

Probationer as a Customer

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Introduction

A major goal of probation is to facilitate a reduction in recidivism. Few dispute that goal. Leibrich and others (1994) assert the goal as "desirable, reasonable, and achievable with at least some offenders." But how? Experts and laymen alike have suggested that the answer, at least in part, may lie in the quality of relationships that exists between the supervisors and supervised and the services made available to those under supervision (Bingham, 1994; Corbett, 1993).

A primary goal of the Texas Department of Criminal Justice and the agencies it supports should be sensitivity and accountability to the population it most directly serves - the convicted offender. Or, in the words of the late John Conrad, these institutions and agencies should be "lawful, safe, industrious, and hopeful" (Beto, 1992), thus promoting a climate where rehabilitation is encouraged. This client population composed of convicted offenders can be compared to that of "customers" in the business world - with one significant difference: the relationship in the prison setting and, likewise, in community supervision and corrections departments is an involuntary one. That involuntariness in the nature of that relationship would seem to heighten the significance of the overall experience for those "customers."

The study by Leibrich and others cited above indicates that the quality of the relationship between a probation officer and a client offender played a critical role in an offender's likelihood to recidivate. Field staff were convinced that the quality of the relationship between a probation officer and a client could provide the mode for establishing a positive influence upon the client. Offenders seemed to be more open to reviewing and ultimately choosing acceptable behavior.

How might good relationships be established? The researchers identified the following key factors: establishing rapport, adapting to individual needs, taking risks, going the extra mile, being genuine,

being honest about the relationship, empowering the offender, balancing care and control, and spending quality time.

This article is devoted to a survey conducted by a Texas Community Supervision and Corrections Department designed to determine if staff was responsive to the needs of the offender client.

Development of the Current Study

In September 1991, a new Director assumed responsibility for the Judicial District Community Supervision and Corrections Department for Walker, Grimes, and Madison Counties, headquartered in Huntsville, Texas. And with this new administrator came a new mission statement:

The mission of the Judicial District Community Supervision and Corrections Department is threefold. The Department is committed to providing quality services to the Courts by conducting presentence investigations, supervising offenders at meaningful levels, and by providing alternatives to incarceration along a continuum of sanctions. The Department also serves the community, by protecting its citizens from illegal and antisocial acts by offenders placed on probation, operating community service programs, and by collecting court imposed financial obligations, such as restitution, fines, court costs, and court appointed attorney's fees. Finally, the Department serves probationers, by providing them with a continuum of services and sanctions, all used as a means of working toward law abiding and socially responsible behavior.

In delivering these services, the Department is well aware of the often conflicting philosophical approaches within the criminal justice system - deterrence, rehabilitation or treatment, just deserts or retribution, and incapacitation. While the Department places considerable emphasis on treatment or rehabilitation, this treatment is balanced with offender accountability.

Following the passage of a little more than two years, the Director was fairly well assured that the Department was providing quality services to the Courts and the community. This assurance came as a result of regular meetings with the Judges, elected officials, and community leaders, coupled with an extremely favorable program audit conducted by the Community Justice Assistance Division. He was not as convinced, however, that the Department was providing quality services to the offender population. Prompted by an article appearing the Winter 1994 issue of Executive Exchange, the Director elected to survey the probation population.

In July 1994, the Director created a committee to develop a questionnaire to survey probationers about their perception of the Department, its staff, and the services provided. More specifically, the Director wanted to know if his employees had embraced the quality service concept and were being responsive to the needs of the probationer/customer. The committee subsequently developed a 60 item questionnaire, which contained questions designed to glean demographic data about the respondents and their opinions as customers of the Department's services. The survey was subsequently reviewed by a member of the faculty at the College of Criminal Justice at Sam Houston State University, who suggested several revisions.

The revised survey looked at what adults on misdemeanor and felony probation in Walker County say about their experience under supervision. It was designed to get a reading as to how offenders on probation supervision evaluate the accessibility, helpfulness, and effectiveness of probation. It asked them about the quality of their relationship with their probation officer and other staff as well as the programs and help offered. It even asked them if they thought it would have been better to have just

gone to jail. Only a few such studies have been known to have been made which evaluate probation from the perspective of the offender clients it serves. This is the only known formal study with that perspective and purpose conducted in Texas.

Following the development of the survey instrument, nine probation officers in the Department's Walker County Office randomly distributed the questionnaire to adult misdemeanor and felony probationers under their supervision. One hundred and eighty-four (184) questionnaires were obtained during the remaining months of 1994, which represented 27% of the probation population under direct supervision.

