

# Colorado Probation Research in Brief

## *Pro-Social Modeling*

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**Key Words:** supervision, recidivism, probation officer skills, modeling, positive and negative reinforcement

### Using Modeling for Change

#### Summary/Conclusions

This article is a literature review on pro-social modeling. The author defines the skill of pro-social modeling and discusses the studies which have explored the use of modeling with offender populations. The author also identifies and responds to some of the criticism of this skill. Research noted in the article found that the use of pro-social modeling can reduce recidivism, and the author concludes, "The greatest strength of pro-social modeling is that the research evidence suggests that it works."

#### Limitations of Information

The article draws heavily on research conducted in countries other than the United States. Although one can assume the findings are generalizable to the US offender population, more work with the US population would enhance the findings for jurisdictions in the United States. Also, it is noted that "pro-social modeling will not address all the problems faced by clients...It is, however, one skill which will address some issues, it relates to client outcomes and can be used along with a range of other skills."

**Caveat:** The information presented here is intended to summarize and inform readers of research and information relevant to probation work. It can provide a framework for carrying out the business of probation as well as suggestions for practical application of the material. While it may, in some instances, lead to further exploration and result in *future* decisions, it is not intended to prescribe policy and is not necessarily conclusive in its findings. Some of its limitations are described above.

For the purposes of this article, pro-social modeling is defined as "the way in which probation officers...model pro-social values and behaviours in their interactions with clients." In addition, the author's definition includes positive and negative reinforcement and confrontation.

The article cites several studies that found pro-social modeling to be associated with improved outcomes for offenders. Specifically, studies have found "it can make considerable difference to the re-offence rates of those under supervision." Examples of pro-social modeling include respecting other people's feelings, being honest and reliable. "Pro-social workers are also inclined to reinforce comments and actions which value non criminal activities and associations including family, sport..." One of the easiest ways to reinforce the client is through body language (such as leaning forward to listen) and using praise. Also, the use of appropriate rewards is effective, when the connection can be made by the client between the pro-social behavior and the reward.

Negative reinforcement includes confrontation. Confrontation can relate to positive outcomes when the officer "(1) suggests more positive ways of dealing with the situation, (2) acknowledges that negative feelings may be justified and (3) explores the reasons why clients feel and act the way they do." It is also important to confront anti-social comments and/or actions to improve outcomes.

There are some criticisms of modeling which the author addresses. First, some officers feel like they already model well. "However, there is evidence that

those who work with involuntary clients do not routinely use these skills," and in some cases, officers "inadvertently reinforced the very behavior they were hoping to change, often through use of smiling and body language." Critics also note modeling may be inappropriate with clients of particular cultural backgrounds; however, the author refutes this charge by stressing the importance of cultural competency by emphasizing that probation officers must "attempt to understand the views and actions of their clients in terms of their cultural context."

#### Practical Applications

- √ Start simply: be punctual, be reliable, be non-judgmental, respond to phone calls, be attentive, use praise, be positive, express empathy, and listen carefully.
- √ Give positive feedback to probationers when they demonstrate pro-social statements or actions.
- √ When rewarding pro-social behavior (such as reducing the frequency of office visits) ensure the probationer understands the reward is clearly connected to the pro-social behavior (history of regular attendance).
- √ When utilizing pro-social modeling be mindful of cultural differences. For example, not all cultures place the same value on time or educational achievement.
- √ When the probationer fails at pro-social behaviors (for instance, having a college application turned down or not securing a job after an interview) positive reinforcement, not confrontation, should be used.