

Debbie's story

My next case management job is in the foster care system. Foster care is more complex than the previous assignments. There is a larger cast of characters to orchestrate on behalf of the children – natural parents, schools, foster parents, the court, juvenile justice, medical providers. In terms of my own growth, I realize I need to step up and play a stronger role or the best interests of the children would not be served.

It's the kids who give me the courage to do this, and I realize it's not about me at all. It's not even about fulfilling the requirements of the job description. It must be about the kids, and in some cases, their natural families.

Many "Teachers" enter my world during the foster care era. They teach me about myself and how to do my work.

The more I learn from moments like this the more the term "case management" seems to be a misnomer. The people I met are not "cases," but real people. Also, when I am at my best, I don't "manage" them. We partner to find solutions. Our work is reciprocal: while I'm helping them, they are helping me become more of a real person. When I slip and try to "manage" them, our partnership is less authentic and so are we. When I try to force them to do things that I think is best, we both lose ourselves.

My experience with Debbie illustrates the foolishness of me falling into that "manager" role instead of promoting partnership. Thankfully Debbie doesn't let me get away with it. Right from the beginning Debbie pulls my heart strings. I want to help her so much. Everything I do to help seems to make things worse for both of us.

One evening her probation officer calls to tell me she had escaped from juvenile hall. I jump in my car that rainy night and head for a place I think I might find her. Sure enough, there she is walking along a country road at night in the rain. She glances back at me and keeps walking. Her short blonde hair is dripping wet and curling softly around her face, losing its usual boyish look. She is tough, yet fragile. I pull to the side of the road, step out of my car and walk along with her. I try to convince her to return to the car so we can get out of the rain. We are both soaking wet and cold.

My reasons and wishes are of no interest to Debbie who is even less interested in my threats. Finally, I stop. I watch her walk off into the darkness beyond the glow of the headlights of my car.

I don't know what to do, but I know what I'm doing is making things worse. I return to my car feeling defeated, cold and miserable. I've worn myself out trying to "casework" Debbie. I'm exhausted from arguing and threatening. I don't seem to have a single productive idea left in me. I think about finding a different job. I sit there in the car staring through the rain drops hitting the windshield. I cry for Debbie and I cry for me. I sit there for a good twenty minutes before I hear a

knock on the window. It's Debbie. Her tough self is melting away and her fragile self is cold and frightened.

We don't have to like the person's plan for it to work

Debbie slides into the car and we sit in silence for a long time. At last she says, "Here's what I think I can do," and she described a plan that in my estimation will never work. I don't want to hear it, but I'm being banged on the head with it.

I say, "OK, let's try it." Over the next six months Debbie carries out her plan. It is a messy implementation with lots of falls and restarts, but she does it. She moves in with her sister and actually stays put for several months. She takes GED classes and earns her high school diploma. She stays as sober as she can – a big improvement. With each step she becomes more confident and stronger.

Let the person do their job and I will be much better at doing mine

I look back now on that rainy night in the car and realize that the anguish and frustration I felt was directly related to me trying to do Debbie's part and my part and doing them both in ways that were counterproductive. No wonder I was exhausted. The inclination to "fix" another person is often irresistible to those of us who like to help. We are quick to come up with answers and solution that we are sure will produce a wonderful outcome. Worst of all, we think we are right. We think we have somehow managed to come up with the best possible solution. We set about to convince people that we know what's best for them. When this doesn't work, we blame them; call them names, like "non-compliant" and "resistant." This is not our job. Our real job is to inspire people to find their own answers and their own path to recovery, then we support them as they follow it. We should know by now that managing and controlling people only makes it harder for them to recover, plus we wear ourselves out trying to do this. It doesn't work.