THE EVALUATION OF THE INDIVIDUAL PERFORMANCE OF THE PUBLIC EMPLOYEE. A RESEARCH DESIGN BASED ON CONSTRUCTIVIST TOOLS

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In the Italian public entities the assessment of employees involves the use of two parameters: the performance objectives and the individual performance factors. The last ones concern the personal behaviors required in the workplace by employees under evaluation, and their measurement affects the construction of the reciprocal roles of the evaluator and the evaluated. Difficulties invest both: the evaluator considers that he/she does not possess technical tools and relational skills to manage this process; the evaluated tends to focus mainly on the economic and career consequences. The aim of this work is to help the manager to recognize the meaning dimensions underlying his evaluator activity and to become more effective and consistent as evaluator through the use of some constructivist tools. In this way it will be possible to encourage the evaluator to become more aware about the dimensions involved and the impact of his activity on the assigned personnel and on the whole organization.

Keywords: *evaluation (assessment), manager, employee, performance, measurement*.

INTRODUCTION

Once a year, each Italian public body entity assesses the performance of its employees through a process that constitutes the main "tool through which to analyze the contribution provided by the individual to achieve the specific objectives of the organization (Rollo, 2012)". ‘Performance’ is defined as "a set of behaviors that the individual adopts to achieve certain assigned objectives, using skills (Berzeno, 1999)".

Such contribution is measured by two factors: the percentage of achievement of the assigned objectives and the quality of skills and competences exercised at work. The evaluation of performance aims to align the behavior of the staff to the expectations of the organization, promoting the desired behaviors by means of economic and career incentives, and discouraging, as consequence, those that are unwanted.

Evaluation is usually accepted within public organizations as an often unpleasant but necessary duty to distribute subsidiary wages; a task with many problems and few advantages; an investment of time and energy destined above all to create resentment and disappointments. However, it is necessary to propose new management tools, broader elaborations and promote new relationships among the actors in the process.

According to the current Italian legislation[1],

[1] Article 9, paragraph 1 of Legislative Decree 150/2009: “The measurement and assessment of the individual performance of executives and staff responsible for organizational units is linked:

a) to performance indicators relating to the organizational area of direct responsibility, which is given a prevalent weight in the overall rating;
b) to the achievement of specific individual objectives;
c) to the quality of the contribution assured to the general performance of the structure, to the professional and managerial skills demonstrated, as well as to the organizational behaviors required;
d) to the evaluation capacity of his own collaborators, demonstrated through a significant differentiation of judgements.“

the staff assessment of public organizations is carried out in relation to four areas of judgment:

a) the performance indicators connected with the way one's activity is carried out;
b) the achievement of individual goals;
c) the quality of one's contribution, the proficiency and the behavior required;
d) the ability to evaluate one's own collaborators.

The field of relevance of the first two areas is made up of essentially impermeable constructs ("a construct is impermeable if it rejects elements on the basis of their newness", Kelly, 1955); while the third and fourth ones are given by comprehensive constructs ("the ones which subsume a wide variety of events", Kelly, 1955) and are characterized by permeability and propositionality; in other words, they admit newly perceived elements to their contexts and carry no implications regarding the other realm membership of their elements (Kelly, 1955). These features favor several possibilities of interpreting the events related to the "evaluation" construct, expanding the perceptual field of the actors involved (both the evaluator and the evaluated) so to reorganize it at a level which is as much as possible characterized by commonality: "to the extent that one person employs a construction of experience which is similar to that employed by another, his psychological processes are similar to those of the othe person (Kelly, 1955)". This allows the entry of new information into the construct.

In other words, in the first two areas we find close constructs ("the ones that lead to invariable forecasts", Kelly, 1955), delimited by shared rules by which the evaluation should apply on the basis of predefined parameters (generally, on number and importance of projects and programs, allocated resources, respect of deadlines and percentage of achieved objectives). In the last two it is possible to identify a shared focus of convenience ("a construct's focus of convenience comprises those particular things to which the user would find its application maximally useful", Kelly, 1955) between the evaluator and the evaluated, within which to co-construct a common system of values: in order to do this the evaluator must have the ability to read the system also from the point of view of all the other actors, using the right tools to perform at his/her best this activity.

CONTEXT ANALYSIS

To understand today's rewarding systems of public work better, some mention may be made about the historical development of the evaluation activity.

