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## **EMPOWERMENT LESSONS FROM A SMALL NON-PROFIT IN MEXICO**

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**Empowerment Lessons from a Small Non-profit in Mexico**

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## **Abstract**

Empowerment is one tangible way to cultivate hope. Using empowerment and strength-based social work theories as the foundation, the story of a small non-profit in Mexico is used as an example of how empowerment and leadership opportunities contribute to providing strength and hope in an undeveloped community with extensive poverty. As lay community leaders, both young and old, take ownership of providing services, a partnership is formed in the community and a powerful force gives pride and goes beyond the non-profit service provision to cultivate sustaining components that enhance personal and community growth and development.

## **Setting the Stage with Empowerment and Strength-Based Theories**

### **Strength-Based Perspective**

One of the most important tenants in the social work profession is its emphasis on strengths. Focusing on strengths with client systems is the essence of empowerment.

Kirst-Ashman and Hull (2009) state: “It is social work’s task to empower clients in general and members of oppressed groups in particular. Empowerment means emphasizing, developing, and nurturing strengths and positive attributes. It aims at enhancing individuals’, groups’, families’, and communities’ power and control over their destinies” (p. 15).

Suppes and Wells (2009) indicate that an emphasis on client system strengths is one of the unique components in the profession of social work, along with focus on person and environment and the profession’s code of ethics. Strengths-based perspective works from a resiliency framework instead of an emphasis on deficits.

Strengths-based perspective acknowledges that client systems have skills and capabilities despite realities that may create challenges. When clients receive encouragement and positive feedback on what the client system is doing well, hope is generated. Hope prevents despair and creates potential for growth and wellness in the client and community systems.

Not only is this perspective good for clients, but it also provides hope to social work professionals. Working for social justice through attending to client system issues, utilizing resources and promoting and advocating for equitable social policies and resources takes energy. Utilizing this perspective, which draws on what is working and where strengths can be found in situations, cultivates hope for the worker as well and helps sustain an energized and compassionate social work professional.

## **Empowerment Theory**

Long, Tice and Morrison (2006) state, “Empowerment is the key term for understanding and directing our efforts in terms of consumer-based ‘macro’ change” (p. 17). Additionally, “A strengths assessment nurtures empowerment by supporting the wants and needs of consumers with social work interventions that are designed through collaborative partnerships, based on soliciting and relying on consumer participation, and focused on understanding people within their own frame of reference. The strength perspective, including the strengths assessment, recognizes the power of consumers, encourages consumers to use that power, and supports the collaboration of social workers with consumers to organize change across levels of practice” (pp. 38-39). Thus, empowerment is building on the strengths of individuals, families, groups, organizations and communities for enrichment on micro, mezzo and macro levels of social work practice.

## **Constructing a Positive Framework**

As the social worker engages the client system it is critical to recognize positive attributes during the assessment so the worker can affirm and reinforce these strengths. Glicken (2004, p. 21 -) describes forty-five positive behaviors to be considered when evaluating a client system: coping skills, support network, prior life successes, current life successes, cultural strengths, problem-solving skills, level of moral development, degree of social responsibility, level of motivation to resolve the presenting problem, educational success, success in the workplace, interpersonal skills, personal appearance, communication skills, prior attempts to resolve the problem, decision-making skills, relationships with significant others, level of spirituality or religiosity, healthy personal habits, using alternative approaches to resolving problems, locus of

control, orientation to the present, self-concept, financial intelligence, emotional intelligence, creativity, uniqueness, curiosity, intimacy, the desire to be autonomous and independent, conviction, flexibility, fun, trust, tolerance, risk taking, resilience, passion, persistence, determination, knowing the difference between being needed and being wanted, introspection, variety, internal peace, and insight.

Glicken's list focuses on behaviors mostly regarding assessment with individual and/or family client systems. Saleebey broadens the focus and provides a framework for strength-based practice with individuals and family systems. Saleebey (2013) names the six principles of strengths-based helping:

1. The initial focus of the helping process is on the strengths, interests, desires, hopes, dreams, aspirations, knowledge, and capabilities of each person, not on their diagnoses, deficits, symptoms, and weaknesses as defined by another. (p. 59)
2. The helping relationship becomes one of collaboration, mutuality, and partnership – power with another, not power over another. (p. 60)
3. All human beings have the inherent capacity to learn, grow and transform. The human spirit is incredibly resilient. People have the right to try, to succeed, and to experience the learning which accompanies falling short of the goal. (p. 62)
4. All human beings have the inherent capacity to learn, grow, and transform. People have the right to try, the right to succeed, and the right to fail. (p. 62)
5. Helping activities in naturally occurring settings in the community are encouraged in a strength-based, person-centered approach. (p. 64)

6. The entire community is viewed as an oasis of potential resources to enlist on behalf of service participants. Naturally occurring resources are considered as a possibility first, before segregated or formally constituted “mental health” or “social services.” (p. 65)

Long and colleagues reference Payne below and include perspective for working with individuals and families, but also groups, organizations and communities. They recognize the interconnectedness of micro, mezzo and macro systems and how social history and policies can gravely impact people and resources. Thus empowerment and strength-based work must also include these realities. Payne et al. (as cited in Long, Tice, and Morrison (2006, p. 38) include the following important features of empowerment practice:

1. All people and their communities have skills, capabilities and the ability to change.
2. People have the right to be heard and to control their lives in the communities where they reside.
3. The problems of people and communities always reflect some issues related to oppression and discrimination.
4. Collective action is powerful, and social work practice should build on this.
5. Social workers must facilitate challenges to oppression that lead to empowerment.

