"General semantics can have positive effects in management, supervision, and worker training."

GENERAL SEMANTICS IN THE SUPERVISION AND STAFF DEVELOPMENT OF DRUG PREVENTION SPECIALISTS

MARTIN H. LEVINSON, PH.D.*

I HAVE USED the formulations and strategies of general semantics for over fifteen years to assist PROJECT SHARE Substance Abuse Prevention and Intervention Specialists (SAPIS) to find ways to overcome difficulties and be more productive in their work. The result has been a more effective and efficient staff of drug prevention specialists and additional proof that general semantics can have positive effects in management, supervision, and worker training. (1)

* Dr. Martin H. Levinson is Director of PROJECT SHARE, a New York City school-based drug prevention program. He is also Vice President of the New York Society for General Semantics. A much briefer version of this text appeared in the Summer 1996 ETC. This article will appear as Chapter 7 of The Drug Problem: A New View Using the General Semantics Approach, Greenwood Press, 2002.
This article will examine and discuss some of the specific ways I have applied general semantics to improve SAPIS functioning in five areas that are vital to their job. The areas are 1. being able to adapt to circumstances; 2. "burnout" avoidance; 3. alleviating stress and working effectively; 4. practical decision-making; and 5. the development of productive assumptions. To succeed at their vocation, it is crucial that SAPIS do well in each of these areas because effective drug prevention requires more than just having a strong commitment to the belief that children should be drug free. To be successful in the field of drug prevention, its workers must also perform their jobs in a competent and skillful manner. This article demonstrates that general semantics can help them to do that.

The Importance of Being Able to Adapt to Circumstances

We know from modern science that at each moment everything in the world is changing, sometimes slowly and sometimes very quickly. Because things are constantly in flux, general semantics suggests that to get good results in situations it is important to adapt in order to respond appropriately. In a volatile and uncertain world, the ability to adapt can be thought of as a scientific way to success.

The drug prevention specialists of PROJECT SHARE work in the volatile and uncertain world of inner-city public schools. In this world they frequently encounter crumbling and falling apart school buildings, angry and unhappy students, stressed-out and frustrated teachers, and fed up and complaining parents. They may also have to deal with profanity, threats of violence, weapons, and being in unstable neighborhoods where safety can be a concern. Clearly, the work environment of the SAPIS is a stressful one that is characterized by changing conditions.

In this difficult and often unpredictable setting, SAPIS are asked to do a complex job involving a number of different tasks. The following is a partial listing of some of these tasks:

1. organize assembly programs with drug prevention themes
2. teach drug prevention lessons to all the grades in the school
3. provide individual and group counseling to "at-risk" students
4. conduct social skills groups with selected students
5. facilitate peer leadership groups
6. perform family counseling
7. consult with teachers and guidance counselors about particular students
8. arrange referrals for students who require additional assistance
9. extend crisis counseling to students in need of immediate help
10. sponsor positive alternative activities — e.g., drama, music, athletic programs
11. coordinate drug prevention campaigns in the school and community
12. offer parent and faculty workshops
13. supply tutoring and academic help to students
14. furnish students with recreational activities during the summer

To effectively accomplish the many duties they are required to perform, in the highly fluid milieu in which they must work, it is essential that SAPIS be adaptable. Adaptability is so important to effective SAPIS functioning that at hiring interviews special efforts are made to screen out candidates who appear to have fixed attitudes and who would strongly resist suggestions. We cannot afford to take on individuals with rigid points of view who will waste lots of time and energy being aggravated over the hassles of the job. We need workers who will be able to adapt to fluctuating circumstances.

For many SAPIS the first test of their ability to adapt comes in the area of finding suitable workspace. Let me explain. Our drug prevention specialists work in overcrowded schools with little space available for anything but classroom instruction. Because space is so limited they are frequently asked to counsel and meet with students in locations such as gym locker rooms, book closets, utility areas, and lunch rooms or they may be assigned office space which must be shared with other school personnel. To make matters worse, sometimes the space the SAPIS are given is only temporary and they may have to vacate it during the school year. And often there is simply no available workspace which means SAPIS have to negotiate with administrators and teachers for the use of empty classrooms and other acceptable places to do their work.

To keep from becoming stressed-out over the vagaries and vicissitudes of locating feasible workspace, it is essential that SAPIS be able to adapt to whatever the situation demands. Doing this is a lot more productive than being angry or depressed about not having proper work quarters.

