**Clarifying Who Owns**

**the Problem**

**Introduction**

Before you ever open your mouth, before you ever say a word to your client, you want

to be able to discern accurately who owns the problem. Who owns the problem?

*It is the person whose* ***needs*** *are not being met.*

It is not the person who is being rude and uncooperative. It is not the person who is ruining

a party. It is not the person on our case load who has begun to drink again. Nor is it

the person who is singing off-key and ruining a songfest. It is the person whose needs are

not being met. You should know who owns the problem for three very good reasons:

1. *You will know who is responsible for solving the problem*. If you know who owns the

problem, then you know who is ultimately responsible for solving it. If you know

who is responsible for finding a solution, you will not assume the entire responsibility

is yours. In other words, you will not accept responsibility for problems

that are not yours. When you take over and try to solve other people’s problems,

or tell them how they should resolve their problems, you may be seen as meddling

in their affairs or being pushy.

2. *Meddling is disrespectful*. This sort of meddling is disrespectful, even when you

intend it to be helpful. It says clearly that you have doubts about the client’s ability

to figure the problem out and handle it on her own. You indicate that you are

not sure other people have the sense and insight to know what is best for them.

3. *The client loses opportunities to grow*. Furthermore, when you take over with

solutions, you interfere with what might be a very meaningful experience for

the client. This person may grow from wrestling with this issue. It may be the

www.MyEbookNiche.eCrater.com

**128** Section 2 Useful Clarifications and Attitudes

opportunity needed to gain insight, learn a new skill, or try something that until

now has been too frightening. If you attempt to take over with your own solutions

and ideas, your client will miss this valuable opportunity. Clients can never

say, “I did this myself!” Instead, they will have to say, “My case manager did this

for me.”

Just because a person tells you about a problem does not mean you must solve it.

Kentaro, working in a sheltered workshop, was learning a new job on the assembly

line. He seemed to quickly pick up his responsibilities, but he was having trouble

keeping up. Over and over the worker monitored his progress and gave him tips for

improving his speed. The worker stood behind him and grabbed the pieces Kentaro

missed. Finally, the worker was called away to the phone. When he came back, he

discovered that Kentaro was sitting so that he faced the assembly line from a different

position. Now, with better visibility, the client was catching each piece that came

toward him and making the necessary adjustments. The worker later said he felt foolish

for standing over Kentaro all morning when it turned out the client knew all along

how to solve the problem.

Agnes wanted to have a better relationship with her mother. She confi ded this

to her worker one day, and the worker set about helping her solve the problem. While

the worker spoke to her about poor communication, mother and daughter relationships,

and family therapy, Agnes decided to buy a pretty card and send it to her mother.

In the card she told her mother how much their relationship meant to her and how

much she wanted them to be friends. She enclosed a little lace handkerchief, and sent

the package off to her mother. Soon her mother called Agnes, and they began to talk.

Agnes, who knew herself and who had lived a good portion of her life with her mother,

understood how best to solve her problem. Listening and helping Agnes talk about the

relationship with her mother might have been a better course of action for the worker.

Keep your clients in a position of authority over their lives to the greatest extent

possible. Remind clients of how much of the resolution of the problem is their own

doing. Point it out to them. You might say, “Let’s look at all the things you’ve done to

make this happen.” Make sure your clients have the opportunity to feel pride in their

part in solving the problem. Let clients see they can help themselves more (even if

it is only a little bit more) the next time, rather than turning to their case manager to

solve the problem for them.

**If the Client Owns the Problem**

Let us suppose your client comes in and tells you that she cannot stand living with

her mother anymore. Her mother is verbally abusive and rejecting. Your client is unhappy.

Obviously this client’s need for a pleasant home environment and her need to

be appreciated by her mother are not being met. The client owns the problem. Does

the mother own the problem? She does not appear to. This method of communicating

with her daughter seems to work for her. She shows no discomfort or guilt about

any pain she might be causing her daughter. It seems to meet some need of hers to

www.MyEbookNiche.eCrater.com

Chapter 6 Clarifying Who Owns the Problem **129**

communicate in this way. The mother does not have a problem in this situation, as her

needs appear to be met.