Additionally, Long, Tice and Morrison (2006) recommend “Structuring Services to Build on Strengths and Promote Empowerment with three useful ideas:

1. Provide services as physically close to people as possible.
2. Promote community-based outreach.
3. Combine micro and macro social work” (p. 87).

## **Introduction of Small Non-profit in Baja California Sur, Mexico**

Sarah Lanier (2000) in her book, “Foreign to Familiar,” writes about hot- versus cold-climate cultures. Mexican culture generally speaking is a “hot-climate culture.” Lanier goes on to indicate in hot-climate cultures relationships are more important than tasks, the group is more important than the individual, experiencing the moment is more important than time and hospitality is spontaneous.

Time after time that was my experience the six months I lived in Mexico. A favorite memory of mine is an unannounced walk up a hill to a one-room dirt floor home and the lady living there seeing me coming, pulled plastic buckets off of a stack, turned them upside-down and welcomed me to sit for a visit. Or, another time when a little boy who had nothing, would not accept the gift of a pencil unless he was given one for his brother also.

I was asked to write a 100-word Japanese Haiku for my church to share a glimpse about my experience living in Mexico, and it also reflects on these hot-climate culture attributes.

*Baja California South, La Paz, Mexico. A beautiful land of contrasts:*

*Sea of Cortez, desert and mountain; marina wealth and extensive poverty;*

*despair and hope.*

*No electricity, no running water, rutted dirt roads, steep mountain to climb, only strong legs to walk the distance. Two tiny rooms, dirt floor hut for this family of six, only two plastic chairs.*



*I am the guest, I sit, you stand, you fill a glass of trucked in purified water,  
precious as gold, freely given for me to drink – life-giving.*

*My USA extravagance – when so little is really needed...*

In his Pulitzer Prize winning book about Dr Paul Farmer and his work with people in Haiti, “Mountains Beyond Mountains,” Tracy Kidder (2003) challenges, “You want to see where Christ crucified abides today? Go to where the poor are suffering and fighting back, and that’s where He is” (p. 79).

### **Care for Kids La Paz Beginnings**

Located in a neighborhood on the edge of the state capital—La Paz, Baja California Sur, Mexico—is the small non-profit organization appropriately named Care for Kids La Paz.

In one of the most impoverished areas of the Baja California Sur, a small community with developing world needs and very limited services, was presented with the opportunity to name what they felt was most needed to enhance their community. Out of this exchange a group of mothers living in this *colonia* indicated that what they wanted was a breakfast program to feed their children a nutritious meal before school, because many days their children were going to school hungry.

As stated previously, many of these families have no running water and no electricity. They live in houses made of blocks, sticks, cardboard or tar paper. They have little money to buy food or needed commodities. Out of this need, the non-profit Care for Kids La Paz was born.

## **Mission**

“Care for Kids La Paz is a non-profit charity dedicated to improving the lives of impoverished children and families in La Paz, BCS, Mexico. The charity provides long-term support by guaranteeing access to food, health care and education to children. Through our commitment, Care for Kids La Paz strives to achieve lasting improvements in the quality of life of underprivileged children giving them the opportunity to become healthy, self-reliant individuals” (Care for Kids La Paz, n.d.).

## **Philosophy excerpt**

“No child lives in isolation. For the child to benefit in any way, the child's needs are best addressed within the family. The best way to fulfill these needs is to involve children and their families in the entire process of planning, implementing and maintaining personally designed programs. These programs are designed to reduce poverty and to give children a better future and more secure livelihood.” (Care for Kids La Paz, n.d.)

## **Community Empowerment Lessons**

### **Community Ownership**

First empowerment lesson: Ask the persons who are being served directly what is needed. In this example, the mothers were asked, “What do you feel is most needed here in the colonia?” They indicated the need to help feed our children before they go to school. In response to their request, the non-profit breakfast program began.

Funding comes primarily from Canada and the United States and founder, Barbara Spencer, MSW, directs the distribution of the money. By building a network of community contacts in the *colonia*, five volunteer teams of mothers rotate and cook the hot breakfasts for their children and any child in the community: all children are welcome. Currently, approximately 100 children are being fed a free hot nutritious breakfast Monday, Wednesday and Friday mornings before school.

