

1.8. PROFESSIONAL COMPETENCE AND ATTITUDE

If in this manual we were to talk about youth workers, i.e. specialists of the field, we could come up with endless things that they have to know. But this manual is not devoted to youth workers, but to those working with youth. Here we deliberately avoid the words 'youth worker', we would be ignoring a big group of actors, who are in fact professionals of other areas and to them youth work is only a leisure time or secondary activity, while for 'youth workers' it is a first and foremost activity. There are many people who consider themselves youth workers.

Despite these differences we invite readers to pay attention to several things that apply to both groups of people, since both have to be knowledgeable of what they do with another person, in this case – a young person.

Talking about a youth worker as a certain expert of this field, we cannot conceal the fact that anyone who wants to be a youth worker has to be knowledgeable about certain things. In order for youth work to be qualitative one has to have a certain attitude: a 'professional' attitude, or the so-called '*competence of professional action*'. Understanding the concept of attitude becomes clearer if we refer to the competence model.



Fig. 3 – Competence of professional action

A youth worker:

- Has to be aware of himself/herself, i.e. of his/her *attitudes* and *viewpoints*. This area encompasses all personal attitudes, acquired through experience: attitude towards self, environment and the people around (men, women, policemen, teachers, politicians etc.), things and phenomena (drugs, alcohol, food, life etc.). Their realization happens through work with oneself and reflection, with the help of oneself and others.
- Has to have certain *knowledge*, theoretical and practical, acquired via non-formal education, development and studies and from the accumulation of their experience. Depending on where, how and with whom they work, they need knowledge about: youth in general and about the ones who they work with in particular; about their behaviour; about groups and

working with them; about methods; about legal matters; about local and broader context; about support structures; about other institutions; about...about...about...

- Has to have certain *skills*. They are learned, exercised and trained. They must be able to: lead the group; step back and grant freedom of decision; be able to stand by or intervene; be equally able to talk to youth as well as to a local politician, or to an old lady at a shop; be able to... be able to... be able to... Tools and methods used in youth work can also be attributed to skills. Don't forget – YOU are, first of all, a tool!!! A youth worker also has to be knowledgeable about different methodologies and so on.

If we attempted to name all the things a youth worker should understand, know, be able to do in detail, we would probably go insane. Our wish and the purpose of this manual is to give everything in small amounts: knowledge, thoughts on attitudes and viewpoints, which manifest in different situations through behaviour, tools methods as well as attitude models, to give something to hold on to while working with young people and groups of young people in real life.

We would be happy if readers would perceive this manual as an introduction to the purification and development of a professional attitude or an introduction to trying the role of a professional youth worker.

Certain questions arise when we talk about work in a group and the role and attitude of a worker group-wise: what kinds of attitudes are necessary to encourage an open, confidence-based group climate⁷. It depends on the viewpoint and attitude you are

⁷ From here to the end of the chapter we referred to the teaching of C. Rogers, A.Mewaldt, Ž. Gailius 'Practical manual for youth leaders', 1997, and own reflections.

exhibiting towards group members, not on the used methods and techniques. As was mentioned earlier – being conscious about your attitude towards people, groups and their members is a baseline before starting to work with them. If you don't respect or trust people, if you are angry and unhappy, you should ask yourself once more if you really need to 'get your hands' on other people. Leading the group and the style of managing it (i.e. the worker's behaviour towards the group), is influenced by the individual's internal attitude towards them. It is not possible to practice a certain style of leading solely because you have heard that it is beneficial to the group, if it is not reflected in your actual behaviour. Therefore, before starting to work, a conversation with the self usually helps: do people, being in contact with me, have enough space to grow and reveal themselves? This question is derived from the set goals and pursued results of non-formal education, mentioned in the previous chapter. From here arises another question for self-reflection: which of my experiences allows me to pursue these goals and results?