Personal/Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

The first part of the questionnaire focused on personal and demographic information of the respondents. Specifically, data were collected regarding their age, sex, ethnic/racial background, marital status, family size, education, and employment history. In addition, questions were asked to obtain information relating to their probation supervision. These questions asked them about their previous probation experience, length of their probation supervision, type of probation (felony or misdemeanor), revocation status, and the name of their probation officer. The personal, demographic, and probation supervision information follows.

Gender

Of the 184 probationers responding, 134 (72.8 %) were male and 50 (27.2%) were female.

Age

Ages ranged from 17 to 81 in the sample. As expected, the largest number were found from ages 20 through 24; some 57 of the 184 respondents (31%) were in this age group. The modal age, or most commonly given age, was 23. Twenty people listed that as their age. The next largest response listed was 22, which 13 claimed as their age. Ten respondents indicated their age was 24. The second largest number of probationers were found in the age group 30 through 34; a total of 34 (18.5%) fell in this age group. Twenty-four (13%) of the respondents were in the age group 25 through 29, followed by the age group 35 through 39 where 22 (11.9%) of the respondents were found. Thirteen (7.1%) probationers were in the age group 40 through 44, followed by the age group 17 through 19, where ten (5.4%) of the respondents fell.

Marital Status

Of the 184 respondents, 82 (44.5%) were single. The second largest group of respondents considered themselves to be married, either formally or through a common law relationship; sixty-six (35.9%) probationers were in this category. The divorced category, with 23 (12.5%) respondents, made up the third largest group. Those describing themselves as "separated" included eleven (6%) people. Finally, two (1.1%) probationers described themselves as "widowed."

Children

Probably reflecting the large number of young single males in the sample, 61 (33.1%) respondents did not have any children. Also, as would be expected the next largest categories were for one (34), two (28), and three (34) children, which represented 52.2% of the respondents. Seven (3.8%) probationers had four children, while eight (4.3%) had five. In addition, three or fewer had more than five; two had eleven children, and one had twelve.

Race/Ethnicity

With 76 (41.3%) respondents, the largest number of probationers participating in the survey were Black

Americans. Anglos or non-Hispanic Whites were next with 66 (35.9%), and Hispanics numbered 35 (19%). Only two (1.1%) checked the category "Other" and five (2.7%) others failed to reply.

Educational Level

Most of the respondents - 134 (76.1%) - had at least some high school education. Half of that number had completed high school, while the other half had attended high school but had not finished. Only 17 (9.7%) had finished eight grades or less. A similar sized numerical minority - 25 (14.2%) had attended college, and only one respondent had finished college. Eight probationers failed to respond to this question.

Employment Status

More than half (113) of the probationers were employed on a full-time basis. About a quarter more (45) were not employed at the time they answered this questionnaire. Twenty-four others described themselves as employed part-time. Percentages of all who responded (182) for these categories were as follows: full-time employed (62.1%); part-time employed (13.2%); and, not employed (24.7%). Two failed to respond to the question.

Offense Level

Of the total that replied to this question (175), the great majority, 121 (69.1%) responded they were on probation for a felony offense. Those responding that a misdemeanor offense was the reason for their probation numbered 54 (30.9%). Three others did not reply and six responses could not be determined.

Length of Time on Current Probation

Most of the sample - 102 (56%) - had been on probation for at least one year but less than three years. A total of 54 (29.7%) of the respondents had been on probation for three to five years. Only 18 (9.9%) had been on probation less than a year and eight (4.4%) were "long-termers," having been on supervision for more than six years. Two probationers failed to respond to this question.

Previous Probations

Of the 180 respondents, 106 (58.9%) reported this was their first probation experience. About half that number - 54 (30%) - had been on probation once before. Twenty (11.1%) respondents had been on probation more than once, including one respondent who said he had been on nine times before.

Probation Revocation History

Of the 181 who responded to this question, 163 (90.1%) had never had a probation revoked. A small minority of 18 (9.9%) had experienced at least one probation revocation. Three people in the sample did not respond to the question.

Responses Indicating Probationers' Attitudes and Perceptions of Probation In Walker County

The second set of questions, many of which were grouped to cover related issues, were designed to elicit responses from offenders about their experiences with the Walker County Office of the Judicial District Community Supervision and Corrections Department.

Did you get any help from your probation officer?

Probationers overwhelmingly responded in a positive fashion to these questions. Responses ranged from a little over two thirds positive reaction to as much as 98.4%. The most positive reactions concerned the three questions dealing with providing information. More than 95% agreed that the probation officer clearly explained the rules of probation and answered all their questions when they were first put on

probation. The highest percentage (98.4%) received on any question was "Does your probation officer clearly explain what is expected of you?"