### **Community Leadership**

Second lesson in empowerment: Turn the responsibility of running the services over to those who are being served. The teams of mothers run the breakfast program. Each team of mothers works for one week before rotating to the next team, which works for one week and so on until all five teams have rotated through and then the cycle begins with the first team again. Thus, each team works one week every five weeks. The service runs smoothly, and the mothers have pride in helping feed not only their children but the children in the community. There is ownership in the work by the very persons who receive the service – a very sound and successful model.

Lawrence Shulman (2009, p. 286) talks about the significance of “mutual aid” in group work and this fits well with the group work at this community level. Another component of the non-profit that evolved was a scholarship program for middle school and high school children. Even children who were doing well in school were dropping out due to their family struggling to have enough funds to allow them to continue with school. The costs include bus fare, tuition, school supplies, uniform and shoes, and incidentals. For families with very limited income, this can be prohibitive. Thus, a Scholarship Program was added to the non-profit. Individuals or

families from Canada and the United States support one child's school costs for one year with the hope of an ongoing relationship that will financially support the child until he or she graduates from high school.

### **Intergenerational Partnerships**

Third lesson on empowerment: Built in to the scholarship program is a component of community service and accountability that each young person in the program adheres to. Each child writes a letter of thanks to their sponsor and also completes four hours of community service a month in a role of their choice. Each child is given significant responsibilities, and these opportunities help build leaders for the community and also for the future of Mexico.

Scholarship students generally begin the program when they are in junior high school. These students via their parents are given keys to the building where the programs for the non-profit are held. Some of the responsibilities include cleaning the room where the breakfast is served, serving as overseers in the small informal library of donated books and puzzles, reading to the younger children, and leading craft activities. Other students coordinate sports, dance or music instruction for the smaller children. Each youth who receives a scholarship chooses their own community service for the school year, which is fulfilled by doing four hours a month.

The significance of trusting young people with meaningful responsibility speaks volumes to each adolescent as their evolving individualization is emerging around what they have to contribute in the world around them.

## **Sustainability**

In the six years this program has been running, despite great odds, six students have gone to college, one will be entering a master's program and one won a scholarship from the Mexican government to study English in Belize for ten months. Three additional students are graduating from high school this school year. These successes are testimony to the significance of this empowerment model used in this small non-profit.

A *colonia* advisory committee made up of two mothers, a youth, and the director helps guide ongoing decisions and planning for Care for Kids La Paz. Desmond Tutu instructs, "Do your little bit of good where you are; it's those little bits of good put together that overwhelm the world" (Goodreads, n.d.). I have been inspired by the good being done by social worker director Barbara Spencer and the small community-based non-profit, Care for Kids La Paz.

## **Application to Practice**

### **Questions for Analysis**

How do these lessons on empowerment apply to social work practice internationally and domestically? In one city in the United States where I was working as a social worker, two youth centers were being built. The one center hired experts to design and create an aesthetic atmosphere with state of the art amenities, including a juice bar for nutritious snacks. The other center hired local youth as consultants to decide what the youth in that part of the city really wanted in a youth center. Many of the youth themselves asked to teach different "courses" on dance, art or martial arts. It is not a surprise that the center in the city planned by the youth was the center that had the most youth attendance.

What makes it hard for professionals to give control to the persons being served? How can a community be more empowered to embrace ownership in programs and services in their locale? The lessons of application are foundational and so critical: Ask the persons who are to be served what it is that they want. The significance of ownership is substantial. Allow persons being served as much responsibility as possible. This can be approached creatively. How can local persons be engaged in the service provision, the maintenance of the service or building or in decisions made about the program or services?

Coordinate community service and leadership opportunities in the midst of running the program or service. How can “community” be built and sustained within whatever service or program is being provided? How can natural lay community leaders, young and old, be called forth and supported with emerging programs and services?

### **Importance of Advocacy**

In the midst of empowering and sustaining community-based programs, one must never lose sight of the macro realities of systemic inequalities, of the uneven distribution of power, or of the macro factors that perpetuate poverty. There must be advocacy for policy changes. There must be the call for allocation of state and federal funding for accessible services and opportunities for all persons. There must be community-based education on civic rights, voting privileges, and knowledge about existing services.

## **Seeds of Hope**

Robbins et al. (as cited in Gamble and Weil, 2010, p. 99) make five observations about empowerment theories:

- Provide conceptualizations of social stratification and oppression.
- Identify the personal and political barriers and dynamics that maintain oppression.
- Offer value frameworks for promoting human empowerment and liberation.
- Identify practical strategies for overcoming oppression and achieving social justice.
- Build on people's strengths, resiliency, and resources.

When social workers implement principles of empowerment and strengths-based perspective, combined with promoting social justice, there is power that goes well beyond the primary service provision to offer hope, cultivate personal growth and sustain community development.

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