

Using counselling skills to aid learning

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Key learning points

- What counselling skills are.
- The interactive skills needed.
- The key process elements of counselling skills.
- Counselling skills as a trainer role.

Introduction

Let us start with something of a definition:

Counselling skills help people solve their own problems.

It is not about advice. It is not about coaching. It is not about mentoring. And, for a trainer, it is definitely not about psychotherapy. What we shall focus on are the skills and process of handling a counselling situation with a person who has come to us with a problem.

As trainers, we are often held in high regard. I'm not suggesting for a moment that we should be or deserve to be. What I am saying is that it comes with the territory. After all, we have helped a person learn something in our area of expertise, so it should be no surprise to us when a previous or current learner raises a problem with us. Often, the problem is directly related to the technical or professional

matters we train for. Less often, the problem raised is more personal – about the person's ability to understand, or their ability to be able to implement what has been learned – and we have also been asked to help with problems that are outside the scope of our remit to the person or the company. We expect you have too.

Some trainers use counselling skills as a method of imparting learning. In this situation, the trainer asks the learner to present a problem and then uses counselling techniques to help the person learn how to solve the problem for themselves. That may lead on to coaching or direct training. This use of counselling skills leaves the learner motivated to be able to do something they can't do now and gives them a way of achieving it.

Managers who recognise a learning need in a member of staff have approached us. The person has attended the appropriate courses and been coached, to no avail. The manager recognises that the person has potential but it is just not being realised. Common sources of such information are 360-degree feedback and potential reviews.



Dilemmas and assumptions

When a person approaches us with a problem, we are immediately faced with a dilemma – or perhaps more than one:

- Is this something we should be dealing with?
- If not, who should be dealing?
- If we deal with the problem owner, will that impinge on our relationship with somebody else in the organisation?
- What action do we take in that event?
- Is there a confidentiality issue?
- If we don't deal with it, how does that impact on our relationship with the problem owner?
- Is this a real counselling skills situation or just one of giving information?

These are not questions we intend to answer. They are situational and there are no clear guidelines we can give. What we will say is: if it feels right to help, it probably is right.

The motivating goal

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 must be realistic. Now we must 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: '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 will have been learned.

Towards action

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 then, 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 or that, for some reason, an 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 proposal and expand the options: 'That's a sound option. What else might you do?' Having a number of options puts the person in the position of making a 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 (restatement of the goal), what you have said you are going to do is ...'. With the goal and the option to achieve it clear, the steps in getting there need to be decided. Again, the client must own this.

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'What will be your first step now?' Notice the word 'now'. What is required is action. What is required is a first step, and what we need is immediacy about the start. The client now knows the start and the goal. Your role is to help them fill the bits in between by a series of seeking proposals, 'how?' questions and loads of support: 'That will be good', 'That should work'.

Follow-up

At the conclusion of this counselling session, always set a follow-up date. In this way the client feels supported and is more likely to take the actions agreed.

Summary of counselling skills

The key skills are:

- pacing and matching verbal and non-verbal behaviour
- seeking information
- listening
- seeking clarification
- paraphrasing and reflecting information
- reflecting emotions
- summarising
- seeking proposals
- supporting
- silence
- vision creation.

Conclusion

Using counselling skills is a key trainer ability. It helps people to solve their own problems and learn through the process. Its use may be needed during or after learning events. It is a tool that may be used as a learning intervention.

Using counselling skills to aid learning

As trainers, our assumption behind helping people learn through a counselling approach is that people who are looking for help to solve their own performance problems are intelligent, energetic, flexible, creative, co-operative and able. Counselling helps them identify and take action to acquire the skills they need. It may also unblock a self-image or a previous experience that is preventing effective learning or performance. The use of counselling skills has the great advantage that the person owns their own learning, using the trainer as a resource when necessary.

A key assumption that we make is: *We can't counsel somebody who doesn't want to be counselled.*

Rapport

If counselling skills are to help somebody to solve their own problems, then the counselling process, by definition, starts with a problem. The problem must be exposed. The question for us is: Will a person just tell us the problem as they have come to us? The simple answer sometimes is: 'No'. We may have to work to get it clear. Part of doing that is to build 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 from our perspective, or we will not be able to help.

To build rapport, we have to begin by 'pacing' the other person – literally going at their pace. Too fast and we leave them behind; 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, though we have had people observing an interaction describe it in that way. What are we matching? We match the pace of speech. If we are dealing with a slow or hesitant speaker, we slow down. We may then speed up a notch, and if the person is in rapport with us their pace increases. Similarly, if the person speaks rapidly, we can pace that and then change to a more comfortable pace. The pace of speech is often indicative of mental state, and getting a balanced pace helps to gain mental balance. We match the body language – not overtly, but subtly.

There is a range of aspects that can be matched. With speech, they are 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.

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Another aspect that aids rapport is the 'chunk' size somebody uses. Some people talk in general global terms, others in specific detail. Some prefer logical step-by-step presentation, and others seem to present bits in a random way. Mismatching with others normally leads to breaking rapport.

From problem to goal

We seek the problem using an open question: 'What is the problem?' Or we may probe: 'Tell me about the problem'. 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 seeking behaviours:

- getting information through open questions or probes
- gathering detail through relatively closed questions
- paraphrasing to demonstrate and confirm understanding
- reflecting exactly what was said, to ensure the problem owner is clear about what they said, and that you heard correctly
- seeking clarification to aid your understanding, and causing the problem owner to clarify.

These behaviours also build rapport.

As the information builds, it is useful to summarise. This supports what has happened, and the rapport is strengthened. The problem owner is given the opportunity to add to what they have said. We believe summarising is a key tool. As the counselling 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; and having matched the verbal content to the non-verbal display; we can frame the right question to stimulate the thought processes or make the correct comment to manage the emotional climate.

A key element when using counselling skills is silence. 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 us to support them

with 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.

It is not unusual at some point in the counselling process for the client to become emotional. Accept it. Reflect it: 'I notice that upsets you, annoys you, excites you'.

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.

“ Using counselling skills is a key trainer ability ”

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 prompt: '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.

