

Four Important lessons for Case Managers

A Buddhist proverb says, “When the student is ready, the teacher appears.” In fact, case management is one of my most persistent teachers. Case management continues to teach me something about myself, about the people we serve, or about the system that has tried to regulate it. Let me retrace the steps and see what emerges.

I graduated from college with a B.S. degree in education in 1966. after the typical four years. I didn’t know what the heck to do next. So, I married. Now what? I think of myself as a teacher, so, not knowing what else to do, I signed on as a substitute teacher in the local elementary school. Do you remember what a hard time we kids gave substitute teachers in grade school? After subbing for a few rough months and suffering from combat fatigue, I was more than ready to explore some other career options to find an escape route. I began thumbing through the possibilities in my imagination, searching for ideas for a different career path.

One of my money-making schemes that got me through college was cleaning houses. If you saw my house today, you’d never believe that I once cleaned houses for a living. But believe it or not, I did. One of my weekly cleaning jobs was at the home of a psychiatrist. He and his wife, a nurse trained in mental health, seemed to worry about my aimlessness. They were very purposeful people and to be without a goal was tragic to them. They also picked up on my skirmishes with depression and anxiety and my vulnerabilities in general, but they were most troubled by my lack of a clear career path. They encouraged me to find a job as a social worker. “Since just about anyone can become one,” they claimed. “Go take a test for it and get on a statewide list for jobs.”

After a few months of substitute teaching I began to think that being a social worker sounded like a damned good idea. I took the test and got on the list. When the call to action came, I hustled off to the interview and, to my amazement, was offered the job.

Honestly, I didn’t even know what a social worker was at that point, but I felt the job couldn’t be as hard as teaching kindergarten! I did remember seeing one once when I was about fifteen. My friend Jane and I were sitting in front of her house when a car with a county welfare department emblem drove up and parked in front of the neighbor’s place. An official looking woman carrying a briefcase emerged and disappeared into the house.

“Who’s that?” I asked Jane.

“Someone from the welfare department. They’re getting a divorce and not taking care of their kids,” Jane answered in her usual no-nonsense voice.

Thanks to Jane’s explanation, I had a space in my head for social workers and welfare departments, but my understanding just hung there like a couple of wire clothes hangers in an empty closet. That was until the moment in my career path when I became a social worker going to work in a welfare department.

I set off to make arrangements for my new job with high expectations. At “the office” I found a little Human Resources man perched on a stool behind the tall counter. His bald head and thick glasses reflected the glare of the harsh florescent lighting. I blinked. He looked up from his flurry of papers for the first time and attempted a smile. In an obligatory voice he said, “Your starting date is tomorrow, since that’s the beginning of our pay period. Welcome to the Welfare Department. You are now a case worker.”

Me, a case worker: a professional job title that, as you might imagine from someone jumping from kindergarten to social work, meant absolutely nothing to me. I had no idea what a case worker was supposed to do. I was still working on “social worker” and “Welfare Department” defined by my friend Jane.

“Good!” I said. “I’m very excited, and thank you for hiring me,” I said, truly excited, but trying to hide my anxiety behind boisterous sincerity.

He narrowed his eyes and peered out through little slits. My guess is he thought, “Are you serious?” My excitement had thrown him a curve ball. Maybe social workers didn’t usually describe themselves as being “excited and thankful.”

The following cold, crisp, late spring morning I began my long love/hate relationship with case work (known today as case management) that continues right up to this moment and, I’m sure, beyond. I tried to remember anything from my B.S. Degree that was relevant to my new job in case work, but nothing popped up. Even the items in the state social worker test revealed few clues as to what was about to happen in my new role.

That morning I arrived early in a new dress I sewed just for this occasion. It was bright pink and stood in sharp contrast to what my new co-workers wore. My supervisor welcomed me and led me into an office crammed full with eight desks, all occupied by caseworkers, except for two grey metal heaps leaning wearily against the back wall. Back then smokers smoked wherever they pleased. Plumes of grey smoke lingered thick in the office air. Each desk held a case worker who shifted through papers, held a phone to an ear while talking quietly, or focused on a carefully filled-out page.

“This is Lori. She’s taking Alice’s place,” said the supervisor in an early- morning voice.

The troops looked up towards us, smiled faintly and nodded. I must have known intuitively that smiling was not part of this culture. This was serious business. I tried not to smile very big and nodded back. "Can one of you show her the ropes?" he asked, almost apologetically. All eyes went down, back to their work at hand. No hands in the air; no volunteers. I squirmed self-consciously a little in the deafening silence and the thickening tension. Those few extended seconds felt like at least an hour.