Adaptability is also important to the effective teaching of drug prevention lessons. Our staff is required to teach these lessons to the assorted grades and various types of classes that exist within the school (e.g., regular education classes, special education classes, English as a second language classes, bilingual classes, etc.). To communicate effectively with so many
disparate groups, a SAPIS cannot simply present boiler-plate lessons using a single teaching style for a specified period of time. What is required instead are lessons, teaching styles, and time frames that are tailored to the needs of the particular classes that are being addressed. It is only through this sort of flexible approach, one that is responsive to specific contexts, that students in each class can have a reasonable opportunity to learn the information that is being presented.

To help SAPIS to improve their ability to adapt, I often conduct discussions at staff meetings that center on why this trait is so important to doing effective work. I also stress the advantages of adaptability during clinical supervisory conferences and at staff trainings. The idea behind these efforts is to convey an understanding that there are usually a variety of positive and practical ways to behave in any given situation.

As a result of their participation in discussions and exercises on the constructive uses of adaptability, the SAPIS have become less stressed-out and more effective at managing difficult work situations. This has led to increased program efficiency. In the next section two additional general semantics notions will be examined that have also benefited the SAPIS and the PROJECT SHARE program.

The Extensional Theory of Happiness and the IFD Syndrome — Two Ways to Avoid Burnout

The people we hire as SAPIS tend to be highly motivated and idealistic and believe for the most part that with zealous conviction and persistent effort they can make significant changes in the lives of the students they work with. However, many of these students come from backgrounds characterized by neglect, abuse, and families in disarray. To complicate matters, the SAPIS frequently are only able to meet with them on a limited basis due to restrictions of school scheduling, parental resistance to school-based counseling, and student truancy. The fact is, no matter how much energy and dedication the SAPIS bring to the job of helping the children, there are plenty of obstacles that can make that work exceedingly difficult.

I have found one way to assist SAPIS to not become discouraged by the difficulties they are sure to encounter is to introduce them to the general-semantics-based “extensional theory of happiness.” This theory contends that to reach a measure of contentment and a sense of success at something one ought to form reasonable expectations about it, work hard, and be prepared to not get exactly what you want. In the case of the SAPIS, consider-
ing their challenging occupational circumstances, I believe achieving success means making even modest gains in areas such as decreasing student truancy, having students begin to do their homework, and opening up dialogues between the children and their parents. But some SAPIS set the bar at a much higher level and think that to be successful with the students they must bring about dramatic reversals in truancy, produce immediate and significant academic improvements, and facilitate perfect child-parent interactions.

When drug prevention workers begin to show signs of “burnout,” one of the first things I do is to acquaint them with the “IFD syndrome.”

When I talk to new employees, I inform them about what I think it means to have “success” with the students. But frequently their enthusiasm and drive for accomplishment moves them to disregard my advice and to instead plow ahead with unrealistic goals and expectations. For many SAPIS, this leads to what is popularly called “burnout” — a physical, emotional, and mental state of depletion caused by seeing one’s strenuous efforts produce less than hoped-for results. And this condition is often exacerbated by a lack of encouragement and support from members of the school staff (one reason some on the school staff do not support the efforts of the SAPIS is a misguided attitude that anything not directly connected to academic instruction is a frill).

When drug prevention workers begin to show signs of “burnout,” one of the first things I do is to acquaint them with the “IFD syndrome.” This malady, which was originally proposed by Wendell Johnson in his classic *People in Quandaries*, describes a condition in which high ideals combined with continued frustration can cause a person to develop a “what’s the use” attitude. More specifically, the IFD syndrome refers to a sequence that involves someone going from *Idealization* to *Frustration* to *Demoralization*.

This concise explanation of what they are going through is usually gratefully received and appreciated by the SAPIS and it frequently leads to a more realistic adjustment of expectations and efforts. But sometimes learning about the IFD syndrome is not enough to keep a SAPIS from going back to a “burnout” condition — putting in too much effort, not getting hoped-for results, and feeling pretty lousy. Fortunately, there are other general semantics techniques that can alleviate stress and improve effectiveness.
Using Extensional Devices to Alleviate Stress and Improve On-the-Job Effectiveness

Extensional devices are general semantics tools that can help individuals view situations more accurately and realistically and so be less frustrated and more effective in dealing with them. This section will reveal how I have used some of these devices, specifically "dating," "indexing," "quotation marks," and "hyphens" to reduce SAPIS frustration levels and increase their work effectiveness.