There are several important ways you can respond to your client’s situation.

First, listen. Then, rather than providing a solution, be a resource to your client. Give

her options. Tell her about services with which you are familiar that might be helpful

to her. Ask her for her ideas. What is she looking for? What does she want to happen?

Leave the fi nal decisions up to her. In this way, you make sure that the client retains

a position of power in her own life, and you act collaboratively. You are the expert on

available services, but she is the expert on her own life.

Now let us change the story a little. Your client brings in the same problem,

but she has a moderate developmental disability. The problem still belongs to her,

but now you make a conscious decision to get a bit more involved and a conscious

decision about the extent to which you will get involved. As a case manager or

worker, there will be times when it is important to give more help than others.

A wise worker will know how much to help and when to stand back. These are

strategic decisions.

Deciding how much to become involved is important when the client has a

problem with you. For example, a client may come into your office and tell you that

he cannot stand the way you sit in front of a cluttered desk and talk to him. He claims

he feels disorganized by your clutter and wants you to have your desk cleaned off

when he comes in. In this case, you may make a conscious decision to let him own

this problem because there is no way to clean the desk off in the middle of a busy day

when you know he is coming in. You would thank him for his comments, give a word

or two about why that might not be feasible, and tell him you will continue to keep

your offi ce as it is for now.

On the other hand, the client may be upset with you because you are always

late. His need for punctuality is obvious; your being on time means to him that you

are expecting him and that you value his time. His need is not being met. In this situation,

you might decide to help own the problem. You recognize that you have been

somewhat disrespectful. You can justify it with your busy schedule, but you also can

do better. So you acknowledge the problem, thank him for his comments, and offer

to be more punctual. You have made a conscious decision to become involved in the

solution to his problem.

It Is Not Uncaring

Sometimes we feel guilty about not doing more. Sometimes others tell us that we

should be doing more. After all, we are the person’s case manager. Why are we not

extending ourselves further? Sometimes the clients themselves are the ones to accuse

us of not caring or of being indifferent. Knowing who owns the problem and allowing

that person to resolve it is not an uncaring action. In fact, you would never refuse to

help a client simply because you determined the problem belonged to the client.

When you allow clients to work on their own issues and problems, you respect

their right to privacy and self-determination. In addition, you give them an important

opportunity to grow and work on their own behalf. Solving one’s problems effectively

www.MyEbookNiche.eCrater.com

**130** Section 2 Useful Clarifications and Attitudes

is part of emotional health and maturity. To the extent to which clients are able, we

want to encourage them to do as much for themselves as they can.

It Is a Strategic Decision

The extent to which you become involved in helping clients solve problems that belong

to them is a strategic decision. This is another difference between the professional

approach to relationships and a friendship you might have away from work. In the

professional relationship with your client, you want to decide strategically how much

help to give and the extent to which you will step in. The decision is based on your

knowledge about the client and about how this opportunity can be used to help

your client grow.

A woman who is blind might need more help negotiating the transportation system

than one who is depressed. A person who is illiterate and from a rural village

might need more help working with the Social Security office in the city than would

an urban lawyer. A child might require more support than an adult to carry out a personal

decision.

The strategy lies in knowing your client’s strengths and limitations and tailoring

your involvement to those factors specifically. In this way, you avoid taking over

simply because that is the easiest thing to do or because you see all clients as helpless.

Your involvement is just to the point the client needs help or ideas and no further.

In certain cases, even though the client owns the problem, you may find yourself

taking over and resolving it almost entirely alone. Suppose you are working

with a single, 17-year-old girl, disowned by her family because of her pregnancy.

She has just delivered her first child for whom she has made adoption arrangements.

The child, however, is severely disabled and developmental issues. The doctors

feel the care required by the child can never be undertaken by a 17-year-old girl

living alone, and the prospective parents have now withdrawn their bid to adopt the

infant. In this case, you work out arrangements for the care of the infant, solving the

infant’s need for a safe, medically appropriate environment and solving the mother’s

problem of what to do with a handicapped child she believed would be going to the

home of another couple. In this case, you would consult with the mother throughout

the process, possibly even taking her to see the facility where her baby will receive

care, but you would handle most of the actual arrangements. If you did not understand

the concept of who owns the problem, you might be tempted to ignore the

mother in the process of solving this problem. If the mother were older, married,

having her second child with this handicap, and supported by her family (or in any

number of different circumstances), your response and the extent of your involvement

would change as well.