Respondents showed the most support for questions assessing their overall satisfaction with their probation officer. Perhaps the acid test for perceived effectiveness was the question: "Do you think that your probation officer has helped you to succeed on probation?" Nearly nine tenths (89%) agreed that their officer did. Over ninety percent also felt that their probation officer wants to help them when they have problems (92.9%); that the advice they receive is helpful (95.7%); and that their time on probation will help them stay out of trouble (95.5%). One commented: "If I wouldn't have got caught, sooner or later I'd have been caught with something more serious. I'm glad it happened like it did, and that it's all over with."

As might be expected, the few who disagreed had strong views on these matters: one did not feel he had been helped because probation officers "have a different outlook, being on the law enforcement end of things;" another stated "he didn't really feel he should even be on probation;" and still another definitively pointed out "it's not the probation that keeps me out of trouble, it's the fear of God!" Two comments critical of fines were made; one felt that the sum should be lowered and the community should help them make the payments. Another simply stated he was having trouble paying the fees and there are too many threats made about not having the money to pay them.

Should the probation officer help with work related needs?

Probationers also responded positively, albeit somewhat less so, to statements that the probation department offers enough help to meet their needs (86.3%); that they received help from the job list (85.3%); and, were willing to talk over job-related problems (84.9%) or attend a class to teach people the skills needed to help them get a job (84.9%). But considerably fewer thought the probation department had helped them get a job (76.5%) or should even have the responsibility of helping someone get a job (75.1%). One commented that he could not understand why so many good jobs are denied to probationers. "It seems like one mistake ruins you for life. Why?" Another comments that he was helped by a resume service, "...but there are a lot of suggestions you should take in mind." What those suggestions are he never says.

Should the probation officer help with personal problems?

Respondents were least convinced that their probation officers helped them with the more personal areas of their lives, such as their families and finances. Likewise, they were less strongly convinced that their probation officers should help them in these problem areas. Although more than four fifths (82.1%) believed that their time with their probation officer helped them solve their problems, they were somewhat less likely to be comfortable with their probation officer helping them with their family (77.6%) or financial problems (80.4%). Respondents were least likely to say they would continue to call upon their probation officer if they had problems even if they were no longer on probation (67.4%). It is important to note, however, that all questions were still answered more than two thirds of the time positively.

Overall, the respondents were clearly satisfied with the help that they had received from their probation officers. Ninety percent felt that their probation officer had helped them succeed on probation. The conditions and expectations of probation were explained well and their questions answered. Probationers were somewhat less positive about the help they had received on specific problems concerning more personal areas of their lives, such as their families and finances, nor were they quite convinced they needed such help.

Are supervision services easily accessible?

A number of factors go into the making of effective probation supervision. These factors may set the stage for the type of probation supervision relationship that will develop. Like all people, probationers want to be shown consideration and dealt with as individuals. They want to be more than just a "docket number," "client," or "case." They want to be treated as "human beings." Often this reflects the perceptions they have about how accessible the probation services really are to them. Are their probation officer and other agency staff really interested in them and do they actively encourage them to make use of supervision services? Do they make genuine efforts or even "go the extra mile" to avail themselves of their services? Several questions were designed to solicit responses to these very important questions. These questions revolve around accessibility to the agency, the secretarial staff and their respective probation officers.

Several questions were designed to see if the probation agency's hours of business were amenable to the probationers and facilitated their accessing of supervision services. Responses indicate the probationers are well satisfied with the current business hours and to a much lesser extent support any changes. Perhaps the principal reason for that is ninety-five percent (95.1%) responded that their probation officer tries to schedule their appointments around clients' work or school schedules. Typical of the many positive comments is this one: "This department has been helpful, sympathetic to all problems, and very accommodating when needs arose. This flexibility is very helpful and appreciated." Likewise, nearly as many (93.4%) feel that the probation department is open long enough to make it easy to report to their probation officer. A minority and less than glowing opinion on the matter was this one: "I work the same hours y'all do; and I've lost jobs for taking off."

Not too surprisingly then, only a minority felt that the probation office should be open in the evenings (42.9%) or weekends (37.2%). But if the probation department were open during the evenings or weekends seventy-six percent (76.1%) said they would report in the evening and sixty-four percent (64.7%) said they would report on Saturday if the probation department were open on weekends. One opposed to reporting on weekends made this comment: "We all need weekends away from work!"

Probationers apparently believe that getting to the probation department is their responsibility. Almost ninety percent of them (88.3%) say that they can usually get a ride when they need to go to the probation department. Only a few (22.9%) thought the probation department should give them a ride.

