



The Mary and Martha Principle

Martha likes things black and white and likes to follow the rules to the letter; Mary loves the subtle tones of grey between black and white and dislikes the rigid application of rules to a world full of exceptions. Martha values efficiency, clarity, structure, and having things settled. Mary values quality experiences, sensitivity, openness, and flexibility. Martha appreciates good laws, Mary appreciates good graces.

At ICCS we think that both Martha and Mary have valid needs that must be met in order for them to feel at home in their jobs and perform well in their duties. We also understand that when they work together, their different preferences and perspectives can sometime lead to conflict, especially when they have to follow one another in a shift rotation.

Take for example the house rule at Martha and Mary's program about saving meals. A long time ago a client figured out that if she asked nicely, she could have her dinner saved on a plate in the fridge so she could eat it later in the day. That way, she could stay out with her friends until curfew and then come in and eat her supper before going to bed. The client loved this arrangement, but Martha did not. It seemed like a special privilege given to one client and it was extra work for her. Martha knows she can be a little rigid about rules sometimes so she didn't say anything until another client decided that he too would like his meal saved till later because he liked a nap in the afternoon right when supper was being served and since the other client had her meals saved, why couldn't he? Martha saw what was going on and refused to hold plates for any clients anymore, but Mary thought to herself, "If they would rather eat reheated left-overs, what harm is there in that?" This went on for awhile until a case worker observed that the clients were enjoying playing Martha and Mary against each other in a kind of "divide and conquer" strategy. The case worker thought this was unhealthy and so she and the manager came up with a rule that said that no meals could be held for clients anymore.

Since both the clients involved had really only been taking advantage of the "hold my meal till later" idea for matters of convenience, they didn't make a big fuss about it and eventually they moved on. The rule, however, did not, it stayed in effect and a few months later a new client ended up with a part time job that started at 4:00 in the afternoon and went till 8:00 and he wondered if it would be possible to have his meal put on a plate and saved in the fridge till later. Martha remembered how she had felt the last time meals were held and remembered all the uncertainty and conflict it caused, so she told the client that there was a rule saying that plates of food could not be kept. Mary came to work later that day and when the client arrived at the house at 8:30 she congratulated him on landing the job. She noticed that he ate hungrily the muffin she put out for the evening snack. "Did you get supper?" she asked, and was shocked to find out he had

been told he could not have a plate held for him. “But you are working,” she thought to herself, “That silly rule has come back to haunt us,” and she made him a toasted cheese sandwich on the spot.

Mary and Martha are both doing what they think is best. Martha needs order and consistency, Mary needs to relieve the discomfort of others. Is it possible to meet both Mary’s and Martha’s needs as well as the needs of the client? We think it is. That is why rules and policies at ICCS programs all come with a built in tag that says, “These instructions must be followed -- until they are changed.” Rules and policies provide instructions on the official way to do things, and they can not be changed except by an executive, but no policy or rule is chiselled in stone, dyed in wool, or tattooed on anyone’s forehead. Most policies and rules can be made better and no policy or rule can be so well written that it applies to every situation. So remember the Mary and Martha Principle when you are at work, and if a policy or rule seems like it could be better, think of how it could be made better and make a suggestion to your manager. It may turn out that there are some really good reasons why your idea won’t work, and you will need to be patient and understanding if change does not occur in the way or at the rate you think it should, but the Mary and Martha Principle teaches us that there are a whole variety of needs and reasons that have to be considered when establishing a rule or policy. In the end you may have to live with rules you don’t agree with, but on the other hand, you may find that your idea is one that no one else has ever thought of. Your suggestion may make life more wonderful for clients and fellow workers; so don’t hesitate to share your ideas with your manager. If your manager does not seem to be hearing you, or if you feel you would like someone else to hear your good idea, you can e-mail it to the Manager of Policy and Publications at: rpowell@iccare.ca.

Oh, and for the record, the rule now states that meals are not held for clients except if the client has a valid reason for missing the meal and lets you or another worker know ahead of time, or calls before dinner time when something comes up unexpectedly. Valid reasons are: medical appointments, a job or job interview, meeting with a landlord to see an apartment, or a meeting that will benefit the recovery or health of the client. If a valid reason applies to make an exception, get out the saran wrap.