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LIGHTING FIRES IN AN ORGANISATION

An Open Systems/Co-counselling approach to Personal and Management Development

Four years ago I was working in the Head Office Training and Organis-
ation Development Unit of a multinational British company. My
job was to produce training programmes for management, supervisory,
and professional staff to increase skills in leadership and influencing.
We ran what were essentially behaviour modification programmes
based on experiential/feedback/theory models.

I was feeling dissatisfied with the medium and long term results of
such approaches. People reported short term benefits but few felt
able to sustain change primarily because the training had done nothing
to seriously question or directly examine people's attitudes and beliefs
and because the methods tended to deal with simulated situations
rather than with real and 'live' data. It seemed to me and to others
I was training with, that a more fundamental examination of who
they were and why they behaved as they did was essential to a success-
ful developmental approach which would give people a lasting, helpful
result.

We had been examining and experimenting with several self-development
approaches but we found that, in general, people were too dependent,
too lacking in self-confidence and self-direction/motivation to use
such approaches well. These, we felt were, fundamentally, some
of the development needs themselves and that self-development could
be useful only when people felt they could cope with it.

T-groups had been run in the company some years before and for
a variety of reasons were not seen as relevant or, in some cases
acceptable.

We were therefore looking for new approaches to development. I
became interested in work being done elsewhere in the company by
two Americans, Jim Clark and Charlie Krone, who were using an
application of open systems to develop individuals. Their course

was structured, seemingly a prime requirement for acceptability
for such training with the company and many participants. It also
used the participants own 'back home data, providing frameworks
for them to examine, analyse and understand what was going on.
It was also helping people to takle the questions 'who am I?' and **'why**
do I behave as I do?'.

At about the same time I was introduced to re-evaluation counselling
and was immediately impressed by the simplicity and power of the
model both in theory and in practice. It was an external consultant
and friend, Chris Bull, who first began to make connections between
the two approaches and we rapidly developed these ideas to produce
a development programme for all staff.

At this point is seems appropriate to describe briefly the basic connec-
tions between the open systems approach and re-evaluation counselling,
which we perceived and used later on the programme.

An open system is any entity which needs to interact with its environ-
ment in order to survive and grow. In this instance I am dealing with
human beings and will therefore focus on the individual as an open
system. An individual has at least two systems, a physical and a
psychological one. For brevity I shall concentrate on the latter as
the one with which we are primarily, but not exclusively, concerned
on the programme.

People take in information, data of all kinds, from their environment
(inputs) and use that information to come up with a response (output)
to the situation in which they find themselves. The output is not
the same as the input, something has happened between the two;
it has been transformed in some way. Each system has a central
or key process which enables this transformation to happen. This
is known as the 'core process'. There are other processes operating
in the system but these are not central, they are there to support
the core process, to ensure that this vital central process continues
to function. In re-evaluation counselling, human beings are seen
as possessing three natural 'states of humanness'. These are that
we are warm, loving and collaborative; curious, outgoing, with a desire
to learn and grow; and intelligent, possessing a huge capacity to use
our storage/retrieval systems to problem solve with the environment
in a flexible, accurate and creative way. We connect these human
qualities with the core process. Each person, we believe, expresses
these characteristics in the world in a way which is individual and
unique. Each of us blends these characteristics together, sometimes

equally, sometimes with a bias for one or other, into our own core
process, our own unique way of transforming inputs into output or
responses. Since the characteristics are positive, each of our core
processes is also positive, enabling us to interact in healthy ways
with our environments with outcomes growthful to us and to the world.