Probably nothing affects perceptions of accessibility more than the manner in which agency personnel, including their probation officer and the support staff, respond to them. Actions often speak louder than words here. How long do they have to wait in the office? Do their probation officers return their calls? How soon? Are they treated with respect by their probation officer and other staff? Questions were included to assess their perceptions in these vital areas.

Probationers see the probation officers as responsive and sensitive to them and their needs. Only a small number (11.4%) think their probation officer makes them wait very long when they report for an office visit. On a follow-up question, almost three-fourths (72.1%) of the respondents said they waited less than ten minutes to see their officer, and another 23% were able to meet with their probation officer within 20 minutes. Even when they arrive late or without an appointment, three quarters of them (76.1%) say they do not have to wait for more than 20 minutes. Although a sizeable minority (32.6%) say the probation department reschedules their appointments often, half of the sample (49.2%) state that their probation officer is always available. Of the remaining 36.7%, they were able to see another probation officer. Apparently nearly all (96.7%) are content or possibly placated by their probation

officer's willingness to reset their appointments when they have emergencies. Several made additional comments to that effect such as this one: "Every time I couldn't make it, he will give me another date." Regarding telephone call-backs, another source of potentially great irritation, eighty-six (86%) say their telephone calls are returned within the hour.

As every good agency administrator knows, lasting impressions are often created in the initial contact people have with a business or agency. That first contact is usually with a secretary whose job is to answer incoming telephone calls or greet clients/customers at the reception desk. The same is true in the typical probation office. The secretaries play a key role in establishing perceptions of agency accessibility. The secretaries are apparently doing a superb job in this role: nearly all probationers perceive them as quick to wait on them (97.8%) and polite (98.4%) when they come to the agency to make a payment. Telephone contacts are likewise very positive: nearly all (98.3%) say the secretaries are polite and about the same percentage (97.2%) ask them if they would like to leave a message for their probation officer when the officer is not available. One strong voice of dissent was heard here however. One respondent grumbled: "The secretary is not the most helpful person. She is also rude and unconcerned."

How is your probation officer?

At the heart of probation supervision is the relationship of the probation officer and the probationer. This is the pivotal ingredient upon which good rapport develops and is sustained. If good rapport exists, like a set of keys it can unlock doors to new opportunities for positive change. Key components to good rapport include honesty, respect, quality time and continuity in the relationship. Several items were designed to tap this most essential of supervision dimensions.

On a summary item - "Do you think you have a good relationship with your probation officer?" - more than ninety percent (92.9%) responded affirmatively. Probationers were even more favorable on key factors of that relationship - honesty, fairness, and respect. Sample respondents were nearly universally in agreement that their probation officers answer questions clearly and honestly (97.8%). About the same percentages stated that they were treated fairly by their probation officers (96.2%) and that they were treated with respect (94%). Several added glowing comments of praise about their probation officer. Typical of these are the following: "I think that all of the probation officers I have are very caring, open and friendly. They make me feel human and not like some animal that has to be punished." "If all your probation officers are as friendly and helpful as mine, I think you've done a good job. He's wonderful!" "My probation officer deserves a raise!" There were a few clearly negative comments as well. The following are such: "My probation officer thinks I'm lying and that I'm a thug, because of my past;" "How can people enforce something so unfair?" One presented a rather lengthy philosophical view on the matter: "There are a lot of good officers, but there are a couple that act better than thou! Everyone makes mistakes and no one is better. No one should judge one person's life until they've been through it or lived it in some way. It has a lot to do with some of the ones who make more money. They tend to look down on the poorer ones and that's not right!"

Should probationer clientele be rotated? Probationers showed a distinct preference for continuity in that most do not think that they should change probation officers every once in a while; a mere sixteen percent (15.9%) think they should change probation officers. Even so, a sizeable percentage of the probationers have had more than one probation officer. Slightly more than a third have had only one probation officer (35.9%). The remainder have had two (22.8%), three (15.8%), four (13.0%), or more (12.5%) probation officers. Such changes are not popular as almost half of the sample respondents (44.3%) report that they are upset when they get a different probation officer. This question elicited the

most additional commentary and also the greatest contrast in views. Most emphatically added that they did not like changing probation officers. The most common reasons were that they were "used" to the officer they had or they "liked" the one they had. Other reasons given were that they did not want to start over again; they did not like the "subs" they got; they tend to get "jumped on" by new probation officers; or, new probation officers will want to make new changes in their lives.

