Performance problem solving

Barry Johnson and Mandy Geal

To ensure commitment rather than compliance, a certain amount of rapport building needs to be brought to performance problem solving.

Mankind always sets itself only such problems as it can solve; since, looking at the matter more closely, it will always be found that the task itself arises only when the material conditions for its solution already exist or are at least in the process of formation.

Karl Marx

Introduction

The context of this module is an external coach solving an individual's performance problem within a company environment.

It is not unusual when initially dealing with a client for them to present a problem – 'They don't do this …' or 'I can't do that.' Often the problem presented is real, but it is not the problem that is really impacting performance. Frequently the client will have been 'sent' to you, nominally agreeing to come but with an underlying reluctance, and the client is much more likely to present a problem they **want** to solve than one they **need** to solve.
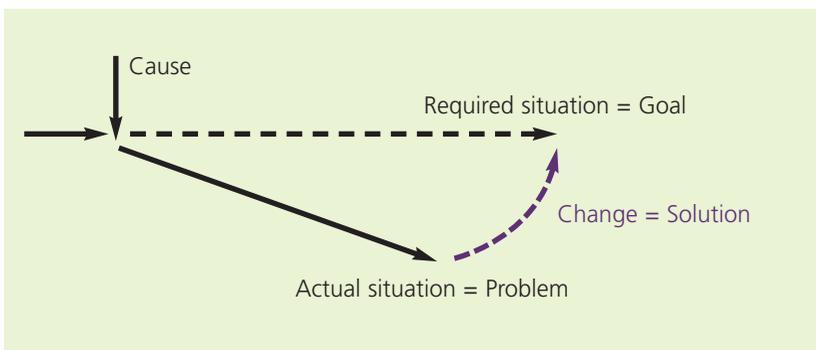

Fig. 1: What is a problem?

The coach's role is to help the client identify exactly what problem the latter needs or wants to solve and the acceptable process to solve it.

Problem

So, what exactly is a problem? For the purpose of this module we'll define it as the difference between the current situation and the desired situation. Only when the problem is clear and commitment to a solution is gained can we start coaching. The cause of the problem may

also have to be resolved so it doesn't occur again with this client or others.

Key learning points

- ◆ The coach's role is helping the client identify problems and their solutions.
- ◆ The importance of gaining commitment.
- ◆ Building rapport using pacing and matching.
- ◆ Towards and away from language.
- ◆ Setting goals, motivation, and creating a coaching plan.

Goal motivation

Having a goal is one thing. Building in motivation to get there is another. This is achieved by questioning:

Let us look to the future. By when will you have achieved your goal?

From this we gain a completion time. That time should be realistic. Now we create a vision of that time:

Imagine it is x time and you have achieved your goal. How will you know it is achieved?

This can be helped by questions such as these:
- ■ What will you see?
- ■ What will you hear?
- ■ What will you feel?
- ■ What will you be able to do that you are not doing now?

This last question is important as it relates directly to what has to be learned.

From goal to coaching plan

A simple question is: 'What have you done so far?' It may arise that the person has done nothing. They will have to be encouraged: 'That's good, we are starting from a clean sheet.' If action has been taken, its effects have to be explored. It may be that the person has closed off options for some reason. A closed option can be revisited. At the minimum, we have set the *starting point* for action. The next point is crucial: it is *seeking a proposal*. The stages for this are to restate the situation:

- ■ So what you want to achieve is …
- ■ What you have tried is …
- ■ What might you do now to [restate the goal]?

Ownership must be in the hands of the client and remain in the hands of the client

Support the client's proposal and expand the options: 'That's a sound option. What else might you do?' Having a number of options gives the person choice. Each option can be explored for pros and cons, and from this the best option is selected.

The selected option needs to be reinforced: 'To achieve [the goal], what you have said you are going to do is …' With the goal and the option to achieve it clear, the steps to get there need to be decided. Again, the client must own this. 'What will be your first step now?' Notice the word 'now'. What is required is a first step, and we need immediacy.

The client now knows the start and the target date to achieve the goal. Your role is to help them build the plan by seeking proposals, 'How?' questions, and loads of support: 'That will be good'; 'That should work'. At the conclusion of this problem-solving session, always set a follow-up date. In this way the client feels supported and is more likely to take the actions agreed.

