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MDRT Minute

Deciphering the Communication Code of Our Elders

Why do so many baby boomers have problems communicating with older adults? Their failure to act on or follow through with our best efforts to help them stems from a problem with us. Simply put, we have very little useful information about their psychological agenda. Having and using this knowledge, enables you to work with them and not against them.

The Secret Mission

We assume because the person is declining, losing their hair, or can't move as fast that surely the personality goes right behind it. However, PET scans reveal that an 80-year old brain is in high gear. IQ doesn't drop more than 1% if it drops at all.

The developmental journey of the human personality is life long and has critical growth stages throughout. Each growth stage has a mission. For the elderly, the mission is two-fold: maintain control in a world where all control is being lost **and** create a legacy because time is running out. Older adults hold onto control because they are losing it in so many aspects of their lives, one of which is their finances. At the same time, they have lived 80 years, so they ask themselves what difference they have made, what is the meaning of their lives.

The Communication Code

There is a communication code that resonates with older adults and where they are in their mission: action verbs. Action verbs transfer power from you to the person you are speaking to. "How do you want to control this?" What are your thoughts about how you want this managed?" These kinds of questions allow them to retain control. By choosing your verbs wisely, you can settle the control issue up front and put them in charge of the process.

To resolve the legacy element of their mission, ask discovery questions, questions that require you to pause and listen to the answer. "What do you remember about your grandparents?" "What was the biggest obstacle your family had to overcome when you were growing up?" Discovery questions aim right at the heart of life review, because that's where they are, and if you don't open that you won't connect with them. Allow them to give non-linear answers. Let them move where they are going to move, not you pushing them to cut them off -- and be ready for anything.

If a case comes to a dead halt, you can assume that the lack of movement is really a lack of enthusiasm for their legacy. You may be really excited about it, but they're not. You can use this as a signal for you to help them discover their legacy. The answer is waiting to be discovered.

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