According to humanist psychology and pedagogy, being taken seriously, being understood and trusting the honesty and reliability of others are the factors that contribute mostly to the atmosphere of growth and unfolding in a group.

The most prominent representative of this school and one of our (indirect) teachers is psychotherapist C. Rogers, whose models of work with people and groups of people spread in the area of psychology as well as amongst youth workers. According to C. Rogers, in order for a youth worker to be able to create the atmosphere of growth, three main attitudes, or qualities (possessed or acquired) are important:

- Acceptance (unconditional acceptance)
- Empathy
- Congruence (being consistent)

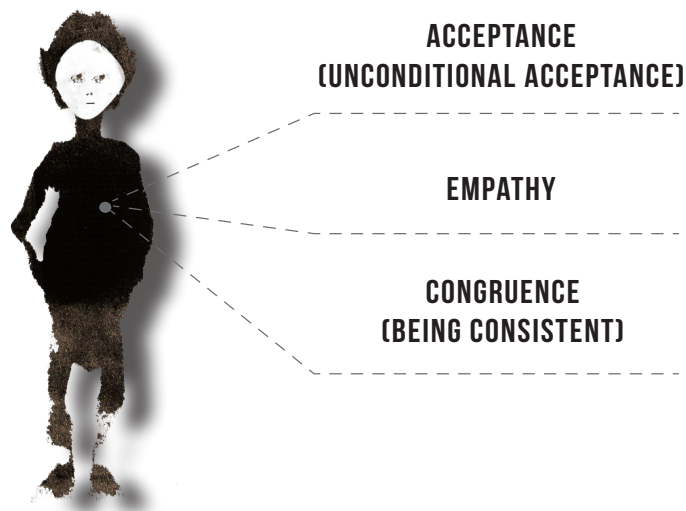


Fig. 4 – principal attitudes according to C. Rogers

Unconditional acceptance

It is best understood by illustrating it with the opposite phenomenon, i.e. 'conditional acceptance': *if you love me, then I will tidy up the rooms; if you are always spontaneous, active, happy, then I will love you...* and so on. We could come up with dozens of examples, because they are familiar from our lives. Conditional acceptance says 'I know what is good for you, I know what you should be; you are right in this case if you accept what I offer or do'. In this case the effect on people is simple – they don't learn and don't understand themselves or their experiences, but only fulfil the demands of others. People like that are not autonomous, i.e. independent.

Unconditional acceptance means:

'I accept you the way you are. I am attentive to you, even when you don't act as I imagine you should. I value you without any

preconditions. I am attentive to your mind, your feelings, your values, your beliefs and your wishes. I listen to you when you express your opinions. I have my own wishes and expectations towards you, but our relation does not depend on whether you fulfil them or not. You are free. I am not indifferent to what you do, but I respect your independence and ability to take decisions, you have your own feelings and experiences. I would like to learn from you.'

The effect of acceptance is: 'I am learning to be confident in myself, guide myself and take responsibility. I can overcome constant fear – so if I do something differently than expected by others I am not fearful of other's reactions. I will learn to be confident with my experiences and appreciate them, use them as a renewable resource for making decisions and taking responsibility'. In other words, acceptance is one of the attitudes which leads us to be conscious and liberated. It is an on-going work with oneself, since if you want to convey that to others or help them to develop, you firstly have to accept yourself the way you are.

Empathy

Empathy means that I am able to identify other people's thoughts, emotions, intentions and personal traits and I am able to react to other people's feelings from my own perspective.

Empathy is closely related to unconditional acceptance – if I respect and accept another person, then I am interested in their world, attitude and life. I am aware that their life differs from mine; therefore I am interested to learn about it and learn from it. A common Indian proverb illustrates empathy as an attitude: "If you want to understand me, you have to walk in my moccasins for one moon".