Conclusion

Using a systematic problem-solving approach helps people to solve their own problems and learn through the process. It gives the client commitment to a clear motivational goal and the coach the basis of quality coaching.
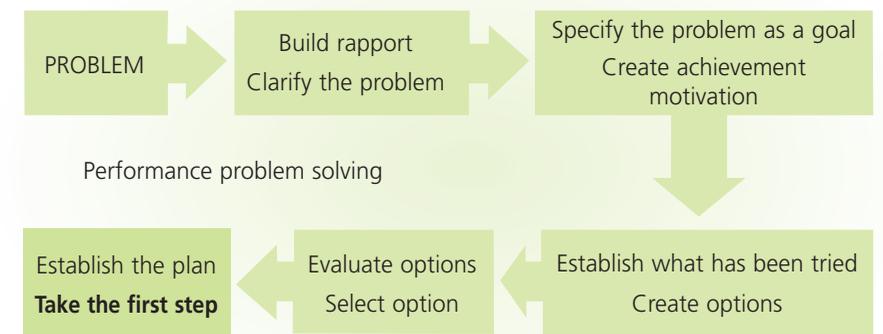

Fig. 2: Performance problem solving

References
1   S Hall, 'MetaPrograms', *Coach the Coach*, Issue 10, 2005.
2   B Johnson and M Geal, 'Behavioural Analysis in Training', *Train the Trainer*, Issue 23, 2005.

Further reading
Kepner, CH, and Tregoe, BB, *The Rational Manager: An Updated Edition for a New World*, Kepner-Tregoe, 1997.

Mandy Geal ran her own software company before co-founding Learning Partners, a people development consultancy, in 1995. **Barry Johnson** started his career as an aircraft engineer, before taking a degree in psychology and changing career direction to HR and training management. Barry and Mandy are master Neuro Linguistic Programming practitioners. They use competencies in the design and running of assessment centres for development and selection, behavioural learning events and performance management; and they design and produce development guides for self-development and coaching.

- Telephone (Barry Johnson): +44 (0) 1276 29978
- E-mail: barryj@learningpartners.co.uk
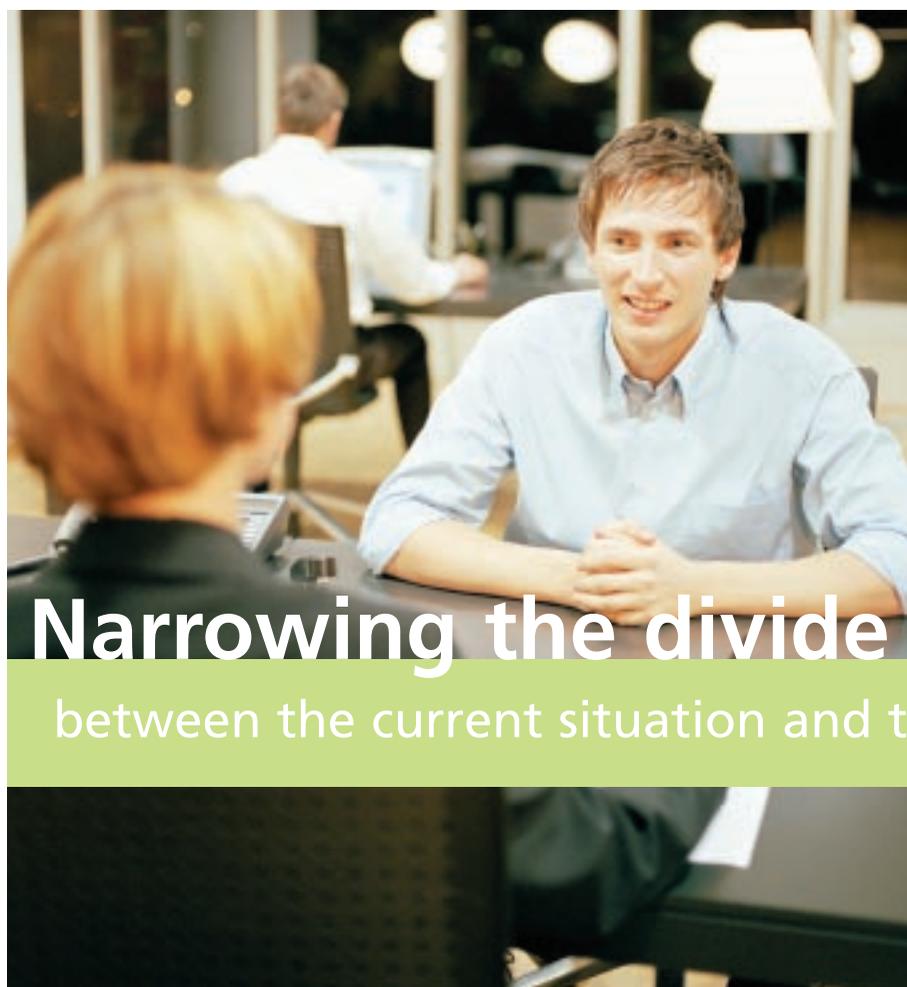
Narrowing the divide
between the current situation and the desired situation

Commitment

We need to gain commitment to the most productive way forward. Commitment is more than agreement, and clearly much more than compliance.

Why is commitment to solving a problem so vital? For a client to solve a deep-seated problem, they will have to devote time and energy to it. The client may have to drop habits of a lifetime that have served them well. Even if the problem is relatively mild, commitment is necessary for the client to solve it.

