Care Begets Caring

Feeling supported and secure makes people more altruistic

The Clifford Beers Clinic is a mental health facility that serves families in greater New Haven, Conn. Because many of the clinic's clients are abused children, the clinic's counselors sometimes experience distress and depression. To create a supportive environment for its counselors, the clinic holds a confidential, weekly group conference at which staff talk about their emotional reactions to their work.

An article in the November 2005 *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* suggests that Clifford Beers' employee outreach may help not only its staff, but also its clients. The research shows that when people are reminded of others who have supported them, cared for them, and made them feel safe – so-called secure attachment figures – they tend to behave more altruistically.

"If people feel that someone cares about them, they can turn their attention to exploration and caregiving," says Phillip Shaver, the article's coauthor and a psychology professor at the University of California at Davis. Conversely, people who are protecting themselves from getting hurt tend to be less altruistic.

In one of their five studies, Shaver, his Davis colleagues Omri Gillath and Rachel Nitzberg, and Mario Mikulincer of Bar-Ilan University in Israel first subliminally reminded study participants of people from their lives by flashing their names on a computer screen so quickly that participants didn't realize they had seen them. One group of participants saw the names of people who made them feel safe and supported, one group saw names of people who were close, but not attachment figures, and a final group saw the names of distant acquaintances. (Participants had previously listed these names in an allegedly unrelated task.) The authors reasoned, and other research suggests, that the participants subliminally "primed" with the names of their attachment figures would feel more secure and supported than would the other two groups.

Participants then watched another alleged participant (actually an actor) complete several unpleasant tasks.

Capacity by Any Other Name

Donors don't know much about capacity building, except that they don't like the term

For several years, a philanthropist had given money to a San Francisco-based AIDS prevention organization. When it became clear that the nonprofit needed to expand, he gave a $50,000 grant so that the nonprofit could hire its first paid secretary and rent office space. Although academics and foundations might say that the donor contributed to "capacity building," neither he nor the recipient ever used this term.

Our interviews with 34 individual donors and their advisers across the United States likewise show that they either don't know or don't like the term "capacity building." Capacity building means developing the internal resources (e.g., technological equipment, management expertise) a nonprofit organization needs to accomplish its mission. Individual donors generally support the idea of developing these internal resources. But most donors never use the phrase "capacity building" to describe their often informal philanthropic work in this realm. Indeed, most view the term as jargon. Many donors also said that they do not know about other donors' or foundations' work concerning capacity building.

The respondents in our sample included both major and minor donors, wealth managers, office managers, private bankers, and trust attorneys. Many were eager to learn more about capacity building, saying that they would prefer to receive their education through peer networking or brief, journalistically written summaries, perhaps on the Internet.

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