'I am interested in you; I could understand and describe you. I can imagine being you, I want to perceive you: your situation, thoughts,

feelings, life. I will try to realize what you want to find out with my help. I am wary; I feel your boundaries and accept them. I do not interfere when you say: 'It's none of your business.' This way you can feel that everything is ok. I stay me, and you stay you, but we have a mutual connection.'

Empathy helps to understand and take seriously ('legalize') feelings, wishes and thoughts, and change them or leave them as they are, if there is a wish.

Empathy should not be mixed with emotional involvement. Imagine the following situation: the group leader is crying together with group members, because the problem of group members (bad food for the third day in a row and poor sleep in beds from the soviet times), touched him emotionally. The group leader understands the feelings and thoughts of the group. In this case the leader himself needs some help from outside, because in this case he is caught in emotions and cannot work constructively with the group. Here the youth worker understood the emotions of members and couldn't handle his own so his emotions were not employed in any constructive way⁸.

Being consistent (congruence)

Unconditional acceptance and empathy are attitudes, directed at 'YOU': "I want to see and be with you this way". Next to these attitudes also belongs the third, which is congruence, or consistency and partially – authenticity, or being yourself⁹. Being

⁸ The example is not thorough, but it illustrates the difference between emotional involvement and empathy.

⁹ There is a slight difference between authenticity and congruence: being consistent I am myself, but being myself I am not always consistent i.e. my behaviour might be different from the things I say – it's the way I am, in other words, I am being myself, but there is not much consistency in it. In order to avoid mixing different notions in this context we will be using consistency and being yourself as synonyms, since we can see that both are important and compliment each other.

congruent means that my behaviour and my thoughts reveal what I am. My behaviour or speech coincides with the 'inner' me. I try not to pose, not to wear a mask – I am real, together with my weak and strong sides, together with my fears and challenges. An invitation to talk to people via 'me', from the heart is related to this attitude. In other words, if you ask a question, then firstly tell what it means to you. Here we are talking about the transparency of interrelation and conscious acknowledgement that everyone is unique, and therefore *different* from me and can (has to) be that way.

This attitude would be null without the other two. It is only in relation to acceptance and empathy that it can create the atmosphere of growth in the group.

Sometimes congruence can be perceived rather pragmatically: I say all that I feel, think, perceive... regardless of what it means to my 'partners', group members, colleagues, etc. In relation to acceptance and empathy, consistency means: What I do and say has to correspond to what I feel and think. *But* I don't need to say all of what is going on inside of me. I am responsible for myself *and* my 'partners'. I select what, to whom and when I say, do or allow. In other words, congruence is not only channelling of thoughts and feelings, but also being aware that I perceive and feel what goes on inside of me and I put effort into understanding where it comes from. In that case I am free to decide when voicing what is meaningful to me and my 'partner' (youth), and when remaining silent is wiser.

If a youth worker puts effort into integrating those three attitudes into his/her life, there's a big chance that the main goals of non-formal education will be clearer and more tangible to him/herself and to the youth he/she works with. These goals are consciousness and liberation. It sometimes happens that you realize your direction together with the participants. You need that as well.

At the end of the chapter we would like to mention that there

is no 'right' attitude as such, but there is always a youth worker's behaviour and attitude, which more or less fits to an actual situation of a group and the needs and expectations of participants (and the worker).

We also want to stress that the professional attitude can only be employed when you are in relation to someone, in this case, young people. Therefore we will look deeper at the relationship and its meaning here and now.

1.8.1. THE IMPORTANCE OF THE RELATIONSHIP IN YOUTH WORK

Full learning

Inspired by C. Rogers, we would like to start this part (and continue the previous one), with the pedagogical credo of our teacher A. Mewaldt. Andrea conveyed to us the fundamentals of youth work and the aforementioned attitude, which we follow. She was the first non-formal educator to make us passionate about our work, to create a space for reflection, in order for us to realize our vocation. She taught us how to work with groups and value the RELATIONSHIP.

Full learning requires my ability to communicate with other people: speak so that I can understand and be understood.