A brief history of the evaluation

In a first phase, the evaluation is mainly based on the measurement of the performance carried out by experts having the necessary technical competences to build and use appropriate tools: in 1908 Alfred Binet, with his IQ test, was the first to measure intelligence through the relationship between the mental age and the chronological one; and Arthur Otis in 1916 carried out some tests for the selection of army soldiers (Army Alfa and Army Beta).

In the next phase, the measurement is no longer the only one, but it becomes one of the tools for evaluation: in 1939 Ralph Tyler first introduced the term 'evaluation' by associating the concepts of measurement and test, until then used, with that of objectives.

As years went by, the evaluator begins also to formulate his or her own judgment: in 1976 Robert Stake was the first author to include qualitative methods in the evaluation process, introducing the preordinated evaluation (with objectives, tests, standards and research reports) and responsive evaluation (oriented to the program activities rather that to its objectives) constructs. With Stake, evaluation is more a service than a critical analysis: an activity that leads to a judgment both on the merit of the assigned employee and to his or her worth.

In more recent times, the 'fourth generation' evaluation has been more elaborated, which underlines that the evaluators must relate to a changing social process: the judgement can be formulated only after observing how the objective plan faces the problems, having compared it to similar situations and having heard the stakeholders' opinions.

The step forward is twofold: on the one hand the points of view of all the stakeholders involved in the evaluation process are brought out; on the other, a context of dialogue and discussion about the results of the evaluation is created. It is therefore no longer a linear path (from the evaluator to the evaluator), but rather circular one, with constant negotiation of the meaning of the action.

What literature refers

After a review of the literature on the subject, it emerges that most of the analysis in the field of evaluation concerns public policy program evaluation through cost-benefit and cost-effectiveness analysis to verify the ability of investments to generate social benefits superior to costs; or activities in the not-for-profit sector to check the correct use of financing flows. Few, and mostly based on technical-legal analysis, are the insights regarding the evaluation of the personnel, mainly within the teaching world. In terms of company organization and of human resources management, the authors focused on measuring managerial performance and on the technical characteristics of the evaluators, who must possess various skills, which are very difficult to find in a single person: economic-financial, legal, statistical and IT.

Personal experience

During my career I have had the opportunity to play all three professional roles involved in the evaluation process: assessed employee, assessing officer and member of independent bodies required by the law to guarantee the evaluation process[2] (2). This enabled me to understand that the evaluation activity is a problem for the actors involved: the evaluated are often dissatisfied with the score received while the evaluators consider this obligation something foreign to their managerial function. The consequence is that, every year when the evaluation forms are delivered, the assessed staff show deep dissatisfaction through appeals, notifications on the procedures, requests for access to the documents, absences and bad mood. While most evaluators, aware of these consequences, are inclined to minimize the negative effects; so each of them adopts his/her own yardstick for the evaluation, which is often different from that used by colleagues. As a consequence, similar behaviours may be assessed in different ways which can cause negative effects on staff relationships between colleagues, between citizens and users, with the evaluators themselves and on the quality of the job.

The aim of this work is to analyse this issue and to investigate, using the Personal Construct Psychology (PCP) approach, the points of view of the evaluator and to try to encourage change through a research intervention. To proceed in that way, it is necessary to examine the recurrent critical issues in today's evaluation systems, to identify the constructs to be analyzed and to propose an appropriate tool for exploring the dimensions involved.

WHAT IS HAPPENING?

The 'evaluation' construct: more attention on the process, less on the result

In playing one's role of evaluator, the executive often aims to focus on the process. It is likely that at the time of the assessment, he/she is experiencing anxiety in the Kellyan sense ("the awareness of an imminent incidental change in his/her core constructs", Kelly, 1955): the consequences of the scores he/she assigned to his/her employees can raise unexpected implications for which one is not equipped. Therefore, inside the construct 'evaluation activity' (assuming that the two poles are 'evaluation process' vs 'evaluated person'), one often considers the first pole as the most elaborative one. We are here within the ambit of the organization corollary and looking at the ordinal relationship between constructs. The executive, having been accustomed to respecting laws and procedures, as his/her focus of relevance in his/her system of constructs, will

