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Using interviewing techniques, risk assessment to better help your clients

It is crucial to stay current on best practices and evolving models in family law to best serve our clients. A current and vital discussion in our field is the paradigm shift and how we, as professionals, can best guide our clients through it.

The paradigm shift

Paradigms are the parameters and boundaries set by individuals to navigate through their daily lives. They make us comfortable, allowing us, as individuals, to have a certain level of confidence in possible outcomes.

A paradigm shift occurs when a fundamental change takes place in an individual's life. The paradigm shift in family law refers to the shift that occurs when a couple separates or starts the divorce process, as the couple shifts from married life to single life. When the shift occurs, individuals must be able to alter the way they previously approached their life in order to resolve the difficulties ahead.

The shift unveils families that are either functional or dysfunctional. In dysfunctional situations, one spouse will try to control the other's behaviors to achieve his or her own goals at the expense of the other. It becomes essential for the professionals involved in the shift to be equipped with helpful tools to implement change. To best serve our clients, we must continuously seek out individuals to brainstorm with and to learn from.

Interviewing techniques for children and adults

At 9 a.m., Nov. 11, the Illinois chapter of the Association of Family and Conciliations Courts (AFCC-IL) will host psychologist Larry Fong at the DePaul O'Hare Campus, 8770 W. Bryn Mawr Ave., Room 206.

Fong brings a breadth of knowledge to the family law arena, with more than 30 years of experience working as a mediator, arbitrator, consultant and custody evaluator. He travels internationally to teach attorneys, mental health profes-

sionals and judges in using proper interview techniques with children and adults. He will also train on proper risk assessment and addressing violence in a family.

Fong will spend the morning discussing interviewing techniques for children and adults which lead to more successful outcomes. His systematic model for questioning is used in more than 15 countries in both legal and forensic settings. Under this model, he will discuss the differences and benefits of lineal questions, strategic questions, relational or circular questions and reflective questions.

Lineal questions are informative and are not meant to be stimulating. Strategic questions are those meant to elicit succinct responses and likewise are similar to leading questions. Relational or circular questions are those which require the individual to differentiate thereby requiring more self-analysis. Finally, reflective questions are intended to help clients hypothesize and brainstorm.

However, the questioning model just scratches the surface of his interviewing techniques. Fong will also discuss the substance of the question. He will teach participants how to "ask questions of a

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difference that makes a difference." The purpose is to challenge clients to achieve a new level of thinking that will create a space for change.

Often, we encounter clients who seem unable or even paralyzed by their own thoughts. This paralysis prevents them from changing their thought patterns and behaviors. As a result, we often see clients make the same decisions over and over. It is as if their



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thinking is "frozen in time." Frozen thought patterns prevent clients from making changes. However, it is important to understand that an inability to change often serves a purpose for that client — it feels stable, safe and secure.

As professionals, we must help clients think differently about their problems. Whether as an attorney, mental health professional, mediator or judge, it is the professional's responsibility to provide different thinking than what the clients brought into the process to begin with. To this end, Fong will lecture extensively on using and understanding the Milan Systemic Approach.

The Milan Systemic Approach helps professionals understand how their own behaviors impact their clients throughout the process. As it pertains to mediators, the mediator has to assume that everything they say and do not say will affect, or has the potential to affect, the outcome of the mediation.

Understanding your own professional influence on the process will help guide you in engaging in

respectful awareness rather than taking a position of unawareness and/or less involvement. Learning that all behaviors and statements have consequences, leads to taking a true stance of neutrality. This is key to a successful mediation or collaboration.

Since the method of questioning and substance of the question can elicit a different emotional response from each client, having insight and self-awareness into how your questions may affect the client is crucial. Such insight will help you decide on which types of questions to ask in light of what information you are looking to garner.

Assessment of risk

Later in his presentation, Fong will discuss how to deal with client risk issues both in court and in the office. He will present on how to assess for risk of harm to others using the HCR-20 model.

The HCR-20 model defines violence as "actual, attempted or threatened infliction of bodily harm on another person, [and/or] physical or serious psychological harm affect[ing] one or more people aside from the actor."

This model uses the most current research and discusses facets such as a person's history of behavioral problems, experiences with trauma, problems with relationships, employment and substance abuse as well as any major mental health disorders and diagnoses — to name a few.

The model also looks to the person's future problems such as his or her living situation, access to professional services and support systems and ability to cope. This presentation will help attendees learn how to assess whether their client is at risk of harming another person, such as their spouse or child.

For details and to register for Fong's lecture, visit afccillinois.org.

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