I was ready to bolt and set us all free by saying, "Oh, don't worry about me. I'll figure it out on my own somehow. I know you're all busy and I don't want to be a bother." But before I could utter a word, the office door burst open and a flurry of energy filled the room. From the desks all heads turned and eyes came up—looking startled, perturbed, and relieved! Ellen had entered the room. Rescued!

"Sorry I'm late. Damn car wouldn't start again. You get one thing fixed and then another thing falls apart." Ellen tromped past me and the supervisor to the back wall where she plunked her stuff down on one of the grey metal heaps. "Hey, Bill! What's up?" she asked on her way past. "You guys have a good weekend?" Bill's face showed real relief. She shot a glance in my direction and asked, "Who are you?"

"She's new" Bill explained. "She's taking Alice's place."

"Oh good—finally we get a replacement! Want me to show you the ropes?"

A collective "whew" passed quietly through the room. Everyone was relieved, especially Bill.

I liked Ellen right away. Her energy was contagious. She had a "can do" spirit about her. I had no idea what I'd signed up for, but she never made me feel brainless or inadequate or wrong. Her interest in me as a young professional was validating. She believed in me more than I believed in myself.

Ellen married at sixteen, and, being a good Catholic, gave birth to five kids by the time she was twenty-four. Not long after the birth of the fifth kid she divorced her "no-good" husband. In those days it was easy for fathers to avoid paying child support. Ellen's only option was to go on welfare. Her case worker recognized her potential and enrolled her in a "school-to-work" program. It covered the cost of her attending school and included a little stipend to supplement her welfare check. For the next couple of years, Ellen attended school and earned a B.A. degree in social work. Her personal experience as a "welfare mom" equipped her to be the best possible case worker and a wonderful mentor to me.

Do not be distracted by circumstances

No house was too dirty, no kids too out of control, no problem too complex to faze Ellen. She barely noticed these circumstances that others might have found overwhelming. Ellen was able to instantly connect with people, even those who refused to allow other case workers into their houses. Once we gained entry through the front door, she connected with everyone in the household. She disarmed even third-generation veteran welfare recipients and survivors of the system who tended to be unimpressed by unimportant social workers.

Relationship is everything

People told Ellen everything without her even asking because her authenticity established a level of trust. She had personally experienced and had survived what they were living through. She had even thrived. She assumed they would too. Ellen believed in them.

I spent the next four years working in the welfare department. The first year I carried a caseload of ninety to over one hundred people, depending on who moved into my designated geographical area. I was unprepared for the size and magnitude of the overall caseload. I worked with a wide array of cases. Each case had been labeled with some sort of disability and each received a monthly disability check in the mail to seal the deal. Some were people released from state hospitals after long periods of time inside, and they still suffered from untreated mental illnesses, or worse, the vagaries of institutionalization. Some were physically disabled. A few were developmentally disabled. Most were heavily medicated.

As a case worker for this group of wounded warriors I tried to locate them at regular intervals. I talked with them about what was happening in their lives, which usually included one massive problem after another. I dutifully recorded the events in the case files. I tried to help them find solutions, but in many cases, there just weren't any.

Raise your expectations

No one expected any of these folks would get better, only worse. Hopelessness was the order of the day. In fact, if by some rare coincidence any of them did get better, it was overlooked—or was unseen. Since none of us expected recovery was possible, we didn't recognize recovery when it happened. If the recovery and wellness continued to unfold in the cases, in spite of the absence of our validation, an unspoken suspicion—suggesting that the case had been malingering all along—emerged among the ranks of the hardcore caseworker camp. If a case isn't supposed to get better, yet they do, the only explanation is that they weren't really disabled in the first place. We know better now, but we didn't then.

Connect with the person instead of the problem

The pain inherent in the work often taught me and grew me the most. Sometimes it exacerbated my own depression and anxiety, while at other times it distracted me from my personal anguish. I needed to learn how to experience the pain and suffering of others without being pulled down to the same level of consciousness of helplessness and hopelessness. If I allowed this to happen, I was useless. I had no positive energy to lend them until they developed enough strength and confidence to manage their own lives. The lesson for me was to stay focused on the person's strengths and to also stay focused on my own strengths. This way I had enough positive consciousness to hold us both steady until we found a way out of the swirling sink drain of hopelessness.

So in summary, here are the first key lessons I learned about how to be an effective case manager:

Do not be distracted by circumstances

Relationship is everything

Raise your expectations

Connect with the person instead of the problem