

Motivating “Unmotivated” Clients: Three Stops & Three Steps

by Elisabeth Sanders-Park

I specialize in working with difficult clients, and I’ve see my share of people who appear “unmotivated.” Still, I believe everyone is motivated, but I understand that many aren’t interested in what I want them to do. It’s not our job to decide if a client is or isn’t motivated. Everyone is motivated... to do something. If we figure out what they want, and attach what we want them to do (attend workshops, meet 1-1, pay for services, get a job) to it, they’ll be motivated. Our job is to meet each client where they are, clarify a vision for their career future and help them move forward. For clients who don’t already see it, we get to help them see the value of work in general, and specifically what’s in it for them to work.

In my experience, there are two reasons clients appear “unmotivated.” The first is fear. Clients who fear that this process won’t work for them, or that it will(!), often appear unmotivated and sabotage their own progress (see my article on Fear, 11-05). The second reason is that clients don’t clearly see how work is of value to them. This may occur when they’re mandated, someone else initiates the partnership (a mother, spouse, employer), they’ve never worked, or they’ve been unemployed for some time and want to maintain their situation (on welfare, disability or unemployment, a stay-at-home parent or spouse).

Here are three stops and three steps to help you motivate clients who are unmotivated to work because they don’t see the value in it.

THREE STOPS

1 - STOP talking about work! It doesn’t really surprise clients that you think they should get a job, do work they enjoy, etc. Check your job title, this isn’t news! Clients are pleasantly surprised when we don’t talk about work, but instead begin with what’s important to them and what they want in life. This allows us to discover what’s in it for them to work.

2 - STOP acting as if work is a glorious goal in and of itself! For most of us, work is a means to things that are important to us, a way to get and do things we value, such as making a difference, providing for our families, living out a calling, being creative, independent, influential, etc. This is what we want in life and work helps us do it! So it should be for our clients.

3 - STOP filtering everything through your personal values, and even imposing them on clients! People are unique. Their values and motivations are as different from yours as their facial features and life experience. Your values can hinder the process, diminish the partnership and keep you from seeing what matters to them. Listen, listen, listen without prejudice.

THREE STEPS

1 – STEP: Identify what motivates the client in life. What are they willing to put energy into getting, or getting away from?... making someone proud, proving someone wrong, owning a home, getting out of a living situation, financial independence, staying out of prison, owning a business, salvaging or severing a relationship, getting away from the kids for a while? These are motivators! Make use of them. Unless it’s

illegal, dangerous or outside what your services can support, support everything you can. Too often, we don't want to support a choice, not because it's truly damaging, but because it's not what we want for them. This is a misuse of time, especially when we're looking to jump-start this process. Only when we recognize what motivates them in life can we create value for work by attaching work to what they care about. We're re-defining work as "something that gets you what you really want."

2 – STEP: Now that you know what they value, help them realize "work can help you do that!" Get great at attaching work to almost anything. I've worked with clients who were motivated to never to see me again, sleep as much as possible, or watch their favorite Soaps. Well... "work can help you do that!" (watch your attitude here). The skill is to see and communicate how work can get me out of their life (once working they won't see me much, but until then I'll be a constant), help them get paid on a job that includes sleeping (overnight manager at a residential facility, mattress tester, etc.), or help them get paid while their Soaps air, afford a DVR and watch them every evening! Once work is attached to something they want, proceed to the final step.

3 – STEP: Launch into the Life/Work Planning (or career planning) process to discover work they should pursue, because 40 hours a week is a long time to endure work you dislike, even if it helps you get things you want. Clarify their most important fascinations, skills and values, then combine and explore them to define their career direction and next job(s) so they can job search. All the while, remain mindful of the "things that make them go in life" and use them as motivators. They'll remain motivated to do things that are clearly linked to getting things they value. "Work can help you do that!"