This process is interfered with by patterns, accumulations of past
distress experiences when we felt emotions different from our natural
feelings or warmth and love, such as anger, fear and boredom. These
emotions cause the natural input/transformation/response process
to close down or freeze and we respond in rigid and often inappropriate
ways. Our psychological support systems, whose outward manifesta-
tions are crying, laughing, sweating, shaking, talking, shouting, etc.,
would rid us of the unwanted emotional content, freeing the true
data for storage and subsequent use wholly or separately. However,
such activities are generally unacceptable in our society and are
suppressed from a very early age. Thus we suppress, rather than
truly deal with the distress and the entire incident in which the distress
is embedded is 'stored' in its entirety and is only subsequently available
as a complete experience, distress feelings and all. Thus, when we
meet a new situation which contains something, however small, which
is like that previous distressed one we 'trigger' the old experience
and, while re-experiencing the old emotions, we behave in the new
situation as we did in the old. Additionally, the new situation has
itself become distressed and we file this alongside the old one. Thus
we build up accumulations of similar distress experiences which each
have a 'filing label' such as 'I'm stupid' or 'nobody liked me' which
are inconsistent with the natural human being and his core process.
They are the negative labels we attach to ourselves and which cause
us to act in situations in rigid, undifferentiated ways.

The programme we put on based on these ideas lasts from Monday
lunchtime to Friday lunchtime. A pre-day is held at least two weeks
before to enable people to hear what we will be doing and how and
on the basis of this, to decide whether or not they wish to attend.

On the programme we work in groups of four each with a trainer
and each morning we have review times in cross-group pairs or new
groups.

From day one norms are made explicit and actively encouraged which
re-inforce the natural nature of human beings. These include, dis-
couraging all negative feedback, validating each other, listening with
interested attention and giving people complete freedom over what

they do or do not talk about. Such norms, though feeling strange
to participants at first because "life ain't like that", quickly become
established and rapidly build a climate of trust and support which
encourages early disclosure and openness and reinforces belief in
oneself.

The course begins with participants, and often the trainer too, using
a simple framework to identify the important aspects of their current
environment, the aspects with which the person needs to interact
in some way. For each aspect or domain as each is called, the person
will use words or pictures to describe what is happening now between
him or herself and that domain – the state of the relationship – and
the feelings they have about it. Each person then shares their map
with the group. This in itself is often a very revealing exercise, helping
individuals to a new understanding and perspective on their current
situation.

Next a series of steps, similarly working individually and then sharing
and working with the group, helps each individual to 'label' their core
process, usually with a verb and a noun. E.g. 'sharing love', 'building
bridges', 'lighting fires'. This label encapsulates for the individual,
his or her own unique blend of the natural human states, their stance
to the world, the way in which he/she approaches situations when
operating accurately, flexibly, co-operatively.

This experience can be anything from a confirmatory to a revelationary
one but, once identified, it allows the person to move to the next
stage, that of identifying and overcoming the patterns which prevent
the core process functioning.

There are a variety of techniques for identifying and working on these
patterns. People may identify a current domain with which they
have an unsatisfactory relationship or may talk about similar situations
in life which they encounter which they find difficult to handle.
In either case an analysis is again used to identify the pattern or
patterns which operate in the situation(s) preventing the natural core
process from dealing accurately and appropriately with it. If the
things which trigger the pattern can be made conscious there is a
good chance that the person can avoid being 'taken over' by it in future
similar situations. The strongest and most pervasive patterns are
usually such as directly contradict or warp the core process. For
example, those people whose core processes reflect particularly the
warm, loving, collaborative aspects such as 'sharing love' are likely
to have strong patterns about being competitive or that nobody likes
them.

Having intellectually talked about and analysed these patterns the participant is encouraged to explore it further using the Gestalt 'empty chair' technique. In one chair the person will speak as the pattern, in the other as the core process. This dialogue almost always results in a 'victory' for the core process. The individual, in defeating the pattern arguments then selects a phrase or image which can be used in the future to counter the thoughts and feelings induced by the pattern being triggered, and enabling the core process to continue to operate.

Sometimes it is also helpful to get the person to explore the origins of the pattern, to re-count past experiences from which the pattern has developed and release the stored distress as they could not do at the time. This release disperses the distress contained in the incident, freeing the data for normal filing and, in turn, reducing the strength of the pattern. This is particularly useful where the pattern is so strong that people find it very difficult to 'give it up'.

