



## Candor and Honesty are Your Shield

As most counselors can attest to, working with people who abuse substances often involves having to deal with a fair share of manipulation and clever twisting of the truth as well as outright lying from some of our clients. Once again we all realize that dishonesty is a negative behavior and attitude often associated with a lifestyle focused around addiction. Some counselors, have extensive personal experience with addiction which can help them first hand to understand some of the lies and trickery used by some clients in an attempt to avoid consequences or to dodge the often uncomfortable truth. Counselors who are able to draw upon past personal experience making them “streetwise” and therefore more aware of some types of client negative behaviors, can use this knowledge to their advantage provided they do so *carefully and honestly*. Some counselors may simply feel that they have an increased sensitivity to knowing when a client is lying. If you stare into the face of people lying to you enough times, you become very familiar with the signs and appearance of dishonesty as most substance abuse counselors do. If you are a counselor who feels that you may have heightened instincts to sense when a client is lying or otherwise hiding something, it is essential to follow some basic ground rules:

- ❖ It is important to remember that a counselor possessing an “instinct” or “gut feeling” or other form of heightened sensitivity with regard to knowing when a client may be lying or hiding information, should remember to *keep this feeling in perspective*: An instinct or inclination or intuition or other “sense” that a client is being deceptive **is not a fact, nor should it be treated that way**. In other words, it can be appropriate to take your counseling instincts into consideration but remember, everyone can be wrong from time to time so our clients deserve the benefit of the doubt. Therefore it is not ethical to discharge a client or make major shifts in a client’s treatment solely based on just a “sense” that this client is not doing the right thing with no factual evidence to prove it. For example, a statement such as “I just know that Johnny is using I can just tell by the look on his face” may be enough of a reason to keep a closer eye on Johnny but it definitely is not enough of a reason alone to discharge Johnny from your program. Does this sound obvious and elementary to you? Perhaps it does, but nonetheless, in your experience as a substance abuse counselor you will most assuredly meet clients who have been kicked out of other programs based on another counselor’s hunches and intuitions. As counselors, in our efforts to be fair and ethical, a gut feeling alone is not enough to act decisively without some tangible evidence. Our instincts and inclinations as counselors can guide our focus but alone should never empower us to act on behalf of a client simply because we “feel” a certain kind of way. In such a situation it would be appropriate to confer with other involved people, perhaps asking the client’s family or probation officer or other involved persons a question like “Did you notice anything different about so and so, I am just concerned that something does not seem right.” During that consultation, you and others may be able to piece together something more substantial about what may be going on. Or, others may have evidence to reduce our concerns if they have viewed things as going well. Evidence is important to substantiate gut feelings and hunches.
- ❖ As we discussed earlier in the section about clients “getting over” it is important to reiterate that some overconfident counselors may erroneously make extensive efforts toward trying to always stay one step ahead of clients who appear to be lying by using cunning and deceptive means in an effort to “beat the client at their own game”. There are even counselors who take pride in their ability to “outmaneuver” or “out-slick” a challenging client in this mutually devious manner. There often is an initial appearance of effectiveness derived in the short term from using trickery and deceit to “outfox” clients who may be trying to outsmart us. However, the inescapable reality is that *any approach that is not honest often does more harm than good in the long term*. Anything



short of being honest and straightforward with our clients at all times is generally an ineffective counseling strategy for a variety of reasons (listed below)