When the client owns the problem, *carefully* decide the extent to which you

will be involved. Test your hypothesis about how much the client can handle alone.

Be ready to take on more responsibility or give more responsibility to the client

as you move toward a solution. Watch your involvement to be sure you are not obstructing

the client’s opportunities to grow or to exercise self-determination and

independence.

www.MyEbookNiche.eCrater.com

Chapter 6 Clarifying Who Owns the Problem **131**

Be a Resource and a Collaborator

You will have at your fingertips information that can help the client solve a problem.

You may have the names of agencies, phone numbers, contact people, and addresses

for services. You will also be familiar with policies in various agencies and within large

social service systems, such as child welfare and mental health. You will often be more

familiar with the law as it pertains to the client’s situation. This makes you a valuable

resource to a person attempting to arrive at a solution.

Bring the information and facts to the client, and then collaborate with the client

on the solution. It is the client who is most aware of which solution will work and

which ones are impractical. Together, with your knowledge of the system and your

clients’ knowledge of their personal lives and circumstances, you will be able to construct

a useful approach to clients’ problems.

**If You Own the Problem**

If you are having a problem, that is, your needs are not being met, you will understand

that the resolution of the problem is ultimately your responsibility. This applies to

personal problems, and it also applies to problems you might have in the course of

your relationship with your clients. What if it is the client who is always late? Whenever

the client is late, you fi nd you are behind for the rest of the day. This is not the

client’s problem. The client may fi nd it perfectly acceptable to get to your offi ce at

approximately the time he is scheduled to see you. He may have scheduling problems

or punctuality problems; but in this case, he does not own this problem. You do. Your

need to stay on schedule and see everyone you are scheduled to see before 5:00 p.m.

is not being met. Therefore, you are the one who is responsible for bringing it up. Do

not expect that others will guess there is a problem.

In bringing up a problem we are having with another person, we are asking for that

person’s assistance in resolving it. Just as you make decisions regarding how much you

will become involved in resolving someone else’s issue, your clients have the right to

determine the extent to which they want to help you. It is conceivable that the client will

see your point and make some changes. It is also possible that the client will decide that

it will have to be your problem because it is preferable to be late for whatever reason or

because being punctual is an inconvenience. There are ways to solve problems like this

one; but for now, as the fi rst step, you need to be clear about who owns this problem.

**If You Both Own the Problem**

Sometimes you both have a problem. Suppose a client needs evening appointments, and

you work only during the day. Or perhaps a client wants to shout and yell about her situation,

and you fi nd that too unnerving to do a good interview. These are opportunities

to negotiate. You, as the worker, have to be able to sort out in your own mind who owns

what problem, and you must be able to initiate some negotiation around these issues.

www.MyEbookNiche.eCrater.com

**132** Section 2 Useful Clarifications and Attitudes

When you both own the problem, you should not view it as a win–lose situation. If

the client sees it that way, you need to point out other ways of looking at the situation.

Perhaps he can see another worker who does work at night, or perhaps he can come in

during the day sometimes and you can stay late sometimes. Maybe she can yell with

less intensity, and you can overlook the rest of it. It might work to transfer the client

to another worker, one whose schedule is better suited or one who can better tolerate

the yelling. There are many ways to negotiate a solution. When you work on a solution

collaboratively with the client, you provide the client with an important experience in

problem solving. As the worker, you invite the client to join you in this effort.

Margaret had been ill with schizophrenia for a very long time. Rejected by most

of the community and most of her strictly religious family, she found solace and support

among the workers in the mental health system. In the course of her illness, she

had been hospitalized and knew the staff at the hospital well. She had encountered the

various members of the crisis team and knew them too. She had a case manager whom

she found supportive. Margaret found countless reasons to call workers within the system.