1. Dating

It is not unusual in the course of drug prevention counseling for students to become uncooperative and resistant to making changes. Typically when this happens the SAPIS counselors persevere at their work and help to overcome the problem. But sometimes a SAPIS will respond to student resistance by becoming overly discouraged and pessimistic. The counselor may believe that the resistant students will never make progress in counseling. Rather than letting the SAPIS succumb to such negative thinking, I will often suggest the use of "dating" to gain a more hopeful and realistic perspective on the situation. (Dating is a general semantics device that involves attaching dates to people, objects, and events as a reminder that change occurs over time — e.g., John Doe_{2001} is not John Doe_{2000}, the drug problem_{2000} is not the drug problem_{1970}.) The following anecdote illustrates how dating can provide a more encouraging outlook on the counseling process.

I was a counselor in the PROJECT SHARE program, before becoming an administrator, and occasionally I come across former students whom I used to counsel. Many of these students are ones who I thought might not turn out well as adults, but surprisingly a fairly large number of them have exceeded my expectations by holding down jobs, by being happily married, and even by going to college. Quite often when I talk to these students they tell me that I played an important role in their achievements, saying things like, "Dr. Levinson, I never told you at the time but going to counseling really helped me with my problems. When things get tough for me now and I start to feel angry or depressed I remember what you told our counseling group — "Doing your best is all you can do' and "If you set goals you have control'." Obviously the mature individuals in the present who are telling me these things are far different from those "hopeless" individuals of 15 years ago. Back then it would have been hard to imagine that such troubled young people would eventually become well-adjusted and useful members of society.
When I relate stories like the preceding one to SAPIS who feel dejected about the lack of progress their students are making in counseling they begin to understand that students who they believe are “hopeless” persons today will not necessarily be “hopeless” persons 15 years from now. As a counselor all one can do is work hard in the present and trust for good results in the future. And while doing the work it makes no sense for a counselor to become overly discouraged because one never knows what the future will bring. As dating reminds us, the only thing constant in life is change.

2. Indexing

Sometimes SAPIS complain to me that the teachers as a group are impossible to work with or that none of their students are doing well in counseling. Instead of wasting time and effort arguing against these broad generalizations, I often suggest to SAPIS that they use the general semantics device of “indexing” (examine individual cases within a larger category) and look for specific examples of teachers who support their efforts and students who show improvement in counseling.

I have found when SAPIS do this, they quickly come to see that just because teachers one, two, and three are not being supportive, that does not necessarily mean teacher four is behaving in a similar manner. And just because students one, two, and three are not making progress in counseling, that does not automatically mean student four will make no progress. Unlike generalizing, which can prevent the staff from being aware of the success they are having with particular teachers and students, indexing provides a useful tool to search for and locate specific achievements. Finding these achievements, and realizing that their labors are producing positive results, can be energizing and can motivate the SAPIS to try to replicate their successes.

3. The Use of Single Quotation Marks

Another extensional device I employ with the staff is the use of quotation marks. I tell them to place single quotation marks around certain words to indicate that the words within the quotes are not sufficiently explanatory. For example, I often put single quotes around the words ‘emotional problem,’ to suggest this kind of difficulty involves more than just an emotional component, and around the phrase ‘intellectual development,’ to indicate there are other factors at work here besides just intellectuality. I also
make it a practice to put single quotation marks around the term 'drug prevention program' to alert the SAPIS that these words can sometimes mislead students, teachers, and parents into thinking that our program is mainly concerned with youngsters who are actively involved with drugs.

It has been my experience that many people falsely assume that drug prevention programs work primarily with drug users, rather than on preventing drug use, and this incorrect assumption can have negative consequences. For example, students who are in need of counseling, but are not involved with drugs, may decide not to seek our program for assistance if they believe we work only with individuals who have drug problems (they may also worry if they come to us for counseling they will be stigmatized as being "drugies" and "drug abusers"). If teachers think we only counsel drug-involved students, they will very likely not refer students with other problems to our program. And parents may not want to give us permission to meet with their children if they assume we only deal with students who are linked to drugs.

To get the idea across that we really are a drug PREVENTION program, we ask SAPIS to provide literature and make presentations to the children, teachers, and parents about the comprehensive nature of our work. The SAPIS are also instructed to inform the teachers of the many different at-risk attitudes and behaviors that can make a student eligible for PROJECT SHARE counseling. This is all done to create an awareness that the primary goal of our program is to assist every student in the school to make healthy life choices and to stay away from drugs. And, as will be discussed next, this means more than just staying away from illegal drugs.