[2] These are 'Independent Assessment Bodies' and 'Evaluation Units', i.e. the external bodies (monocratic or collective) required by law to guarantee the correctness of the whole evaluation process: they are appointed by the top management of the institutions and last for three years. Among the main functions, they propose the evaluation of the divisions and annually certify the correctness of the system.

tend to position him/herself toward the most impermeable pole (“it is impermeable if it rejects elements on the basis of their newness”, Kelly, 1955) ensuring a high-level of cognitive awareness; in fact, the pole ’evaluated person’ as well as being permeable, also leads to many varying forecasts. So, anxiety can often be addressed by paying attention to the process rules, rather than to the person and by focusing on applying all the formal steps and avoiding the risk of taking an individual approach to the assessed. According to the choice corollary, “in a dichotomized construct people choose for themselves that alternative through which they anticipate the greater possibility to develop their system (Kelly, 1955)”.

The ‘process’ construct: more attention to the result, less to the path

In analysing the evaluation process, the executive tends to value the score above all, by making a constriction (“it occurs when a person narrows his perceptual field in order to minimize apparent incompatibilities”, Kelly, 1955) on the final part. However, the evaluation process involves several intermediate moments of evaluator-evaluated comparison: we can therefore hypothesize that the two poles of the construct ‘evaluation process’ are ‘final result’ (emerging pole for the evaluator) vs ‘entire evaluation path’ (submerged pole: the one which is less available for application to events). If the evaluator chose to expand on the whole evaluation process, one would recognize that the assessed represents not only a score to assign but is also the partner in an experiment of mutual knowledge, the bearer of a system of constructs different from the evaluator’s and also from that of the other people under evaluation. So, he/she should verify that each assessed person is a person with whom it is possible to have a role relationship: according to the sociality corollary, to the extent that one person construes the construction processes of another, he/she may play a role in a social process involving the other person.

The ‘score’ construct: more attention to the relationship with the assessed, less to the growth of the organization

In assigning the annual score, the evaluator often chooses to avoid conflicts with the assessed and focuses on his/her convenience: it makes the assigned personnel satisfied but does not set the conditions for highlighting any critical areas within the organization. Therefore, the scoring process will be characterized by the utility for the evaluator and not for the organization. In fact, it frequently happens that managers give high valuations to the staff in the face of less than excellent quality of services.

An example of the above can be provided by the ARPAV data (Regional Agency for Environmental Protection of Veneto) for the year 2016. Out of just over 900 employees of the organization, following the evaluation, the 95.78% of the executives received the highest economic incentive, while for the employees the percentage rises to 99.35%.

In the same year and same Agency a sample survey was carried out about the quality of the services provided: in this case the judgment on the Agency’s work, given by a representative sample of companies, institutions and citizens reports a positive rating of 66.70% (quite satisfied with 39.36% and very satisfied with 27.34%).

This highlights how the internal evaluator has chosen to work on a clear constriction on the scores assigned to the staff even though the external audience has instead expressed a lower rating on the quality of the services provided.

Since “in a dichotomized construct a person chooses for himself that alternative by which he anticipates the greater possibility of elaboration of his system” (Kelly, 1955), the direction chosen by the evaluator seems to be that which, at that moment, offers the greatest advantages and preserves his personal relationship with the assessed. We can hypothesis that the superordinate constructs, which include the development of the organization, the potentialities of the assessed and the evaluator’s role, may be experienced as a threat (that is “the awareness of an imminent comprehensive change in one’s core structures”, Kelly, 1955).

Each actor's constructions

A correct application of the evaluation system postulates constructions with different focus of convenience for each actor in the process. The anticipations of the organization are mainly connected with the human resources as a tool for the growth of the organization (promoting a communication-oriented style of management, identifying strengths and areas for improvement, improving the use of resources, guiding career paths and individual development, providing elements of analysis for the construction of training, management and organizational activities). For the evaluator, the system should be a tool to improve his/her way of guiding the collaborators, planning their activities, redefining the objectives in the event of deviations from the scheduling, motivate the staff and monitoring the progress of the assigned structure. Finally, for the assessed, the system is functional for obtaining wage increases and assignments and as a guide in one's job activity, offering opportunities for professional growth and a tool for constantly monitoring skills at work.