Night and day she called with tiny questions, not so much because she could

not resolve the problems herself, but because she found contact with these supportive

people comforting. Sometimes she would call to ask what time she should go to bed.

She might call to ask if she should eat one frozen dinner rather than another. Should

she go out for a walk tonight or not? Should she buy a new pair of shoes or not?

Margaret’s incessant calling began to create a problem for already busy workers.

They grew exasperated. Margaret had a need to feel their support, and the workers

had a need to get things done with other clients. Finally, a solution was worked out

with Margaret and all the workers in the system who regularly received calls from her.

It was decided that a man on the crisis team who shared her religion and genuinely

liked her would be the person she would call. When he was off duty, a backup person

was designated. Margaret was then allowed only one call a day. She was to save all her

questions for that one call. Everyone agreed to this plan.

Although Margaret tested the plan many times initially, everyone stuck to the

agreement. Eventually Margaret began to make the calls more meaningful, asking for

help with real problems. Undoubtedly, this one call a day helped to sustain her and

helped her to live more comfortably in the community rather than in an institution. It

also allowed the workers to focus on other clients.

In this situation, both the workers and the client had a problem, and their needs

confl icted. By collaborating on a solution, rapport was not lost, and both the workers

and the client gained valuable experience.

**Summary**

Knowing who owns the problem is an important fi rst step in working with clients. This

allows us to understand who is ultimately responsible for resolving the problem. Once

we recognize that many of the diffi culties our clients bring to us are theirs, we need to

determine the extent to which we will assist in problem resolution. Both the determination

of who owns the problem and the decision to get involved are the fi rst strategic

decisions you make in your work with clients. Your involvement must be tailored to the

www.MyEbookNiche.eCrater.com

Chapter 6 Clarifying Who Owns the Problem **133**

clients’ strengths and capacities so that you do not take over where a client is competent

or take from clients the opportunity to grow and learn from their experiences.

For many, deciding that the clients own the problem can be seen as uncaring. In

reality, you are not abandoning clients with their problems. You are, instead, making

decisions about how much clients can do for themselves and where you will be most

helpful. In the long run, we want our clients to be able to take some pride in the fact

that they participated in solving their own problems and learn from that experience.

**Exercises I: Who Owns the Problem?**

**Instructions:** In the following situations, identify who owns the problem. As you

study each case, decide whether it is you, as the worker, who owns the problem;

whether the client and perhaps the client’s family owns the problem; or whether both

you and the client own the problem at the same time.

1. A woman you have placed in temporary housing is angered by the loud music of her

neighbors. She appeals to you to do something about it. Who owns the problem?

2. You work at a victim/witness resource center where you assist the victims of

crime to handle the emotional and technical ramifi cations of the crime before

they go to court. The husband of a victim, a woman who was carjacked by a

teenager one night, takes you aside and asks you to persuade his wife to drop the

charges. He tells you confi dentially that it would be better for his wife if “she

didn’t have to go through this.” Who owns the problem?

3. The mother of a rape victim, with whom you have been working, calls and says

that ever since the rape, her daughter has been crying and unable to eat or sleep.

She tells you it is urgent that she know exactly what happened to her daughter,

but that her daughter refuses to talk about it. She asks if you can tell her what

happened. Who owns the problem?

4. You are talking to the victim of a violent crime in the emergency room. Her boyfriend

barges in and demands to know “what’s going on.” Who owns the problem?

www.MyEbookNiche.eCrater.com

**134** Section 2 Useful Clarifications and Attitudes

5. You have placed a woman in temporary housing after she left her home following

severe abuse by her husband. The husband calls demanding to know where

she is and tells you he will get his lawyer and sue you if you do not tell him. Who

owns the problem?

6. You are working with a support group. One of the participants tells you on the

side that another participant is monopolizing the group’s time with frivolous details

and asks if you will do something. Who owns the problem?

7. Your client is going to court on his third DUI charge. The family of the woman

whose car he hit calls your offi ce before the proceedings because the article in

the paper stated your client was receiving help from your agency in preparation

for the trial. The family wants you to withdraw your services and advocate

with the judge that your client be sent to prison and not to a rehabilitation

center. Who owns the problem?

