

Outreach Work Principles

Trust

In these circumstances trust becomes a necessary provision for collaboration. If the young people experience that the outreach worker is not trustworthy, the whole basis for doing outreach work falls apart.

To build a relation to young people where trust constitutes a central element both becomes a goal on it's own term and a method for further work.

Outreach work means that dialogue and the capability to commence a dialogue become the most important work tools. Tact and discretion is important in this connection. Tact we understand to be the delicacy in human interaction, and that which is appropriate and suitable. This is connected to caring and sensitivity. An outreach worker should be able to understand the youth's "inner life" and be able to interpret what lies behind the behaviour and expressions.

The outreach worker's approach to gain trust is deeply rooted in some basic work principles and methods. These are continuity, flexibility, voluntary decision and professional confidentiality.

Continuity

Continuous contact with the young people is vital in order to get to know, create alliances and arrive in a position to be able to intervene. Regular presence in youth environments over an extended period of time makes the fieldworkers predictable and thus approachable to the young people. Long term, patient attachment to and work within the youth environments are presuppositions to succeed in this kind of work. Only adult professionals or experienced co-workers who are out in the youth environments over an extended period, have the opportunities to reach ahead with work that can influence and change.

Even in periods when the young people have little interest in, or completely rejects contact, it is important to appear regularly. Hereby the outreach worker signals that he or she cares about the young people.

There can be special crisis situations where a type of "fire-extinguishing" would be needed. (Aggressive youth behaviour in gangs etc.) This is normally not sufficient as a model, or foundation for, establishing outreach

work. Even though gaining contact with the young people can be easy, it often takes a long time to gain their trust. Trust is often a presupposition for security and a foundation for stable relationships.

Flexibility

To continuously visit and to be patient as an outreach worker, without at the same time being flexible, hampers the possibilities for contact. The outreach workers must be able to relate to changing situations and different places, and also be able to act fast, safely and appropriately in difficult situations.

A young people group can change their meeting places and hangouts and meet at new times. The inrush to a young people environment can increase so that the environment becomes insurmountable. Ways of meeting and patterns of communication can change. There can also be changes in types of drugs abuse, a-sociality and negative behaviour. The constitutions of groups, norms and leaderships within these groups can change.

If the outreach worker does not manage to meet these challenges through altering his work hours, approach methods and ways of reacting to the young people, he will soon have discarded his role as a trustworthy adult. The young people's interests, ways of being together and behaviour are marked by quick changes. If the outreach workers are insufficiently flexible in relation to these changes, they will easily fail to meet the young people's standards, and so will not be able to gain any trust.

Accessibility

Continuity and flexibility makes the outreach workers easily accessible. It is important to be easy to reach and gain contact with if one wants to catch and prevent problems in the youth groups. On the one hand young people live for the moment, they are not very good in planning for the future. On the other hand they are often sceptical to the help apparatus and to adults.

Appointments and written inquiries do not work well if one wants to get in touch with young people with problems. That the outreach workers frequently visit the young people over a certain time period, that they are flexible and preferably have some kind of premises where the young people can visit without appointments, makes the fieldworkers easily accessible.

Thereby an important presupposition for the young people to trust the outreach worker is fulfilled.

The outreach worker has to show that he or she is easily approachable, a trusting situation has to be achieved and a relationship established. After this the outreach worker can start working towards change and towards making the young people feel responsible for their own actions.

Accountability

A target for good professional contact, support and help work towards young people aims to stimulate the youth's learning and maturing processes. This way they can reduce negative behaviour and develop positive behaviour. An important element in this process is to teach children and young people about their rights, demands and obligations, and how they shall proceed to use these in constructive attempts to change or strengthen their own functioning. In these circumstances it is important not to work in such a way that responsibility is not removed, but instead systematically work for making the help apparatus and administrative and political authorities responsible in relation to the youth's situation and needs.

It is of considerable significance that the before mentioned principles distinguishes the outreach workers working methods.

Voluntary decision

The starting point for contact and work with young individuals and groups of young people must always be that they want, or get to want, contact and to be followed up. The young people choose whether they want contact with the outreach workers or not. Young people are involved with suggesting and planning initiatives that are directed towards the individual young people or young people group. They know that the outreach workers won't act "over their heads". This type of voluntary decision is decisive for gaining trust and admission in the youth environments.

To have the opportunity, over an extended period of time, to see and learn to trust an adult social worker in his or her own environment, often initiates motivation processes and a wish for support and help to begin change.

Many children and young people with problems are suspicious and sometimes hostile towards authoritative adults. This can cause the work to

fail unless the outreach worker does not show that he or she is trustworthy, does not gossip and basically are on the “side of” the young ones. This does not prevent the social worker in established contact relationships from continuously setting limits, but in an open and honest way that excludes that he or she in any way tricks the young people.

Professional confidentiality

Protecting the person and professional confidentiality is a presupposition for trust. When professional confidentiality keeps being emphasized as an important work principle, it is due to the fact that young people can be very sceptical to adults and have very little trust in them. They can have experienced that teachers, parents or police have talked about them without the young people being informed of this.

If a youth cannot trust that what he or she tells a outreach worker doesn't come any further, there is little foundation to gain trust.

Professional confidentiality implies that the young people can bring up topics they find hard talking to others about. This is important and necessary to create alliances and relations between the young people and the outreach worker. All of the outreach workers should therefore have to keep professional confidentiality about what information they receive about the children and young people that they meet. Since outreach work has to be done in the youth's own environment it is an important supposition for establishing contact that the young people are convinced about the trustworthiness of the outreach workers. Some of the young people hang around or are attached to criminal environments and hard and at times brutal drug abuse environments. Professional silence will in these circumstances also be a necessary protection for the outreach workers themselves.

It is especially towards parents, police and child welfare authorities that this professional confidentiality can create conflicts. The question about the duty of information and professional confidentiality, both duty bound and the right to confidentiality, will vary. The laws will differ from the various countries, and professional confidentiality will reflect this. It is, however, important to note that if the young people don't feel reasonably safe on this, it is highly possible that they won't have any contact with the outreach worker. Thereby the foundation for the outreach work is undermined. When it comes to information concerning individual persons and police affairs one will have to be especially attentive.

Experience shows however, that professional confidentiality is not a problem when the collaborative instances work well together and get to learn about the special work forms that distinguish outreach work. When planning and establishing outreach work it is therefore important that there is time to inform about the special circumstances and discuss collaboration routines with co-working instances.

Having said all this, and keeping in mind that professional confidentiality is a key factor in outreach work, there is situations where secrecy must be put aside. From time to time outreach workers get knowledge about severe crime, violence and abusive actions or plans in such a direction where professional confidentiality must leave the room and information delivered to the right authority. It's important that the outreach work service has a high degree of transparency so that the work done can be appreciated and evaluated by other cooperative services.