



## Module Sixteen: Follow Up

You can do the best job working with your clients, building relationship, asking wonderful questions, getting a commitment and if you leave out the follow up, you will decrease your effectiveness and may even lose clients.

When you and your clients take the time to delve into a situation and make a plan together, it is an implied commitment on your part to see them through to the end. When you casually work out a plan, shake your client's hand, never to revisit the plan again, you are communicating that all the work you put in is not important and that you really don't care about the outcome.

The interesting part is that this is how most amateur "helpers" have likely operated with their clients up until this point. In fact, your clients may be counting on it. If your clients have experienced inadequate to no follow up in the past, then they may be counting on the same behavior from you. They have learned they can make commitments to "helping" people and get away with limited or no accountability.

This creates a situation where people simply go through the motions of working on a plan, knowing they won't be held accountable. They can make all kinds of grandiose commitments, realizing they will not be held to task.

That does not mean when you work with someone, he or she is not sincere. That will be determined in subsequent sessions. It simply means many people are accustomed to a half-hearted commitment from whoever is helping them change behavior so they have been conditioned to give a half-hearted commitment as well. Don't be surprised by this or misinterpret its meaning.

So what does it mean? At this point, you don't know. Your job is to wait for the agreed upon time to elapse and then do a check in to see if your client has been successful with whatever was agreed upon. If he or she was, then great! You can celebrate together. If there is additional work to do, then you can plan the next step.

Whenever clients aren't successful, there are many things to explore, but you can bet you won't be exploring any of them if you forget the follow up action. Let's look at the possibilities when a client hasn't been successful.

Was the proposed action too big?

Sometimes clients encounter paralysis in their forward movement because the plan they made constitutes a huge, giant step for them. If the step is too big, people don't know where to start.

I remember early in my career when working with a schizophrenic client who wanted a volunteer position. After talking about it, her assignment was to get a volunteer job. When I met with her the next week, she had done nothing. We broke it down into smaller steps, e.g. look in the Yellow Pages, make a list of places you might like to work, call each of them to see if they use volunteers, if they do ask what the next step is. When I saw her the next week, she had a job at the local hospital.

Some questions to ask might be:

- Do you know where to start?
- Does this all seem a bit overwhelming?
- What would your first step be? Then what?
- Did the client really not want what he or she said they did?

Sometimes clients don't want to reveal what they really want for several reasons. They may not trust you yet. They may not think they can get what they want. They may think you'll find them foolish. They don't want to be told they can't have what they want, etc.

When this happens and a helper is asking them what they want, they may just throw out a random answer to move the conversation away from the uncomfortable. When this is the case, it's not difficult to understand why the client doesn't make progress toward something he or she doesn't want.

A couple of possible are:

- Is this what you really want?
- Are you sure this is what you really want?
- Did they make a half-hearted commitment?

Have you ever said you would do something when somewhere inside you knew you probably wouldn't? People do this a lot. It's a way of taking the pressure off. As a teenager, when my mother would ask me to clean my room, I would say, "OK, Mom." I had no real intention of doing it but I wanted her off my back.

In an attempt to end the questioning of a counseling session, a person might make a commitment they don't intend to keep.

In this case when following up, you might ask:

- So are you really serious about doing this?
- Do you really want this?
- Has the client's wants and priorities shifted?

Clients may want one thing one week and then, during the week, they realize they actually want something else. Priorities can shift and change. Information and opportunities can change priorities.

Let's say one week your client plans to quit his or her job but then that week gets a raise. His or her priorities may change resulting in the want changing.

You can ask:

- So is this what you still want or do you want something else now?
- Did he or she just tell you what you wanted to hear?

Sometimes when you work with clients who are people pleasers and high in the need of love & belonging, they attempt to glean what you think is the "right" answer and simply give you that. They are attempting to seek your approval and avoid any type of conflict.

They have a strong Quality World of you, liking and approving of them. That Quality World picture can supersede any of the Quality World pictures they may want for themselves.

The best way to counteract this is to remain objectively neutral and not give away what you believe the "right" answer is.

You might ask your client this question:

- Is this really something that's important to you or do you simply think this is what I want you to do or what I think is best?
- Was the client just giving the socially-acceptable answer or trying to please someone else?

This happens most often when someone is not voluntarily seeking help. Someone is "making" them come to you for assistance with some problem they don't think they have. In these situations, there is almost always a company line. There is a socially-acceptable answer.

When I worked in the field of child welfare, whenever you asked parents what they want, 99 times out of 100, they say, "I want my kids back." Sometimes they don't do what is expected. When you look closer, you may realize getting their kids back is the "right" answer. It may not represent what they really want. Clients may think what they really want is not something you'd be interested in hearing and it may even get them in some trouble.

In this case, there may be no question you could ask to uncover the truth since the client's goal is to deceive you of their actual intent. Instead of question, you may want to make an observation coupled with a question such as:

I'm a little surprised to hear you say you really want \_\_\_\_\_ since you haven't made any progress toward that goal in quite some time. Could it be this isn't actually what you want?

Did they allow life to get in the way?