8. You are arranging for housing for a woman who is in a homeless shelter. Her parents

come to see you and ask you to see that she also goes to therapy. They tell

you she has never “seemed right,” and they ask you to give them your opinion of

her mental status. Who owns the problem?

9. You have developed a goal plan for a child. The parents agree with the plan,

which involves summer camp and other recreational activities over the summer,

all with a therapeutic program. The teacher calls to tell you that this child

can hardly benefit from school and that sending him to camp is a waste of

the taxpayer’s money. What he needs, she tells you, is therapy. Who owns the

problem?

www.MyEbookNiche.eCrater.com

Chapter 6 Clarifying Who Owns the Problem **135**

**Exercises II: Making the Strategic Decision**

**Instructions:** Following is a basic situation, with a list of scenarios in which the circumstances

surrounding the situation are different. Decide what you would do in each case.

*Situation:* Hannah recently went blind due to an accident with chemicals

at the company where she worked. She is asking for a service plan that will

help her regain some independence.

1. Hannah is a PhD chemist with the corporation where the accident occurred.

She has received a huge settlement from the corporation’s insurance company.

The corporation has said she can come back to work if she can be retrained in

some way, possibly with computers. Hannah has a supportive husband and many

close friends. How do you help?

2. Hannah was a custodian at the small chemical engineering company where the

accident occurred. The company had little insurance, and it has no interest in

hiring her back for any reason. The company did give her $5,000 at the time of

the accident, and the hospitalization plan and workers’ compensation helped

pay the initial medical bills. Hannah lives alone and has few friends. How do

you help?

3. Hannah is mildly mentally retarded and worked as a custodian at the company

where the accident occurred. The company gave her $5,000 at the time of

the accident, and the hospitalization plan and workers’ compensation helped

pay the initial medical bills. Hannah lives with her parents, who are very supportive,

and she has two older siblings who also give support. The family has

been working with Hannah to help her decide what to do next, and they have

found a place where she can answer the phone and give standard information.

This company is delighted to have a real person to do this, as the answering

machine option seemed too impersonal. Hannah will need some training. How

do you help?

www.MyEbookNiche.eCrater.com

**136** Section 2 Useful Clarifications and Attitudes

4. Hannah is a student working on a chemical engineering degree. She worked part

time to pay her school expenses at a large chemical corporation. She wants to

remain in school. Her family is supportive of this, but they live in another state.

Hannah’s roommates seem hesitant about her returning to live with them in

their downtown apartment now that she is blind. How do you help?

5. Hannah is a student working in a small chemical lab while completing a chemical

engineering degree. She wants to remain in school. Her family is supportive

of this, but they live in another state. Hannah wants a seeing-eye dog, has a landlady

who is afraid of dogs but who might accept one, and needs to learn how to

negotiate the town and the campus as a person who is blind. She has numerous

supportive friends. How do you help?

6. Hannah is a student working on a chemical engineering degree and doing a

chemical engineering internship at a chemical plant near the college. She wants

to remain in school. Her family is supportive of this, but they live in another state.

Hannah was using this job to pay for her education. Now Vocational Rehabilitation

will help, but Hannah must fi ll out countless forms. Hannah is depressed and

frightened by her blindness and spends days at home alone. How do you help?

7. Hannah had a fairly ordinary chemical technician’s job at the company when

the accident occurred. She and four other people were blinded by the accident.

Hannah has told you she wanted a lawyer while she was still in the hospital, and

she also feels the group should meet regularly to talk about the accident and their

anger. The others have agreed. Hannah tells you of the state offi ce of services to

the blind and wants help connecting to that offi ce. How do you help?

8. Hannah had a fairly ordinary chemical technician’s job at the company when the

accident occurred. The company offered to pay all her medical benefi ts and a small

stipend to support her while she trained for another kind of work, not to exceed

5 years. Hannah lives alone and has few friends. She makes it clear to you that she

is not interested in receiving any help from you. She rejects services that you know

could help her to begin training and asks you to leave her alone. How do you help?

www.MyEbookNiche.eCrater.com