Beyond training: Looking at learning MI in a whole new light!
Thoughts on Improved Practice (TIP) #1824

Without the benefit of feedback, practicing your new M.I. skills is a little like sucking in your gut when you get on the bathroom scale. It might look good on the surface, but you shouldn't take it to mean that things are actually improving!

(W.R. Miller)

Practice Does Not Make Perfect!

You may have noticed that professional helping is not referred to as a "perfect". Physicians speak of their "medical practice" – but I'll bet you've never heard one speak of their "medical perfect". In the very same way, I know many counsellors who say that they have a "counselling practice", but I've never met one who suggested that she operates a "counselling perfect'. Many world class athletes describe how they "practice" their sport – but none admit to having perfected it! The same logic applies to all of us who practice with enhancing people's motivation for change by hosting helpful conversations. It is unlikely that any of us will ever achieve true "mastery" and be able to brag that we can facilitate the "perfect interview".

Reflective listening plays a major role in how MI gets results. Similarly, reflective learning plays a major role in how MI practitioners develop their skills. When I reflect on my own development as a Motivational Interviewer and when I consider how, after training, some workshop participants go on to become very skilled, there is no doubt that receiving objective, accurate feedback on practice is what makes the difference between practicing improvements and practicing mistakes. After having only one or two brief MI workshops, without good, accurate, reliable and objective feedback – you are bound to end up only practicing the same mistakes, or "imperfects" over, and over, and over again. With no feedback to guide them, I have seen far too many people come back to an advanced training session having practiced various skills in the wrong way, until they have become quite perfect in doing it wrong!

Contrary to what you may have heard, **PRACTICE DOES NOT MAKE PERFECT!** *Rather, practice makes consistency.* Practicing the wrong skills over and over and over again will only make you very consistent in doing it wrong! Human beings need feedback to help them make the necessary adjustments that lead to improved practice.

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Without feedback, there is simply no way to know whether what you're doing is working, or to know whether you're getting better over time, or worse!

This week, I'm encouraging you to think about how getting some support, guidance, advice, and some overall good-practice tips is an important part of the recipe for getting good at this thing called M.I.

So – how does one obtain accurate, objective, and useful feedback – in a way that will preserve that most-valuable of all natural resources: self-esteem? Well, here are four ideas:

1. Get yourself a portable voice recorder and use it to **record and play back sample interviews**. With the permission of your agency and your client, you might be able to record an actual motivational interview that you have facilitated. If that poses too many challenges, ask a friend or a co-worker to allow you to facilitate an MI session with him/her around a minor issue that s/he is thinking about changing. The "topic" or "target" should surround some issue that your friend would like to pursue (or knows that s/he "should") – but hasn't yet been able to accomplish (losing weight, quitting smoking, exercising more, eating better, spending money on a vacation. purchasing a new car, spending more time with the kids, taking golf lessons, etc.).

> **I.** Then, when you have time, go back and listen to 20 minutes worth of the conversation (select a random section if the conversation lasts beyond this time frame).
>
> **II.** While listening, "code" yourself on one or two of the following dimensions:
>
>> 1. how many reflections?
>> 2. how many questions?
>> 3. what is your ratio of questions to reflections
>> 4. how collaborative were you? What was the evidence of that?
>> 5. how evocative?
>> 6. where could you have used reflections instead of questions?
>> 7. could you have turned any questions into reflective statements by simply removing the question mark from your tone of voice?
>> 8. to what degree did you demonstrate empathy with the client's logic and their perspective on their situation?
>> 9. how many affirmations did you make? Where were there missed opportunities to affirm
>> 10. if you could change only one thing in this interview if you had the chance to repeat it, what would that one thing be? Why?

