Understanding Challenging Behaviors

Challenging behaviors is a broad term that encompasses a wide range of behaviors, including ones that make job retention difficult, such as being off task, or being rude to one's supervisor, and behaviors that may be dangerous to the individual or others. Challenging behaviors are one of the most common factors that lead to an individual being excluded from working in the community. The overriding assumption of this section is that the presence of challenging behaviors should *never* be a reason for restricting a person's access to employment opportunities in the community. Frequently the behavior is, more than anything else, an indication that the person is dissatisfied with his/her current situation. What better reason to look for an alternative?

General Principles

Working with individuals with challenging behaviors in the community requires careful attention to understand the meaning of the behavior for the person. Advances in behavioral technology have emphasized understanding the communicative intent or function of the behavior for the person. Interventions based on this kind of understanding more frequently involve changing the antecedents of the behavior (i.e., what precedes the behavior), rather than emphasizing the consequences of the behavior. This greater emphasis on prevention of the behavior is both more respectful of the individual's choices, and more practical in community settings.

Core Questions

A first step in the problem solving process is to question whether a behavior should be a priority for intervention. Some questions to ask:

- Is this a real problem? Is it impairing the individual's ability to work in this setting? Note that work sites are often more tolerant of behaviors that we as support people may not be as willing to tolerate.

- Would a better person-environment match help? Is this job a good match to the individual's preferences and choices? Is there another work site that would be more naturally tolerant of the behavior?

- Is it fair to try to change this behavior? Does it represent part of the worker's personality?

Review the information below, and use it in working on resolving situations caused by behavioral issues.

> ### *Working with Individuals with Challenging Behaviors:*
> ### *A Problem Solving Guide*

I. Determine Scope of Problem
- Is this a real problem?
- Would a better person-environment match help? Is this job a good match to the individual's preferences and choices? Is there another work site that would be more naturally tolerant of the behavior?
- Is it fair to try to change this behavior? Does it represent part of the worker's personality?
  Remember that:
    - Similar types of behavior occur in almost everyone
    - Nearly all behaviors serve an adaptive purpose for the individual

- Because behaviors have a function, all behaviors will not respond to the same intervention techniques

II. Fact Finding
Do a comprehensive assessment of the individual and his/her environment and preferences. This process will include:

A. *Careful Description of the Behavior*
- What does the behavior look like?
- Is the behavior very rhythmic or cyclical?
- Are there physiological symptoms closely associated with the behavior?
- What related elements seem to go along with this behavior, such as signs of pain, discomfort, changes in mood, etc.?

B. *A Functional Analysis of the Behavior*

- What are the antecedents of the behavior (i.e., what happens before the behavior occurs)?
- What cues seem to trigger the behavior?
- What general settings/events seem to precede the behavior?
- Are there simple environmental modifications (i.e., position, scheduling, etc.) that influence the behavior?
- What general instructional factors seem to elicit the behavior (i.e., demands, frustrating situations, supervisor interactions, etc.)?

  1. When does the behavior occur?

  2. Where does the behavior occur?
  - Work area?
  - Break area?

  3. Who does it occur with or near?
  - Who is present/not present?
  - Staff, co-workers, family, strangers, others

  4. What is the task or activity?
  - Type of job or activity?
  - Difficulty/frustration/boredom level of job?
  - Demands placed?
  - Job preferences?
  - Job or schedule changes?

  5. What is the physical environment like?
  - Noise level?
  - Temperature?
  - Crowded/not crowded?

  6. What personal issues are present?
  - Tired?

- Family issues (relationships, illness, etc.)?
- Home issues (staff leaving, roommate problems, etc.)?

7. Are there medical or physiological issues occurring?
- What are the consequences of this behavior?
- Does this behavior result in any social reinforcement (attention, etc.)?
- Are social or work demands reduced after the behavior occurs?
- Does the worker avoid performing any task or activity?
- What are the exact sensory consequences of this behavior?
- Are appropriate behaviors being reinforced? Does problem behavior receive more or better attention than appropriate behavior?
- What are the antecedent and consequence events when this behavior does not occur?

C. Identify The Function of the Behavior
- ☐ Generate ideas about what function the behavior serves for the worker.
- ☐ What appropriate behaviors could serve the same function for the person?

III. Redefine The Problems or Questions to Be Answered
Based on the information developed, how can the problem be re-framed or redefined? What questions need to be answered?

IV. Generate Alternative Solutions
Both this step and choosing a plan need to consider three different categories of solutions. An effective plan *must* include strategies in each of the following categories:

A. Prevention Strategies (Ecological changes)
How can the frequency of the behavior be reduced by changing the conditions?

B. Consequences (*How will you respond when the behavior occurs?*)
Focus on the function of the behavior in deciding how you will respond to it.
Remember: Be respectful!!

C. Adaptive Alternatives
Choose and teach adaptive alternatives that substitute for, or replace, the behavior.

V. Choose Alternatives
Develop a plan that addresses each of the three components above.