

4. *The professional helping relationship is disciplined, whereas in a friendship each person is relatively free to act on impulse.* Of course, friends learn what to do and what to avoid if they want their relationship to last. In the professional helping relationship, much of the informal trial and error is replaced by a set of operating principles.

Even when the human service worker appears to be horsing around in the locker room with the basketball team member or drinking coffee with his or her parents, he or she is behaving in a conscious manner. Workers can relax, but they cannot lose track of the tasks that need to be done. The role of the worker is not to solve the clients' problems but to be a catalyst in the problem-solving process.

Even in informal settings, everything the client says must be kept confidential. Throughout the book, we will discuss the realistic difficulties in maintaining absolute **confidentiality**. But as a general principle, workers accept this basic tenet of the helping relationship.

Although a recreation leader might have a splitting headache or a devastating family problem, on the job his or her personal issues take a back seat. Disciplined workers can, to an amazing degree, ignore their own illness or personal troubles when working. Afterward, in the privacy of their own homes, these irritants might resurface, as annoying as ever.

5. *The professional helping relationship is built on acceptance.* A friendship without some degree of mutual attraction is likely to end as soon as a more appealing companion comes along. A professional helping relationship, however, is not built primarily on mutual attraction. Without judging (or perhaps even liking) a client, the worker tries to understand the person's problem, accepting feelings without necessarily condoning specific acts. Of course, if a worker cannot emotionally connect on any level with the essential humanness of a client's predicament, the client should probably be reassigned to someone else (Keith-Lucas, 1972).

From the helpee's point of view, physical or intellectual attraction may make a counseling relationship more pleasant, but the ultimate success of the relationship will be gauged by how much help was received in overcoming the helpee's problems.

### ***The Content of the Professional Helping Relationship***

Although the structure of the professional helping relationship sets the stage for competent human service intervention, its content—words and actions—is, of course, most important. Figure 4.1 illustrates the three components of this content.

These three components are the threads that bind all human service workers into a profession, whatever their title, label, or academic certification. *Attitudes* are feelings or thoughts about people or things; *values* are the worth we place on them. A person might be described as warm and outgoing; these traits are expressions of attitude. How important others think these qualities are depends on how high or low a value they place on such personality traits.

It is not always easy to separate attitudes and values from skills and knowledge. All are inextricably interwoven in our work. We will separate them into categories only because it is easier to describe them that way.

**confidentiality**  
Secrecy of information that a client reveals to a worker.

Whatever the duration of the relationship, we commit ourselves to ending the relationship just as soon as the client no longer needs it. We strike a subtle balance between setting someone adrift too soon and hanging on so long that we encourage dependency.\*

Saul Alinsky (1969, 1971), a pioneering community activist, always stressed that the human service worker who built a strong neighborhood action group should expect eventually to be thrown out by the indigenous leadership. Once the group members develop skill and self-confidence, they are likely to view the outside professional as excess baggage. Strange as it sounds, the aim of all human service workers is to work themselves out of the professional helping relationship and maybe even out of a job!

2. *The professional helping relationship has a clear focus, whereas friendships have many purposes—some superficial, others profound—most of them vague.* Though the focus of a professional helping relationship may change as it progresses, both client and worker need to agree on an initial set of tasks, stated in action outcomes:

"I am going to this vocational counselor because I want to find a job so I can leave the residential treatment center and be on my own."

OR

"I came to Renewal House because I need a safe shelter from my husband, who has been beating me. As soon as I find an apartment, get some legal help, and sort out my finances, I will move out."

OR

"I work for the Children's Protective Services and have been asked by your son's teacher to visit you to see if you can use any of our services for families."

negotiate a contract To forge an agreement between a helper and a helpee about what will be included in their work together.

The helper and helpee **negotiate a contract** in which tasks and goals are spelled out. Some of these initial goals are likely to change. Sometimes the contract is a grudging one. Perhaps the client has been forced to see the worker in order to earn extra privileges on the locked ward of a mental hospital or to gain early release from prison. (The concept and skills involved in contracting are discussed more fully in Pincus and Minahan, 1973; Shulman, 2008; Zayas and Katch, 1989.)

3. *The professional helping relationship depends on a division of labor.* Although friends often complement each other in many ways, the division of roles and responsibilities in a social relationship is random. The professional helping relationship is a collaboration, but each of the parties has specified tasks. The person being helped shares expertise about the problem—basic facts as well as fears, hopes, and expectations. The helper shares knowledge of resources, alternative strategies, obstacles, and the prospects of different courses of action. Each has the right to make certain decisions. Whenever possible, most of the decisions should be made by the client, who must live with the decisions.

\*Unfortunately, in an age of managed care and cost cutting, forces outside our own reasoned judgment may decide when the professional helping relationship must terminate. This will be discussed further in Chapter 9.