HOW CONSTRUCTIVIST TOOLS CAN HELP TO UNDERSTAND

Even if the behaviours of assessed staff can be meticulously described in order to bring them into a scheme to apply numerical coefficients, each evaluator will read the reality through the lenses of his/her constructs[3]; and will allow or not the entry of new events according to the permeability he/she assigns to each one. For example, for an evaluator, the 'not so available' employee to a user's requests could be the one that for family reasons cannot guarantee a steady turn-out; for another it could be an employee that invests more time in back office activities than in user assistance; for yet another, it could be someone who is very good with clients but not very effective in dealing with their requests; and so on.

But 'the quality of his contribution, demonstrated skills, required behaviors, ability to evaluate his own collaborators' can hardly be measured by reducing into few elements observable behaviors, even if some evaluation systems tried to do it[4].

Two constructivist tools can provide the evaluator with the opportunity to review their own construct system: in particular, allowing them to consider other possible points of view. First, trying to understand within the evaluation process the meanings to which the evaluator assigns a greater importance: this could be achieved by asking the evaluator to submit a self-characterization. Then, on the basis of the analysis of the narrative, to interview the evaluator him/herself. It will then be possible to design and administer a repertory grid by the "inserting between the elements those related to the evaluator's pertinence and representing a sphere of experience and relationships

[3] According to Marcus Buckingham the evaluation tells much more about the evaluator than about the evaluated: he defines it as an 'Idiosyncratic Rater Effect', and underlines how the guiding element of each evaluator is not the idea of evaluating a person, but the definition that the evaluator gives of evaluative action.

[4] We report as an example the definition of the parameter 'user orientation and attention to the institutional image' of IUAV (University of Architecture in Venice), which is described as the ability of the employee to 'act in a service to the user perspective external and internal, striving to understand their needs'. It implies the need to adequately inform the user in the most appropriate times and ways.
The observable behavior in the employee may be
a) 'inadequate': the employee has proved to be not very helpful towards the requests of users of the services of the managed structure. Avoidable problems have emerged with good communication
b) 'minimal': the employee grasps the information needs presented to him and tries to satisfy them with the normal procedures
c) 'adequate': the employee has shown attention to the requests of users of the services of the managed structure. He/she was able to satisfy information requests even by exploiting new technologies
d) 'excellent': the employee improves the quantity and quality of the information available through the managed structure. It often plays the role of coordinator to satisfy complex requests that also involve other structures.

(Armezzani, 2004)"; and constructs that take on relevance in the manager's world and that the same helps to elicit.

Self-characterization

Self-characterization is a qualitative tool devised by Kelly to get in touch with the client's constructs; it is useful to read the reality the person has built up to that moment, his/her way of building him/herself and the world around. By means of this instrument the flow of thoughts of the client, its meanings and its peculiar way of describing events is favored.

The purpose of the self-characterization is to invite the evaluator to talk about him/herself in a sincere, truthful way, by writing and focusing his/her own role in relation to the organization, describing one's role as manager evaluator. Thus enabling the person to analyze his/her perspective as the origin for the meanings he/she assigns to the construct 'evaluation'. So, what matters then is not a supposed historical truth about the activity performed by the evaluator, but the subjective interpretation that he/she is able to offer at a given moment by examining first-hand the effects of his/her activity.

The self-characterization that follows is a self-charaterization carried written by a manager of a public organization with about 800 employees: he was asked to write in the third person how he sees his role as an evaluator.

'Patrick is now an expert evaluator, and has been a manager for about 15 years. He isn't influenced by people and circumstances too much, however he tries to be attentive to any particular personal conditions of the assessed: the workplaces and related procedures are not distant islands detached and divorced from the whole context of the real life. The comparison and the contact with the valued collaborators considers it essential even if, at times, really difficult and thorny. He firmly believes in teamwork and seeks, also through the evaluation mechanism, to encourage in any way the interview and in a constructive comparison within the working group while always maintaining his leadership'.

This tool aims to establish a relationship with the client and is based on an attitude of acceptance of what has been written (credulous approach; Kelly, 1955, p. 320). To analyze the narrative Kelly identifies some techniques, such as the observation of content sequences, the passages from one topic to another, the observation of the organization (Kelly, 1955, p. 331) or the displacement of the accent (Kelly, 1955, p. 333). Then he highlights the importance of contextual areas invoked by the protocol, "those in which the client sees enough uncertainty to make exploration interesting and enough structure to make it meaningful" (Kelly, 1955, p. 334); thematic analysis, with the understanding of the cause-effect links; and finally dimensional analysis, so as to be able to understand "the dichotomized alternatives between which the client must continually and consecutively choose" (Kelly, 1955, p. 337).