It is hard to make changes in one's life. Sometimes it's easiest to break the commitments we make with ourselves. Let's say you have a client who wants to lose weight and commits to exercising five days a week and you found they only exercise two. They have all kinds of reasons why they couldn't do it. They got an unexpected client job. Their child needed a ride to school for missing the bus. The dog got sick. There is always a reason for not doing what you committed to.

Some good questions to ask this person is:

- Just how important is this to you?
- What will happen if you do it?
- What's the risk if you don't?
- Did a legitimate emergency prevent them from being successful?

Let's face it. Sometimes seriously legitimate tragedies overtake our lives and we can't be successful with our plans. Deaths, illnesses, natural disasters and fires come to mind. Whenever something legitimate, overwhelming and unavoidable comes into your clients' lives, you simply need to ask:

- Are you ready to refocus your energy on your plan?
- Honor your client's answer and adjust the plan to meet the special needs of your client at that time.
- Is there something else they want that's getting in the way?

Sometimes clients are not successful in what they want because they don't just want the one thing you focused on in your planning session.

Suppose a client planned to complete a project that had been long overdue. The day they had blocked off to complete it was a day his or her daughter planned a surprise by coming home from college for a visit. The client wants to get the project done and also wants to be a good mom or dad, spending time with his or her daughter.

Two possible questions might be:

"How can you make a plan for spontaneous time and still create space to get your commitment completed?"

"Can you see a way to both visit with your daughter and still complete your project"?

Is there something important they would have to give up in order to get what they want?

I usually reserve this question for when I think there is something that's subconsciously getting in the way of a person's success. These are usually in the form of long-term entrenched beliefs and thoughts that a person is constantly playing in the background of his or her life.

This is a bit complicated so I will give three examples. The first one involved a woman, Sally, who became a moderately successful entrepreneur. Her father has also been an entrepreneur but didn't seem to experience consistent success. He would do well in a business and then lose interest and start another. Do well in that one, lose interest and start another and so on. Sally was desperate to take her business to the next level but just couldn't seem to do it. When I asked her what she would have to give up to get what she wants, she suddenly answered, "My father's approval." She didn't believe her father would want her to be any more successful than she was. Most of these beliefs aren't even true but we have been living with them for so long, they tend to be our puppet masters behind the scenes. Once Sally was able to really look at that issue, she let go of that belief that no longer served her and doubled her income in the next year.

The second example involves a woman, Diane, who had been trying to lose weight her whole adult life without success. Every time she began eating healthy and exercising, she would do well in the beginning only to hit a plateau and then began slowly to put the weight back on she had lost. When I asked her what she would have to give up to get what she wanted, she surprisingly answer, "My husband." I say surprisingly, because this answer even seemed to surprise her, coming from a place she wasn't aware of consciously. When I explored that with her, she explained that her husband was a functional alcoholic. He was a good husband and father; went to work every day, and only began drinking when he got home. He was never angry or abusive but drinks about two six-packs a beer nightly. Diane believed if she got healthy enough to lose her weight, then she wouldn't be able to stay with her husband because his dysfunction would be so obvious by comparison. She decided her marriage was more important than losing weight and has stopped beating herself up for the extra pounds.

The third example involves a man, Joe, who wanted to kick his roommate out of his apartment for lifestyle reasons. We had spent a long time developing a plan for Joe to talk to his roommate. We have even practiced the conversation. Joe left feeling confident he would do it but when he returned the next week, he hadn't broached the subject. When I asked him, "What would you have to give up to tell your roommate you want him out," Joe responded with, "Our friendship." Once I had that piece of the puzzle, the Quality World picture changed from "I want my roommate out of our apartment" to "I want my roommate out of our apartment and to maintain our friendship." It became easier to make a plan to accomplish this goal than when we were leaving that important piece out of the plan.

Some possible questions in this situation might be:

- What would you have to give up to get what you want?
- Is there any way you can see to have both?
- What would that look like?
- If you can't have both (a true dilemma), then which is more important?
- Are you willing to give up what you want right this minute for the long-term gain of what you really want for your future?

As the helper, it is your job to follow up. Let your clients know you care about their progress. Support them through the tough times and kick their butts when they are being complacent. However, be careful you do not become someone using Deadly Relationship Habits by nagging

your clients to do something they really don't want to do. Part of following up involves always rechecking to be sure the goal clients are stating they want to achieve is still important to them.

**Conclusion:**

Your assignment this week is twofold. You are going to make a list of anyone you helped make a plan last week and anyone you make a new plan with this week. There is no separate form for this week because I want you to work this right into your time planning system, whatever system you use.

If you worked with someone last week on developing a plan, create time in your schedule this week to follow up with that person. Write in right in as an appointment with some notes to help you remember what is being worked on.

Then create a space in your calendar for next week for anyone you help develop a plan with this week. The idea is to never forget to follow up with a person you have helped. Develop this habit and your value as a helper will be greatly increased.

If you are a helping professional, then you probably already have a note keeping system that allows you to do effective follow up in each subsequent session. If you already have a system that's working, great! You don't need to do anything different than you already are. Next week, we will be discussing the four types of relationships and your strategies for relating within each effectively. I'm really looking forward to it.