve let this situation deteriorate now until you are in a real mess. You can hide your head in the sand a little longer if you like. And if you do that, I think we both know who you’re kidding. The fact is that it’s time for you to wake up and smell the coffee. You’re the only one who can change this. It’s time to have a good, honest look in the mirror and ask yourself “do I like what I see here?” If not, there’s no harm in admitting that “if it don’t look pretty there’s only one person who can do anything about it and that person is staring back at you in that mirror.” It’s	Well, Don, I’d like to be honest with you and I’d also like to be helpful. It honestly looks to me like the evidence is piling up in favor of change. Your tests results suggest that it would be good to have a look at what all that means, and to make some decisions about how to react to them. Test results are really just facts with questions attached. Really, they’re just saying “here are the facts – now – you’ll need to think about how you want to react to the facts”. I suspect it’s hard to face all of the facts all at once. I imagine it’s a bit overwhelming for you and that’s why I want to assure you that you don’t need to handle all of that on your own. The whole purpose of our chatting like this is to have a look at the facts and



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time to poop or get off the pot here, Don. You've been living in denial about this for long enough.

then decide on the best way to react to them. You are not in this alone, and it sounds like you're at a place where you might be ready to start having a look at some of this in a way that you could manage.

This week, I invite you to look for opportunities during MI conversations to ask yourself "how can I be honest with this person (when my input is warranted) in such a way as to be helpful – and so as to avoid being brutal?"

A while ago, I heard Dr. Miller say "**if our clients could, in fact, benefit from being shamed, blamed, scolded, informed, taught, reprimanded, or treated with blunt facts ... none of us would have jobs. Nobody would need us!**"

People often benefit from honesty – but never from brutality.

Brutality has never had a place in MI work.

Until next week ...

Team Leader,
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