Before the meeting

The more we know about the client and their situation, the more comfortable and focused we will be in our initial interactions and the more value we can bring to the overall relationship.

So what is it we need to know? We need to gain a sense of the issues, factors, concerns, questions and environment that will affect our task. Having this information enables us to approach issues from an informed perspective, and the way we approach the client will have an impact on our credibility. We will know what type of questions we need to ask, and how we can use the meeting time to accomplish as much as possible.

Information gathering will also enable us to plan ways to convey our capabilities and how they benefit the client, and to prepare to speak their language at the first meeting.

Rapport

Rapport comes from understanding the client from the client's point of view. This means that, if we were to see the world from their perspective, experience what they have experienced, and want what they want, we would probably have clarity about the problem they have.

It is essential that we do not see the problem just from our perspective, or we will not be able to help.

To build rapport, we begin by 'pacing' the other person – literally going at their pace. Too fast, and we leave them behind; they would have to rush to keep up. Too slow, and we are left behind, so they have to slow down. In either case there is no bonding.

Part of pacing is 'matching'. Matching is like dancing: where one leads, the other follows. It is not mimicking. What are we matching? We have mentioned the pace of speech. The pace of speech is often indicative of mental state, and getting a balanced pace helps to gain mental balance. With speech, there are also volume, rhythm and characteristics such as pausing pattern.

With body language, we can match posture, eye-contact patterns and so on. It is probable, given the latest evidence, that non-verbal matching is more powerful than verbal matching. You may think of this as 'mirroring' the other person so they are subconsciously 'seeing' a reflection of themselves. We match the body language – not overtly, but subtly. There is a range of aspects that can

be matched. Mismatching with others normally leads to breaking rapport.

Language

Another aspect that aids rapport is using the language the client uses – for example, the client may use towards language and we might say, 'so what you want to achieve is ... '. Alternatively, the client may use away from language, and we might say, 'so what you want to avoid is ...'. In essence, this is the same thing, from one situation towards a different situation. The trick is to express the movement in the language used by the client.[1] Language used by people represents the way they think. Is it visual (they 'see' the situation), auditory (they 'hear' what is going on) or kinaesthetic (they 'feel' about it)?

Listening to the language used by the client is essential so that we understand their MetaPrograms and use the appropriate representational language.

Clarify the problem

We seek the problem using open questions. We recommend not using the word 'problem' initially. For some people, 'problem' is negative. We may start, 'So what is it we need to discuss?' From their statement, we may probe: 'Tell me more about that.' With many people, the problem is not precisely stated: 'I just don't understand this stuff.' It is essential that the problem is clearly stated. We need to know what this 'stuff' is and exactly what is not understood about it. This requires interactive skills:[2]
- seeking information;
- seeking clarification;
- paraphrasing;
- reflecting content;
- reflecting emotions;
- summarising;
- seeking feelings;
- seeking proposals;
- listening;
- supporting;
- silence.

As the information builds, it is useful to summarise. The problem owner is given the opportunity to add to what they have said. As the problem solving progresses, regular summarising builds the 'picture' and, through that, facilitates understanding that enables a solution.

Listening skills are essential. Having listened to the substance, the language, the emotional colour and the messages behind the words, we can frame the right question to stimulate the thought processes or make the correct comment to manage the practical and emotional climate.

It is not unusual at some point for the client to become emotional. Accept it. Reflect it: 'I notice that upsets you / annoys you / excites you.' Don't sympathise, and never touch the client.

Silence is a key problem-solving skill. Silence allows the client to think. Introverts think silently and time goes very slowly for us, but it may be going very fast for them. Extraverts think out loud. They need no intervention from us, but do require support by nods, affirmatives and other positive indicators. The danger with silence is allowing it to go on too long, so that the client becomes uncomfortable. We have to be able to 'feel' when to break the silence.

If at any time during this clarification phase you feel that the problem as stated is a symptom of something deeper, summarise the problem and, having got confirma-

tion, ask, 'So why exactly is this a problem for you?' This may take the problem owner to a deeper level and expose something that, if resolved, might make a major difference to the person. At the minimum, it will add richness to understanding the problem.

What happens during this process is that the problem, as initially stated, changes. It moves at the least to become more specific, and sometimes it shifts to be an underlying personal problem of which the original statement was only a symptom. We become clear about what the problem **is** and what it **is not**.

From problem to goal

Having got the problem clear, it is essential to shift it to the future and make it positive. Problems are historical; what we need is a goal. We may ask, 'What will it be like when the problem is solved?' We may paraphrase the response: 'So what you want to achieve is ...' This will be the situation when the problem is solved, phrased in a very positive way – a goal.

We sometimes find that this has to be further refined. What we have then is a positive future position and clarity about where the person is going, and all we have done is reframed the clarified problem to become a goal.

> ' Matching is like dancing: where one leads, the other follows '