4. The Use of Hyphens

An important part of our work with children involves education to prevent the abuse of over-the-counter and prescription drugs and the use of alcohol and tobacco. We strive especially hard to teach about the dangers of alcohol and tobacco (products not commonly thought of as drugs) because these two substances are so easy for children to obtain and because for many youngsters they are gateway drugs to illegal drug use. Children who use alcohol and tobacco are also at greater risk for developing addictions to them as adults than are children who refrain from their use.

To help students to understand that alcohol and tobacco are indeed drugs, and that using them has drug-related risks, I encourage the staff to use the term "alcohol-tobacco-and-other-drugs" when they teach their drug educa-
tion lessons (linking together words with hyphens is a general semantics device that is meant to show that the linked words are part of a larger whole). The rationale for using this linked-together term is to provide an understanding that even though alcohol and tobacco are not necessarily sold in drug stores, or peddled by drug pushers on the streets, they are still drugs that can cause powerful drug effects and are potentially dangerous substances to use.

Delayed Reactions for Better Decision Making

As was discussed earlier, the job of a SAPIS is a difficult one and the working conditions are not particularly good. Nevertheless, most of our prevention specialists maintain good spirits and a sense of mission in their work and these attributes help them to stay optimistic and centered through the day as they fight an uphill battle to prevent student drug abuse. But I have observed the morale of the SAPIS can be dampened, and occasionally even drowned, if they experience a lack of camaraderie or acceptance from the school staff.

This can happen when a SAPIS walks into the teacher’s room and greets the teachers who are there with a smile and a pleasant “Good Morning” and in return receives scowling looks or the greeting is totally ignored. The more veteran prevention specialists are usually able to shrug off such brusque responses and get on with their duties but new staff frequently react by becoming immediately depressed or angry (some report even experiencing these feelings somatically as a sinking stomach or a blow to the chest). Such extreme negative physical and psychological reactions, aside from causing discomfort, can interfere with the concentration that is needed to perform effectively and may occasionally impel a SAPIS to say or do things that will be regretted later on.

I often advise the staff that rather than immediately reacting to teachers who seem rude and insensitive, it can be wiser to step back, take some time to figure out what is going on, and then to react. (In general semantics this method of response is termed a “delayed reaction,” and while our human ability to do this tends to be taken for granted, it is in fact one of the main characteristics that distinguishes our species from the rest of the animal kingdom.) Problems can be thought-out more objectively with extra time to study them. In this case it means instead of taking personally the scowls and non-responses of the teachers, SAPIS can consider other possibilities such as: it could be some school staff feel too harried and preoccupied to be civil
to anyone who enters the teacher’s room; maybe some teachers really dislike this school and displace their negative feelings onto others; and, perhaps being around children all day has led some teachers to forget the social amenities that adults customarily display to each other in the workplace.

I have observed just taking a few moments to consider these potential explanations can have a calming influence on the SAPIS, can help them to suffer less, and can put them in a better frame of mind to make sensible decisions about how to deal with insensitive teachers. (I also occasionally pass along the advice that one can be relatively happy at work, even if people are being rude, by concentrating more on the work and less on the conditions that surround it.)

Delayed reactions have also helped SAPIS to deal with rejection by school staff cliques. At lunch time and during breaks such cliques tend to clannishly exclude outsiders. That is bad enough for anyone who wants to be part of the group but our prevention specialists have an added problem. Unlike other school staff members, such as teachers, cafeteria workers and the custodial staff, who can find colleagues in the building to relate to, there is only one SAPIS in the school.

I again remind the SAPIS that they do not have to overly suffer the insensitive behavior of others. Instead they can delay reacting to their immediate thoughts about the situation (“How dare those teachers treat me like that,” “Who do they think they are,” “I guess people just don’t like me”), and delay reacting to their immediate feelings (typically anger or depression) and alternatively engage their higher brain functions to try to figure out what is happening and how to best handle it. (One strategy to use in the circumstances just described might be to ask oneself a few pragmatic questions such as: Why are the teachers excluding me from their group? Did I do anything wrong to cause their exclusionary behavior? Is there anything I can reasonably do to change their negative responses?)