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11. Take a few brief notes on what you discover, and then ask a friend who has some training in MI to also listen to the same recorded sample that you coded. Then, compare notes. Does your friend agree with your observations and self-assessment? Where the two of you have different observations, tallies, or assessments, dig a little! Who's right? (Searching for the truth in this way is a great method of learning some of the core components of "good MI practice".) As repayment for the time your friend gave you in comparing notes, offer to reciprocate! It's amazing how much you can learn by observing the practice of someone else – and by being the one to give the feedback – and not just being on the receiving end!
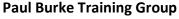
2. Join an MI Learning Circle (Peer Coaching Circle). If you can't find one to join – try forming one of your own! (or - sit in for a "guest visit"). Many Learning Circle participants would welcome the chance to learn by helping others learn! Ask the group to help you by listening to a recorded sample and giving specific feedback to questions (such as those posed in items 1-10, above). Audio tapes work just as well as video tapes for this purpose, and often audio tapes are easier to obtain. They also require less equipment for play-back at the Circle. When receiving feedback from a group, you'll find that the discussion itself becomes as informative and educational as the specific feedback on your MI behaviour. Thinking through how an interview could have been more collaborative, or evocative, or supportive of client autonomy is immensely helpful in preparing for future practice with clients.

3.   Consider having a sample of your practice professionally coded once a year or so. My company offers an individual coding and coaching service that provides highly individualized feedback and support to people who are working away at improving their practice (and who aren't yet at the level of "perfect". It's painless, I promise! Those of you who have participated in good coaching may not remember the level of anxiety that can start to rumble at the thought of getting one-on-one feedback from someone who has put your work under a microscope - but I do! Everyone has memories of "feedback" that wasn't really feedback at all – and instead was just criticism, judgment and evaluation. We've all had unpleasant experiences with judgments and put-downs that masquerade as 'constructive criticism'. My personal philosophy about the use of feedback in learning is that "**IF IT INVOLVES CRITICISM, IT AIN'T FEEDBACK**!" The fact is that criticism is criticism. While it is true that feedback is critical [essential], it is also true that feedback is NOT criticism. Given that obtaining good feedback is so essential to learning, be careful where you obtain it.

The cost of having your work professionally coded varies, depending on the length of the sample that you want coded, and depending on how thorough and extensive you want the feedback on the coding

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outcomes to be. Some coders charge by the hour, and some charge "per sample". To be honest, I don't recommend sending in tapes for review where you get only a print-out of the codes in return (e.g. where there is no individualized feedback, coaching, and discussion about the coding outcomes). Personally, I normally like to code 15-20 minutes of a session, and then provide a 45-minute feedback/discussion session by phone or by Skype. I'm also happy to provide feedback based on a "real play" demo that I conduct whether by phone or by Skype. (If you are newer to the process of being coded, it's nice to have the recorded session available for post-feedback analysis – which isn't easily obtainable in using the Skype format.

4. I'm also offering a new method of supplying feedback to learners in "real time" mode – which I call "MI Virtual Checkup". It's kind fun because it involves having a virtual conversation while I'm connected to you via computer! I supply client "prompt statements" in written form and the learner responds to each of those, "live" and in real-time, with written helper responses. This approach provides some very individualized feedback as we "play" or "experiment" with various client-helper interactions – and while we stay connected by telephone (or Skype). This method allows you and I to discuss the relative merits and downsides to each experimental interaction. I've conducted several of these sessions (usually one hour each session), and it has become a real favorite to people who are getting serious about working toward better fidelity in MI practice.

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"computer-based check-up" service!*

I have a feeling that what makes this process so useful is that it allows one-on-one interaction, with nobody else "evesdropping" – so there is no "stage fright" – the way there can be in classroom training sessions when you're practicing in front of peers. It also trains people to "compose" their interactions – rather than to relate more impulsively. Writing and typing reflections affords learners a little time to 'think first and speak second'. If you'd like to try out a 'virtual coaching session" sometime, or if you'd like to learn more about how it works, just give me a call!

Bottom line for this TIP is: wherever you obtain it, get some good quality, objective, and accurate feedback on your practice now and again. **Without good feedback, you're likely to get very good at perfecting the practicing of your mistakes!**

Until next week …