But, clearly not everybody liked keeping the same probation officer throughout their supervision: those who disagreed, disagreed sharply. Some believed as a matter of policy probation officers should be changed every two to three months or at least every year, at least one stated that it was not a good idea to get "too close;" others were simply dissatisfied with their current probation officers or felt they should have the option to change officers if they were dissatisfied. Two of the more "colorful" volunteered additional comments were these: "there should be more pretty female probation officers" and "sometimes my probation officer can be such an ass!" Finally it should be noted that although the sampled probationers are overwhelmingly satisfied with their probation officers as indicated above, fewer than half (42.6%) would, if they could, want to spend more time with their probation officers. On the other hand, one commented that "you do not mix business and pleasure" and another simply stated "I'm ready to quit seeing probation officers." Apparently, they have had enough of a good thing.

What about special programs?

The questionnaire tapped views regarding two special programs in probation - the GED/adult education program and alcohol/drug abuse counseling made available through the department. A sizeable portion of the sample were involved in either one or both programs, but many others were not. These programs are designed to improve offender marketability in the workplace and to provide empowerment or control over dangerous and debilitating addictions.

In general, the probationers gave high marks to the GED program. Although fewer than half (46.1%) had been asked to attend the program, those who attended felt they received the help they needed (84.7%), that the probation department offered enough classes so that it was easy for them to attend (87.7%), and that getting a GED would help them in the future (84.6%). Considerably fewer (62.8%), however, would actually attend GED classes even if they were not a condition of their probation. Although the probation department offers transportation to the GED classes on Saturday mornings, a large minority (42.6%) were not aware of that. Only a small minority (20.1%) had ever used these services.

With respect to the drug/alcohol abuse counseling initiatives offered by the department, not all sampled respondents had participated in these programs. Those who had tended to regard non-residential drug/counseling programs favorably. They were decidedly less enthusiastic about in-patient programs, however.

Somewhat fewer than two thirds (59.1%) had ever been referred to attend alcohol/drug counseling. The great majority of those (82.8%) thought that the counseling had helped or was helping them. One enthusiastic participant wrote: "Soon I will have completed one year of sobriety; I obey all laws and will continue to obey them. I have made a complete 360° turn around; I will continue to go to church and to attend AA meetings even after probation!" Another enthusiast commented: "I have been on probation for four years. During that time I have used drugs and quit. If it wasn't for my officers, I may be dead or in prison. They [probation officers] believed in me and gave me a chance to see myself for who I really am. And now I know it's OK to ask for help." Three dissenting points of view are interesting if not as enthusiastic, however. One participant did not think his counseling program was helpful: Why? Because

it was "one-sided - didn't allow confrontations." Another pointed out that "I work all day at a construction job and am being sent to three different drug /alcoholic programs a week, one of which I must pay for. I live on my own, take care of my mother and my grandmother and have a hard time attending." Another simply stated that drug testing is uncalled for - people should be able to do private things, as long as they harm nobody but themselves. All in all the sample largely agreed (93.4%) that the department offers enough alcohol/drug counseling programs.

About a fifth of the sample (19.9%) had at one time or another been referred to an in-patient alcohol/drug abuse facility. Almost two thirds (62.0%) of those referred to an in-patient facility thought the probation officer was right in sending them to the facility. Even more (79.7%) reported they had received the help they needed at the facility. The great majority of those treated in a facility (70.9%) added that they had not used any drugs or alcohol, since being out of the facility.

Is jail a preferred alternative to probation?
When asked the question: "If you could choose, would you rather serve your time in jail/prison than be on probation?" only fifteen (8%) of the respondents would prefer jail or prison to probation. One commented: "I got myself in a dumb situation and I am glad I got a second chance instead of going to jail or prison. If I had gone to jail or prison my chances of getting a good job after college would be slim or nothing."

Summary

Since this survey sought an assessment of probation and probation services from the point of those being served, it has extensive possibilities for practical use, including planning for future probation service delivery, agency staffing practices, budget preparation, staff training, etc.

Good administrators recognize the value of information in the management of agencies (DiIulio, 1987; Wilson, 1989); this survey, and those like it, can serve as excellent management tools to identify potential problem areas, the extent of staff responsiveness, and better methods for servicing a troubled population. Too, they provide the customer a vehicle to express his or her views about the services they are provided and serve as an instrument of management to further emphasize to staff the importance of the service delivery concept. Finally, information gleaned from this type of questionnaire may be used to validate existing practices.

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Community corrections and juvenile probation administrators interested in exploring the possibility of having a survey conducted in their department are encouraged to contact either Rodney Henningsen, Ph. D., or Dan Richard Beto at the George J. Beto Criminal Justice Center at Sam Houston State University in Huntsville, Texas.