It requires me to work together with others and know my power, my boundaries, and my limits of understanding so that I can extend my boundaries, but firstly I have to accept that I have boundaries.

It means – not avoiding any conflicts: not trying to run from them, but rather trying to solve them, and also understanding that not all

conflicts can be solved and that conflicts should be taken as they are and integrated into one's life.

Full understanding means being able to say "I need you, your help and your support".

It is being able to be close to someone without losing yourself and not trying to keep distance.

It is being able to get close, which means feeling others and being with them. My openness with others helps me to be open with myself.

It means – perceiving your power and your powerlessness, acknowledging fears, realizing your boundaries and your boundlessness; realizing the fact that I will die, but at the same time loving and having joy for life.

It is an ability to find balance in being proud of: your intellect and fabulous thoughts, the results of discussion; your feelings and longings; spirituality and religiousness; and caring for your body.

Full learning means connection with people who are different from me. They may be weird people, who have different opinions, different social, cultural, religious roots, who might have different values, be of a different age and different health, who ask different questions and find different answers.

Full learning is never just a personal matter. I learn for myself, others learn for themselves, but we all learn a common understanding on how to be responsible for ourselves, for our group, our town, our society, our continent, our only world.

It is the road of thought, feelings and creativity that leads to greater solidarity, truth, peace and freedom. It is the only way, even if it is very hard and never-ending.

Full learning means having hope and being satisfied with little steps, which I can take, but never stop.

Andrea Mewaldt

The relationship is the 'medium' of youth work (and work with other people). There is probably no doubt that the quality of the

relationship is one of the essential factors that determine the youth work results, which are hardly tangible and usually don't come quickly. Relationships are made of interactions, based on verbal and non-verbal communication. There is no doubt that communication is the basis for creating and maintaining relationships. In general, it is not possible to make any stable contact with youth and its environment without the ability to interact. People tend to establish long-term relationships only if they are promised a certain benefit, and the benefit youth workers can share with youth – is the art of clarifying, envisaging and showing. In other words – reacting professionally, and reacting by means of interaction.

1.8.2. RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN YOUTH WORKERS AND YOUNG PEOPLE – AN EQUAL PARTNERSHIP?

*“When we do something for our children, we take away their opportunity to learn”
(According to J. Piaget)*

Let's imagine we want and aim for youth to become liberated and more conscious, e.g. in the field of environment protection. For that reason, we come up with a number of various challenging activities (bike race, camping, collecting trash in the forest, forest clearing, etc.), we frame projects, we get funding and we are very happy about it. When the time comes for the activity, which we have prepared for in theory, we suddenly realize that due to multiple reasons no young person is willing to engage in the activity, because it is not relevant and they do not see any need or benefit in it. The youth worker gets a huge negative emotional charge. The usual reaction is to state: “the youth are passive, unmotivated, uninterested in anything”. Furthermore,

eternal questions arise: “how can we involve unmotivated youth into activities?”, “how can we motivate them?”, “what else can we offer them?” and so on. In short, if a youth refuses to do what I want, they become unmotivated and passive. It's a slippery ground. *(The given example is of general illustrative nature, and provided here for clarity).*

This example quite clearly and tendentiously reflects a youth worker's initiative and means of pursuing result. That is the worker acts like a car maker – he does things from start to the end himself hoping that a client will buy the car. Unfortunately, this may not happen. The car remains and decays at the car salesroom. You can only comfort yourself by saying: “It's the client's fault, he doesn't know what he's missing...”. But it is *irresponsible* to think of young people as clients, who take or reject workers' offers and carry all responsibility, just because at that moment they are not ready to act how adults want.

The described phenomenon, when workers know what is good for young people and what they need in theory is also called “pedagogical one-way street” (Schmidt-Grunert, M., 2002).