1. Deceiving or cleverly tricking clients may work in the short run, but over the long term there is a great risk that the client will eventually find out at some point. If a client learns that the counselor was misleading, or otherwise using trickery or deception, then there is an enormous risk of seriously undermining any rapport that may have built. Trust is critical in the therapeutic relationship so any conscious actions that may impair that trust can seriously do irreparable damage to the counseling process and therefore the counselor may altogether lose that client for good. We would never want to lose a client because of making being dishonest or deceptive.
2. Even if the counselor believes that he or she can get away with trickery or deception with one client, the reputation of being untrustworthy can spread to future clients. People in substance using communities talk to one another on the outside. If a counselor develops a reputation of being untrustworthy on the street, he or she will soon find new clients coming in who already are resistant to building trust just based on what they may have heard from former clients. As a counselor you would never want to get a reputation of being anything less than straightforward and truthful.
3. Most clients are better “skilled” than their counselors when it comes to lies and manipulation. Counselors who think that they can consistently outsmart everyone whom they work with will eventually learn that they cannot do so. Clients who are actively using substances may be still sharpening their abilities to deceive others on a regular basis while the counselor, (if he or she is living the way a counselor should be) is not actively practicing these “skills” of deception and therefore is on the decline. The client clearly has an upper hand in this ill-fated “game of lies”. It is an effort in futility if a counselor believes that he or she can make an entire career out of staying one step ahead because clients through duplicity will most definitely catch up to them. Using lies to cover up past lies surely will entangle one in the proverbial web of deceit sooner rather than later.
4. Most importantly, if we as counselors are going to model proper behavior, then we have to be ready to consistently display honesty and integrity. In the end, when this last crucial point is considered, there really is no way around it. If we are going to teach honesty we must practice what we preach. Dishonesty is unproductive and unfruitful. Supplemental reading (Click: [“It’s Easy to Be Honest When You Have Nothing to Lie About”](#))

This overall theme is repeated in this book because for a reason: Being honest is crucial when it comes to being an effective and engaging counselor. Honesty fosters trust and rapport that endures especially through hard times. If a client knows that you are honest and trustworthy then that client will be much more amenable to opening up and letting you help and the client will be much more inclined to trust you during challenging moments in the change process. This is of much greater and more lasting value than taking pride in one’s abilities to outsmart one’s clients. Honesty truly is the best policy (Benjamin Franklin)



The other related counselor quality necessary for effective counseling and rapport-building is the quality of *candor*. Consider the definition:

## Candor

1. The state or quality of being frank, open, and sincere in speech or expression; candidness: *The candor of the speech impressed the audience.*
2. Freedom from bias; fairness; impartiality.

Going hand in hand along with honesty, candor involves tactfully telling it like it is. All of these qualities mentioned in the definition of candor: bring frank, open, sincere, fair, unbiased and impartial, all coincide with what has been explained up to this point with regard to the best way for a counselor to approach relationship building in the substance abuse and mental health fields. When a counselor is candid all of those with whom he or she works with need not fear that the counselor has a hidden agenda or ulterior motive. Another way to describe a counselor who uses candor in his or her speech and behavior can be described as “What you see is what you get”

The more difficult, resistant, and unmotivated the clients you are working with may seem, the more necessary and effective that candor can be when building a therapeutic relationship. In a sense, to display candor means to be “real”. Many challenging clients entering treatment can tell you stories of the long list of people in their lives who may have said one thing but did another. This list may include many who may have said that they were there to help but then did not follow through, based on the clients viewpoint. Clients may feel that some of those same people who let them down did so because in the end those people were not who they claimed to be. As counselors utilizing candor, it is important that our clients know that we will not always tell them what they want to hear but what we do tell them will be the truth and that our intention is always act in their best interest. Our candor helps our clients to realize that we are on their “team” so to speak, which then maintains a bond of trust. The following are some key aspects of effectively using candor in substance abuse treatment:

- Honesty goes hand in hand with candor. One cannot be truly be “real”, genuine and sincere if one is disingenuous or has hidden motives.
- When faced with a challenge from a client, such as personal questions about ourselves or beliefs our families, or anything personal in nature, the counselor using candor must develop discretion with regard to when to share and when to hold back. Sometimes self- disclosure can be highly effective with regard to rapport building especially with challenging clients. Being overly-cautious with regard to self-disclosure can be harmful to the therapeutic relationship. Counseling is a “people” business and most people, especially those who are distrustful from the start, need to know that you are a person too. A good way to gauge whether or not things are safe to self-disclose as a counselor is to ask yourself the following two questions:
  1. “Could this client *realistically* use this information against me now or at a later time” The answer to this question has changed enormously due to the internet which has drastically increased the public availability of information. There was a time in the counseling field when a counselor could remain a relative mystery to his clients but nowadays, a quick internet search that someone can do from their smart phone can reveal all kinds of basic information about you. For example, there was a time when there was an unwritten rule saying “Never tell a client where you live” In reality, today one or two clicks on a web search can not only reveal



