

Open Door Development's "Facilitating Investment Programs" workshop (offered September 17-19, 2008 and February 4-6, 2009) will be lead by Lindsay Walton, a facilitator who has been active in the challenge course industry for seven years and worked with many 'At Risk' programs. The following article was published on the front page of the Summer 2008 edition of *Parallel Lines*, the publication of the Association for Challenge Course Technology.

### **The Language of Investment: Saying Goodbye to 'At Risk' Populations**

The following exchange may sound familiar to you. Somebody comments "What's up with that guy", the answer is "Oh, he's at risk", and then everyone stands around nodding their heads in an understanding manner. Or perhaps you've seen something like this. A vice-principal of an Ontario high school with a big heart for struggling students created an annual event taking a mix of at-risk students and senior student counselors to a camp setting to build constructive relationships and encourage greater school participation. However the at-risk students were told they had been chosen for a leadership camp and the counselors told it was an at-risk camp and to keep it confidential. Many students each year would clue in once they stepped on the bus and saw who else was there that this was no leadership camp, but go with the flow because it meant not having to be in class, until one year a senior counselor spilled the beans and word got around school. The bus that arrived for the program that year was half full, many of the participants having pulled out of the trip with resentment, hurt feelings, and some four letter words for those who decided to take pity on them.

The at-risk industry is a diverse entity including correctional services, restorative justice programs, wilderness counseling and therapy, team building, conflict resolution training, and more. At-risk populations are the subject of psychological studies, the focus of fundraisers, and the recipients of public sympathy, disgust and fear. At-risk children, youth and adults are at the centre of a great deal of attention with multiple programs in place for them, so what, aside from lack of funding to provide more programming, could possibly be wrong?

A good place to start answering that question is to ask random people, preferably other than your co-workers if you work in the at-risk industry yourself, what comes to mind when they hear the term "at risk". The answers, you will probably find, become somewhat repetitive after awhile. Poverty, drugs, piercings, and drop-outs are popular responses. Abuse, street-kids, violence, and gangs follow not too far behind. When a teacher, counselor or facilitator uses the term "at risk", it is important to understand the cultural mindset and mental images that accompany that label.

And this article is not meant to address the act of labeling individuals or to encourage political correctness, but rather to encourage the exploration of overhauling the language we use when we work with participants who are struggling. When somebody is identified as at-risk society generally accepts that as an all encompassing explanation of their behavior or circumstances. But what makes them at-risk. Why have they been identified?

Are they involved with drugs? involved in crime? have the potential for violence? Are they engaged in destructive relationships? experiencing social isolation? clinical depression? Are they failing to complete high school? experiencing lack of success in the workplace or employment? Are they poor at communicating with peers? communicating with authority? Do they have sexual health issues? a

destructive family environment? low income? learning disabilities? lack of access to resources? Are they abused? suicidal?

Looking at the realities and complexities of life and each individual who walks this earth, the at-risk label is exposed for what it is, language that muddies the waters rather than clears them and reduces the effectiveness of those who have the heart to reach out. And to be frank, it's insulting. Not one person would like to be called "at risk" to their face, let alone find out that somebody is referring to them like that behind their back. How then can we change our language so that it affirms participants rather than degrading them in the eyes of the public, the facilitators, and themselves?

The programs themselves may not require any revision, but subtle changes in the language used while running them could have incredible impact on their effectiveness. Rather than referring to populations by using the *adjective* "at risk", the term can be replaced with "those who are struggling". Again, not to be politically correct, but because of the implications. There is not one person on the face of this planet who does not struggle at many points during their life and with various issues. The language indicates that the person is working through a phase, rather than reflecting something inherent about them as a person. It also begs the question, "struggling with what?" There is encouragement to seek further information about the participant rather than simply accept a pat answer.

And what about the *noun* "at risk", referring to the programs in place for those who have been identified as struggling? "Investment" is a beautifully rich word that offers a great deal of potential in constructively addressing this industry. To invest in a person suggests pouring into them expecting a positive return. Depending on how it is used it can convey the message that there is already potential present, strengths to build on, and so this person is being invested in to encourage further growth. It also conveys an equal playing field because those who facilitate the programs have become the people they are today as a result of having once been invested in themselves. We all need it, to be believed in, to have somebody identify our strengths and point them out to us when we can't see them on our own. In a sense they now have the privilege to "pay it forward" and invest in others as they have been invested in themselves. Hopefully they still have people in their lives who continue to do so to this day. Investment programs and investment language offer a great deal of hope and bring individuals and their strengths to light rather than relegating them to an unidentified mass of poor, high, pierced, faceless drop-outs of life.

As the language of investment is put into practice, watch the impact on the staff and participants. The more it is used, the more terms will develop that reflect the value of the participants and what they and their facilitators are capable of together. And who wouldn't benefit from that?

*Lindsay Walton is the Lead Facilitator of Open Door Development and has been active with Investment populations, facilitating tailored programs including team building, conflict resolution, low ropes and high ropes challenges for seven years. She has worked with the Toronto Board of Education, Adventureworks!, and as the Outdoor Education Coordinator for Camp IAWAH..*