Once the self-characterization has been completed, the protocol can be analyzed on the basys of Kelly's indications. Identifying the sequences and transitions from one theme to the next, significant dimensions emerge: the possibility of being conditioned in the expression of one's own assessment, the incidence of real life on the job and the need to favor the valued personnel. The opening phrase highlights how the experience in the role of evaluator is considered a dimension of absolute importance. Recurring terms such as comparison, repeated teamwork and working group concepts also highlight the relevance of group size.

After completing the self-characterization, the same evaluator manager was interviewed to elaborate on the meaning dimensions that have emerged: many of the detected constructs will then be elicited in the construction of the grid. The choice to use a self-characterization to elicit the constructs for the grid instead of the usual method of triadic elicitation is based on the idea that the work of introspection and self-reflection made by writing about him/herself, allows the evaluator to identify constructs that may not emerge using the elements as the basis of the research. For example, the construct relating to hearing or not the opinions of others in expressing the evaluation, considering the scores that have been assigned, it could not have emerged.

Repertory Grid

With this data it has been possible to start building up a repertory grid. Developed by Kelly in 1955 under the name of Role Construct Repertory Test, and later revised and expanded by his students, it's a tool that allows to understand the significance that the person assigns to the main areas within which he/she acts - and that the researcher intends to deepen. The manager often interprets the behaviors of the staff in many ways (his/her own experience, the expectations of the staff or of the entity, social peace, etc.), but not reflecting enough on the wide range of meanings that this activity has for himself and for all the actors involved in the evaluation process. The purpose of this tool is to identify which constructs guide the evaluator in the choice of the scores to be assigned to their staff. Without predefined constraints, and aided by the researcher, the person is free to express his/her vision of the world using three components:

- A set of elements representing the investigated areas: in this case, the various types of actors involved in the evaluation process. Inserting past, future and ideal elements also allows us to check the movement performed by the evaluator time after time. In this way it will be possible to obtain much information on how the evaluator constructs himself and interprets his own actions within the wider field of pertinence of managerial competences. Through the interview, additional problem areas that did not emerge with self-characterization can also be identified.

- A set of constructs the evaluator uses to make sense to his own system: in this way the evaluator shall be facilitated in becoming aware of the dimensions he makes use of to assess the employees. He can even realise that – sometimes – he does not use those elements in a conscious way. The constructs that will emerge after the interview will be submitted to the evaluator, who will indicate the preferred pole and the opposite pole, thus operating the differentiation process necessary to fully define the boundaries of the construct.

- A rating scale allowing the interviewee to rate each element on each construct: the evaluator will position each element on each construct on a 1 to 7 rating scale. An appropriate choice of these components is very important since it determines the kind of information it may be obtained from the investigated person. Also detecting the submerged pole is important, because it is the one that helps to determine the overall sense of the construct.

The result of this activity is the grid below.

SHORT ANALYSIS OF THE RESULTS

Before analyzing the results of the grid it is necessary to remember that we are about to enter into the dimensions of another person's meanings. It is therefore necessary to be careful not to be conditioned by one's own constructs, to suspend one's own construing and to be completely open to the experience of the other.

As a preliminary step, we can note that the rep grid doesn't detect halo effect (the evaluation of the employee is conditioned by elements other than the behavior on the job), memory effects (influence of previous evaluations), or influence of biases (impact on the evaluation of gender stereotypes, social affiliation, personality, religion, etc.). These constructs, usually reported in the evaluation literature and often considered as relevant in assessment training , are not important for our evaluator.