your address but often a picture of your home. Obviously, it is always important to be safe when considering self-disclosure but it is also important to be *realistic*. For example, would it make sense to hide the fact that you are married, while that is simultaneously posted on your Facebook account open for just about anyone to see anyway? The main point is to practice using discretion with regard to sharing personal information and experiences but at the same time avoid being fanatical about it or overly-secretive either. Revealing, again for example, to a client where you live, does not mean that your client is going to suddenly plan to show up at your home (or even worse rob or vandalize it). (Believe it or not, that has been the mentality on the counseling field in the past) In *reality*, if a client was ever truly motivated to come and find your home the fact that you revealed what town you lived in would not be the deciding factor. If that ever was going to happen (and it rarely, if ever does) it would happen regardless of you mentioning where you live. It is important to practice being *reasonable* about self-disclosure and sharing other personal or identifying information.

2. “Would I readily share this information with a new acquaintance anyway?” Information that you may openly share with a person you are conversing with on line at the supermarket is usually harmless to share in counseling. Information like, some of your basic likes and dislikes, and some amusing or interesting life experiences you may have had can go a long way with rapport building and helping gain our clients sincere trust in treatment. Obviously, you would never want to share something that you will later regret or feel embarrassed about but allowing our clients to view us as a real person can do so much toward building a close therapeutic relationship. This is particularly true when working with adolescents who seem to really have a need to know the counselor on a deeper personal level to form a bond. The age-old wise adage with regard to why one may choose to self-disclose: “Am I self-disclosing for them (the clients) or for myself” should always remain a benchmark for sharing personal information in treatment. Obviously the selective use of self-disclosure is for the benefit of those we are trying to help and for the purpose of rapport building.

A good practice in the effort to display candor is to make it a practice to let your clients know your expectations up front. Being proactive with information is often better than being reactive. Whenever there is any gray area with regard to any circumstances that may affect a counseling situation it is best to make an attempt to discuss these issues early on using candor. A good example of when this may apply is when there are differing expectations for treatment as defined by multiple parties such as the client, the family, the referral source, etc., as we discussed in the previous section [“Considerations for Engagement in Treatment Planning”](#) In summary, in using candor, the counselor should be forthright in discussing the situation with the client as opposed to hiding information so as to manipulate or trick the client into cooperating. As stated earlier, although those types of tactics may work in the short run, if one tricks his or her client and it becomes evident later, trust is usually ruined for a long while. Lastly, if at any time you do not know the answer to something, rather than try to make something up, in the spirit of honesty and candor it is much better to reply with something such as “I am not sure about that, I will definitely look into that and surely get back to you about that”. Then of course, follow through when you have more information.

One last point is that candor is not only useful for rapport building, but it is an excellent approach during difficult moments with our clients. For example, when explaining “bad” news to a client as in the case when the client’s drug test came back positive, or when you are explaining to a client that he or she needs a higher level of care, a candid, frank and honest approach often gets the best results. If we have already established an honest and genuine level of communication with our clients throughout treatment, then when these challenges arise, our clients will be more inclined to respect



our candid approach to revealing information. Obviously, in our efforts to use candor, we always want to also be tactful so as to avoid offending while being perceptive of our clients' sensitive areas. Of course, we always want to be respectful as well. Overall, however when working with the more challenging, less motivated clients we face in this difficult field, a little graciously used candor goes a long way.

Candor and honesty are like a shield because when these qualities are cultivated and practiced in the counseling setting, they in a sense protect us from many of the pitfalls and traps that eventually befall those unfortunate individuals who may lack honesty, sincerity and tactfully used candor in the counseling process.



Taken from: [“The Tools of Engagement: Taking the Escalator Counselor Handbook \(2017\)”](#)



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