

# Six Unifying Themes for Caseworkers

## 1. Self-Responsibility

Both personally and professionally, caseworkers have a tremendous impact on the lives of others. Being responsible for self means being knowledgeable enough about yourself, your perspectives, your behaviors and your values that you can discern your effect on others. It also means owning your actions and words. Self-responsibility is achieved through an on-going process of reflection and of seeking to understand yourself.

## 2. Proactive Stance

A caseworker is an active member of the agency who helps create and shape it. Professionalism means not just doing as told but helping to figure out what needs to be done. Caseworkers have the right and duty to help define their roles; they have a role in creating agency change. It is often said that if more people were dedicated to finding out what isn't working and trying to change it, our agencies would be more satisfying places to work.

## 3. Expectation of Excellence

The function of the whole organization is to identify what is required to meet client needs and to provide it. This implies identifying and removing barriers to quality service – rather than accepting problems and frustration as the norm. Although a caseworker cannot bear the entire burden for agency problems for too long, we have accepted that the job is impossible and then persisted in making that true. In addition, caseworkers have a responsibility to identify and build on their own strengths as well as those of their clients. It is essential to approach clients with the expectation that, through collaborative efforts, the situation can be changed.

#### **4. Tension is Natural**

Caseworkers live in a world of tension, poised between the needs and perspectives of their clients and the needs and perspectives of their supervisor. Such tension is not only natural but also desirable, for out of the pulls and pushes from both sides can develop a synthesis – a new idea that is better than either of the two polar views. Thus, caseworkers take on the creative role of developing and, often, delivering solutions using suggestions from both sides.

#### **5. No Blaming**

A major tension for caseworkers is the need to experience and demonstrate compassion for clients even in circumstances where very troubling behaviors have occurred. Compassion also needs to extend to oneself, fellow workers, supervisors, and administrators. Organizational tensions tend to set different levels against one another because each level views agency activity from a somewhat different perspective. At the extremes, the caseworker does not need to be very concerned about the specifics of the agency budget, but must be an advocate for each client. The director, on the other hand, must be very concerned about the budget, but does not need to focus on details of individual clients. Workers are not fiscally irresponsible and directors aren't oblivious to client need; but the agency has assigned to each a specific area of responsibility, and no other level is responsible for representing the same concerns. It is essential to assume that all are working toward the same goals; all want good things for people.

#### **6. Parallel Process**

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