Note: we certainly do not think that those who are reading this book act namely like this. The example was created based on the experience of authors and other youth worker and, their mistakes (which we are happy about in the sense of learning from them). The mistakes were discussed, perceived and studied and conclusions as well as insights were made which we would like to share. So if readers have recognized the situation in the example they may know what we are trying to convey. If they didn't, we hope that the provoked thoughts would be preventative.

In youth work, the most important thing is making a car together. That is, both sides work on the common 'product' simultaneously, by together creating a more or less personal and dynamic relationship, based on mutual trust. In this case, the desired result is achieved by equal involvement and responsibility. This relationship

is also called 'partner-like' (equal) and the people who take part in it are called 'partners'¹⁰. The role of a worker here is to 'assist', 'help' and 'guide' and thus contribute to the pursued result. Their work principle is 'active involvement' in decision making.

¹⁰ In the German terminology of social work, you can find the term 'coproducers'. There it neutrally reflects the work interrelation, where both participant sides bring in equal contribution to the pursued product or result. In this book, we decided to use the term 'partner', since it is more widely used in the Lithuanian youth work context.

Here we share the daily routine of a youth worker, who works with a group. It might seem that the day is a caricature, but every joke has a little bit of truth. While reading this we invite you to reflect on your experience, your relationships and the roles you have taken in youth work.

ONE DAY IN A LIFE OF AN “IDEAL YOUTH GROUP LEADER” (IYGL)

06.00 IYGL wakes up with a smile on his face.

06.15 In the shower, IYGL sings a happy song. When hot water appears, IYGL gives up the shower for the first child who woke up.

06.30 IYGL makes breakfast for everybody.

07.00 IYGL wakes everybody up by wishing them a good morning and leads them to the shower.

07.30 Breakfast. IYGL waits till everybody has had their fill, and only eats the food that is left. If nobody offers to wash the dishes, IYGL does it himself.

08.30 Dream interpretation. IYGL helps the children to interpret their night dreams.

09.00 Game time. IYGL gets asked to repeat every game multiple times, he also takes part in it.

10.30 Bath time. IYGL willingly allows to be thrown into water, despite the fact that he is still dry and dressed.

12.00 Lunch. Each child eats his meal.

13.00 IYGL spends his lunch break with children, playing ‘Meow-meow’ and ‘Country-city-river’, and also helps them to write letters.

14.00 Outdoor games are organized after careful preparation. IYGL plays with children and acts 5 different roles at a time.

15.30 There’s a strong burst of outrage, because not all the games have been played. In order to keep kids from fighting, IYGL runs around from one to another and tells them to be disciplined. Later on he buys ice cream for everybody as a sign of reconciliation.

17.00 Time to look for the lost ones it’s time to clear up. All children help heartily. All are busy until they lose the will. But no one is restricted.

17.30 The hour of patients. Neck, head and stomach aches are healed. Little patients have to take prescribed medication.

18.00 Dinner. IYGL manages to call all the kids to dinner. They build a meter high cup tower, and IYGL only gets some hot chocolate for dinner.

19.00 Preparation for a disco. The hall has to be prepared, the equipment has to be brought, girls and boys have to be advised on what to wear and how to accessorize.

20.00 Disco. IYGL is a DJ, dance teacher and the host of the evening. He also heals hurt feet and broken hearts.

22.00 The end of the disco. A tale is told before brushing teeth.

22.30 IYGL prepares a programme for the next day.

23.00 Kids start their night travels. IYGL catches them, calms them down and persuades them that it’s time to go to bed.

00.00 One kid starts missing his home and comes to IYGL’s room. He tells all about his pet rabbit, while IYGL listens attentively.

2.00 IYGL falls asleep at last.

6.00 IYGL wakes up with a smile on his face . . .

Questions for self-reflection:

- What roles of this group leader could you distinguish?
- What is this person’s relationship with youth?
- What roles do you have to take? What roles would you like to take?
- What is your relationship with a group of young people?
- How would you define your professional attitude in youth work?