SAPIS who have employed delayed reactions at work generally report this strategy has produced better results than other tactics they have used such as impulsively ranting about the unfairness of life or of seeing themselves as helpless victims. And, paradoxically, delaying one’s reaction by not immediately responding to the slights and snubs of members of a clique can occasionally make it easier to join a clique since clique members sometimes become intrigued by those who ignore them.
“Logical Fate” and Productive Job Assumptions

General semantics recognizes the important role that assumptions play in determining how we think and behave through its use of the notion of “logical fate.” This important concept, borrowed from mathematics, contends that from our assumptions particular consequences (our conclusions, evaluations, attitudes, and behavior) will almost inevitably follow. To achieve a positive result in a situation, logical fate suggests that our assumptions about it should be reality-based and take into account relevant circumstances. If not, inadequate outcomes are likely to ensue.

To get SAPIS who hold unproductive work assumptions (ones that produce poor results) to abandon such assumptions, and to adopt productive ones in their place, I encourage the staff to share their work-related assumptions with each other. The reason for this is to acquaint SAPIS who hold unproductive work assumptions with smarter and more effective ways to work. To provide a better understanding of what I mean by unproductive and productive SAPIS assumptions, the following list provides five examples of each.

**UNPRODUCTIVE AND PRODUCTIVE SAPIS WORK ASSUMPTIONS**

I. Paperwork

*Unproductive SAPIS Assumption*

Haphazardly doing my paperwork and submitting it late for review does not interfere with the most significant aspect of my job — providing direct services to children.

*Productive SAPIS Assumption*

If I procrastinate in doing my paperwork, I will have to cancel classroom lessons and counseling sessions to submit it on time. This is unfair to the children. In addition, if I am careless in doing my paperwork, I will be less effective at achieving job-related objectives and goals.

II. Scheduling

*Unproductive SAPIS Assumption*

When a student or member of the school staff comes to my room and asks me for help with a problem, I should stop whatever I am doing and try to render immediate assistance.
**Productive SAPIS Assumption**

If I stop what I am doing every time someone asks me for help I will accomplish very little during the school day. So, unless it is an emergency or I happen to have free time available, those who come to see me without an appointment will have to make one.

**III. Requesting Assistance**

**Unproductive SAPIS Assumption**

As a well-trained professional I should be able to handle job-related problems without requesting assistance.

**Productive SAPIS Assumption**

It is impossible to know everything about a job, so rather than guessing when I don’t know something it makes sense to ask my supervisors and colleagues for help.

**IV. Taking Work Breaks**

**Unproductive SAPIS Assumption**

The demand for my services is so great that I better not take breaks during the school day. I can always relax when I get home.

**Productive SAPIS Assumption**

Although it is possible to be constantly involved with the children, teachers, and parents during the school day if I do this, and do not take breaks, I will become overly fatigued and less effective at my work.

**V. Being Assertive**

**Unproductive SAPIS Assumption**

I want to be a good team player so I will serve on all the school committees that invite me to join them and agree to requests from the principal and teachers to perform tasks that are unrelated to my job (e.g., doing lunchroom duty, providing security at the school entrance, etc.).

**Productive SAPIS Assumption**

Although I want to be cooperative, I will need to be selective in serving on school committees and complying with school staff desires because if I
do all that is asked of me I will not have sufficient time to perform my re-
quired duties.

Positive results move me to recommend assumption sharing as a
potentially useful procedure for improving worker performance.

Sharing work-related assumptions has led the drug prevention specialists
of PROJECT SHARE to have fewer unproductive work assumptions and
more productive ones, which has led to increased gains in program effi-
ciency and effectiveness. Such positive results move me to recommend as-
sumption sharing as a potentially useful procedure for improving worker
performance. To any supervisor hesitant to try this technique, because you
assume your staff will not be receptive to it or for other reasons, I offer the
advice of Dr. Chauncey Guy Suits of General Electric who said, "Form the
habit of reacting yes to a new idea. First, think of all the reasons it is good;
there will be plenty of people around to tell you it won't work." (2) I have
found this a most productive operating assumption and particularly com-
mend it to supervisors reluctant to experiment with new ideas.

NOTES

1. For more evidence of effective use of general semantics in management, supervi-
sion, and training see Mary Morain, ed., Enriching Professional Skills Through
General Semantics (San Francisco: International Society for General Semantics,
1986), 141-224; Alfred Fleishman, Common Sense Management (San Francisco,
Calif.: International Society for General Semantics, 1984); William V. Haney,
Communication and Organizational Behavior (Homewood, Ill.: Irwin, 1967);
Gerard I. Nierenberg, Fundamentals of Negotiating (New York: Perennial,

2. Kenneth G. Johnson, General Semantics: An Outline Survey (San Francisco: In-
ternational Society for General Semantics, 1972), 31. (International Society for
General Semantics is now located in Concord, Calif.)