	'I, as evaluator today (Present Self)'	'I, as evaluated'	'My collegues, as evaluators'	'I, as evaluator, in the early stages of my' career	'The personnel I evaluated'	'An evaluator I do not like'	'I, as evaluator, at the end of my career'	'The end-user, the citizen'	'The evaluator I would like to be (Ideal Self)'	
expert	2	2	4	6	4	5	1	4	1	*first time evaluator*
free to express the evaluation	2	3	3	3	4	6	2	6	1	*can get influenced*
rational evaluator	2	3	4	5	5	6	1	7	1	*emotional evaluator*
careful about the person	2	4	4	5	5	5	5	1	4	*careful about the worker*
I'm doing on my own	2	2	2	2	3	4	3	4	2	*I listen to the others' opinions*
I take into consideration non working aspects	2	2	5	5	5	6	2	5	2	*I only take into consideration working aspects*
importance of teamwork	1	1	4	3	5	7	1	4	1	*importance of each person performance*
evaluation as an opportunity to meet and exchange views	1	2	6	2	3	7	1	7	1	*evaluation as a mere application of rules*
careful about the evaluated actions	2	2	4	3	3	7	2	6	2	*careful about the way the person under evaluation relates to*

By evaluating the type of constructs, it is possible to note that all are necessary for the evaluator to interpret their role. All the emerged constructs appear to be relatively permeable, that is, with a sufficiently large field of pertinence, even if they belong to different fires: some refer to the characteristics of the evaluator, others to the modalities with which it expresses, others to the object of evaluation. Thus a rather broad view of the role emerges, and is not only linked to the expression of judgment.

In the analysis of the intrapolar structure, it is interesting to note that there is often a dichotomy between the larger dimension of the person (as an individual, as behavior, as a performance in his interest) and the narrower one of the worker.

This evidently constitutes an element of great importance for the evaluator.

Among the constructs, the most intense correlation (that is characterized by the greater strength in the link between the variables) is that between the freedom in expressing the evaluation and the attention to the actions / relationships of the evaluated. Among the dimensions, 4 are characterized by a high correlation. Among them, the predictable between present and ideal self, and the most unexpected one between present self and I as evaluated.

Further *and more specific* observations can be made by analyzing the results with the webgrid program, which can provide the analysis of variance, of clusters, and of correspondences.

However, if on the one hand this tool can help each manager to identify his/her meaning dimensions underlying his/her role as evaluator, its main limit seems to be the absence of any reference both between the elements and the constructs, to the organization in which the evaluator and the evaluated carry out their activity.

CONCLUSIONS

As we have seen, evaluation systems in the public employment in Italy tend to propose, through the expression of a score, a sort of picture useful for measuring the merit of personnel and consequently directing the career development. But the assessment of fluid elements such as the quality of the contribution offered to the organization, or the skills demonstrated by its actors, clashes with the fact that this measurement is based on a value system that is not shared by all the evaluators: so it often happens that each of them interprets the task of evaluator in a different way from their colleagues, and therefore to respond to the expectations of his organization.

The analyzed tools increase the manager's self-reflexivity, but do not support him/her in the relationship with the other actors of the process: on the one hand a greater awareness of the meaning dimensions leads the manager to recognize the importance of evaluation activity on his/her staff and on the organization as a whole. On the other hand the problems related to individual differences in the expression of scores persist: the same employee can be evaluated very differently by two different managers even after the application of the above tools. In order to have a positive impact on the whole public entity, as well as on the individual task as evaluator, the meaning dimensions should be analyzed from a point of view, as far as possible, common to all the organization.

Most current systems base the epistemological premises of their architecture on being oriented to the development of people and not to the distribution of economic resources. However, the relationship of power (and therefore of dependence) existing between evaluator and evaluated and the need to measure the quality of one's contribution, make it necessary to shift the focus of relevance of the analysis on superordinate constructs common to evaluators and evaluated.

The tools described above have been chosen for their flexibility and for the reason that their joint use allows us to progressively deepen our gaze on the world of the evaluator. They can provide help to clarify the implicit constraints that influence an evaluator in the choice of the scores to be assigned to his collaborators.

With this awareness, the evaluator will be able to give a new reading to his evaluation processes and to include within them some new elements:

a) a review of his processes through the expansion of his perceptual field;

b) an analysis of his previous choices, often characterized by transitions of anxiety (awareness that the events we are facing mostly lie outside the field of relevance of our system of constructs and, sometimes, hostility (continuous effort to extort validation tests in favor of a type of social forecast that has already been recognized as a failure), and the identification of new elements previously suspended;

c) a greater awareness of the core constructs that each evaluator uses in the expression of his own scores.

The use of the above-mentioned tools can nevertheless help the manager by widening his perceptual field, and reducing anxiety and hostility.

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