In an evaluation of the programme many lasting positive effects were reported. People felt, for example, 'more confident', 'less pressured'. 'more able to deal with people at all levels', 'clearer about what was happening in situations', 'better able to understand other people'. Another most interesting result is that people report much wider ranges of behaviour, although there is no real focus on how to behave in particular situations, no 'practice' of particular behavioural skills. Behaviour extensions and changes result directly and spontaneously from identifying the core process and removing blocks to its functioning in the shape of patterns. For example, one manager revealed at the follow-up, some eight weeks after the programme, that he had always had tremendous difficulty in telling people that they had done something wrong. He would always, he said, try to avoid such situations by quietly putting the thing right himself. Without talking about the problem at all on the programme he reported that he was now able to discuss such situations with the staff concerned without embarrassment or tension. This he attributed to his understanding of his core process which was to do with sharing and some work he did on a particular pattern of his which was about feeling responsible for everything and 'carrying other people's problems around on my back'.

The programme seems to **begin** a process from which growth and development continues. Nearly four years since the first programme, people who attended those early events still talk about the experience in positive terms and report that they are doing things now at work and in their private lives which they do not feel they would have

done had they not attended and that the process continues to grow them and their understanding of their core process words. It would be wrong to imply that everyone who has been had a highly significant experience which is still unfolding but there are remarkably few ex-participants who feel that the experience was a waste of time or had no lasting effect, 2% maximum. To summarise the feeling, people report being more 'in charge' of themselves, their life situation and the directions that they take, and they cope more easily with crises and setbacks.

As might be expected some parts of the organisation are at best wary, at worst hostile to the programme. These are places which are highly bureaucratic and 'rule bound' who have sent people to the course hoping to bring him or her more 'into line' with the way the department likes people to behave. Often the course can have the reverse effect, freeing people from rigidities which allows them to question and confront outmoded or senseless practices. These resistances are few, however, and the course always has a lengthy waiting list.

The course helps people to manage stress, reduce uncertainty, handle personal transition, be more positive and influential in their lives, extend their responses in a wide variety of situations and to take action on decisions. This latter is particularly interesting. People often arrive at the programme with half-formed ideas about changes they would like to make or things they would like to do or change. The programme helps them to clarify such decisions and builds confidence in the individual to a point where the decision turns into action. About 20% of those attending the programme made a major life change soon after returning. All these people were already considering some sort of action before attending. The course does not force people to suddenly change their situation but it helps to bring any dissatisfactions to the surface more clearly rather than leaving them simmering and vaguely festering below the surface.

This then is our attempt to use humanistic psychology in an industrial setting. It seems to be meeting with continuing success. I, as a result of applying the various ideas and techniques to myself!, am now a freelance consultant with my own business, Janet Mills Associates which I run from my home in Richmond, Surrey. I took this step to have more freedom in my own life to choose the things that are

important to me when considering how to spend my time. I am able now to extend the range of contexts for this training approach, work on applications of the ideas to higher levels of system, such as groups and organisations, and also give more time to other aspects of me such as music and writing. My own core process is 'Lighting Fires' and I like to have a lot of different ones burning at the same time!

Kenneth Gray

WORKING WITH COUNSELLING

Trained counsellors already work with employees in commercial and industrial enterprises, institutes of education, hospitals, prisons and other organisations. Many other people, particularly personnel managers, use counselling methods and skills as part of their job, frequentl unrecognised by their employers and often unaware of it themselves. In addition, there are not a few organisations and individuals offering counselling of various kinds, some are quite specialised, for example, providing redundancy counselling for the manager and professional executive, others with a broader base such as general career development counselling. Everyone at work should be developing their awareness of agencies offering these services as well as extending their own personal skills in the field. However, consulting, particularly with managers frequently shows up a lack of understanding of what counselling actually is and it seems difficult for them to penetrate the mystique which sometimes seems to surround counselling and to learn its language; perhaps counsellors and humanistic educators are a little defensive about our role and skills but it really is time to come into the light of day. Counselling is too valuable to be hidden under a bushel, accessible only to the privileged few in universities and colleges.

The definition of counselling proposed by the British Association for Counselling (B.A.C.) and drawn up largely by its Standards and Ethics Committee, of which the author is a member, suggests that counselling takes place when . . . . .