Recent research from work with high risk offenders, but also important international literature on desistance is beginning to revise practice on assessment and supervision (see McNeill, Raynor and Trotter 2010 for a review). Three key strands are important for practitioners. These are developing more holistic and individualised assessments and intervention plans; engagement and motivation of offenders to comply and to change; and using a ‘strengths based’ approach to achieve more positive outcomes. Paying attention to what offenders say about assessment and supervision can improve practice.

**Developing more holistic, individualised assessments and intervention plans**

The 1990s and 2000s saw confusion amongst practitioners and local managers between risk of harm and risk of reoffending. This was not helped by the use of the term ‘criminogenic need’ resulting in an unhelpful elision of risk and need factors that served to confuse practitioners completing assessments and led to imprecision in the use of key terms central to assessment and offender management. Risk-based interventions also tended to be applied universally without sufficient regard to issues of responsivity or diversity. At worst, they served to increase the exclusion, stigmatisation and pathology of some categories of offenders (e.g. sexual offenders). This reinforces the need for assessments that are both holistic and individualised.

Tick box assessments have a tendency to result in tick box plans, often lengthy lists of un-sequenced and sometimes uncoordinated tasks. Tailoring and targeting plans are more likely to result in positive outcomes, enhanced responsivity and compliance. Offenders value a degree of personalisation, and regard for their unique circumstances and difficulties. Whilst problematic behaviours may have common causes and present in common ways, they are always played out by an individual offender in the particular context of their own life. Fully understanding the ‘why’ of someone’s behaviour is crucial to the ‘what’ of interventions. ‘One size’ rarely fits all, and the individualisation of intervention plans with programmes as one feature of more holistic ‘wrap around plans for change’ are likely to be the future agenda- often provided by probation or prison staff in partnership with a range of other agencies and personnel.

**Engagement and motivation**

Research and good practice indicates that offenders are more likely to engage if assessment and management is fully explained and is seen by the offender as a collaborative approach from which they can benefit (Beech and Mann 2002). Offenders are also more likely to comply and seek positive change if they see the practitioner’s actions as legitimate (this is not the same as being positively welcomed), but rather that the offender accepts that supervisors have the right and the responsibility to do what they do (e.g. third party disclosures about sex offenders). This
Making Offender Assessment Meaningful

should be balanced where possible with interventions that address their legitimate needs and which convey concern, understanding, and appropriate empathy. Whilst it is difficult to always incentivise behaviour change, rewards for positive behaviour, no matter how small (i.e. a ‘well done’, or ‘thank you’) can have important impact and reinforcement. Offenders value assessments that are fair, accurate and clearly explained. Positive supervisory relationships coupled with positive assumptions that they can change are welcomed, and the skill, knowledge and competence of the assessor are seen as important.

Assessing motivation still presents practitioners with difficulties. Farrow et al identify four types of offender and some techniques to aid assessments of motivation:

**Reluctant:** those who are fearful of change-these need careful listening and feedback, plus encouragement to change through the use of small, achievable steps and positive reinforcement of success.

**Rebellious:** those who put energy into resisting the idea of change-the practitioner needs to shift the offender’s focus of attention and energy.

**Resigned:** those who see themselves as incapable of change- the practitioner needs to question and probe in order to identify the barriers and blocks to change. If possible the practitioner needs to remove these barriers. The use of small, achievable steps to change with positive reinforcement of success is also useful. Prioritise first something that the offender is likely to achieve. Start with success.

**Rationalising:** those who use argument and debate to prove that change is not necessary- the practitioner needs to avoid argument and emphasise reflective listening. (Adapted from Farrow, K., Kelly, G. and Wilkinson, B. (2007) Offenders in Focus: Risk, responsivity and diversity. Bristol: Policy Press., p.135 - practice tool 7.3).

**What can a ‘strengths based’ approach offer?**
Supervision and intervention strategies that promote pro-social modelling and ‘strengths’ are now seen as effective mechanisms for reducing risk and promoting offender integration into communities safely, and may indeed enhance motivation. Broadly defined a strength is something which assists the offender’s resilience to offending, enables them to develop a non-offending view of themselves, and a deeper commitment to a non-offending lifestyle.

Offenders themselves view ‘strength based’ interventions as helpful, effective and legitimate, and compliance is often enhanced by such approaches, particularly if the ‘therapeutic alliance’ between offender and worker is positive. So what do practitioners need to do?

- Assessments require a more collaborative approach with the offender (and offenders value this and feedback positively where it occurs).
- Take offenders through an in-depth, face to face interview of self-exploration.
- Assess motivation and readiness to change-sequence and pace interventions accordingly.
- Formulate individualised and balanced intervention plans, enhancing strengths, meeting legitimate needs, and controlling risks.
- Remember that treating offenders with empathy, warmth, respect and dignity all contribute towards positive outcomes.
Some questions:
When assessing motivation do you know whether the offender is ‘reluctant’, rebellious’, ‘resigned’ or ‘rationalising’ and do you adopt the correct strategy?
How individualised and targeted was your last assessment and intervention plan?
How do you identify strengths when assessing offenders? How do you ask about this in assessment interviews?
Taking the kind of things offenders’ value in assessors, how would you rate yourself on a 1-5 scale in providing them?

References:

Author of this document:
Hazel Kemshall
Professor of Community and Criminal Justice
De Montfort University