Beyond the face before you:
considering the internal dynamics of your organisation

Dr Michael Walton introduces four 'world views'

The workplace counsellor has the tricky job of trying to work out what seems to be going on while working with the client and factoring in the dynamics of the wider workplace of the client. This type of counselling is similar to – but significantly different from – the work of the counsellor in independent private practice.

In private practice, which is complicated enough in the first place, the core dynamics triggered by the client's material revolve around the client and the counsellor (discounting for the moment any transferential 'guests' who may have flitted into the consulting room of course!). But in workplace settings significant additional frames of reference – I have called them 'world views' – intrude to complicate the dynamics involved and it is this wider array of perspectives and dynamics which this article seeks to highlight.

Four such world views are briefly considered: (i) that of the *workplace counsellor*, (ii) that of the *client*, (iii) the 'world' of the *organisation* and (iv) the 'world' of the *sponsors* of the workplace counselling provision (ie the managers, the organisation's leaders, the 'administration' of that organisation).

Figure 1 depicts each of these as parts of a system of dynamics that will be active during workplace counselling. While it will be the interactions between the client and their counsellor that are at the forefront of discussions about workplace counselling, the other two factors may often be paid insufficient attention, even though they exert an influence on the counselling provided, and set the context for counselling within the organisation.
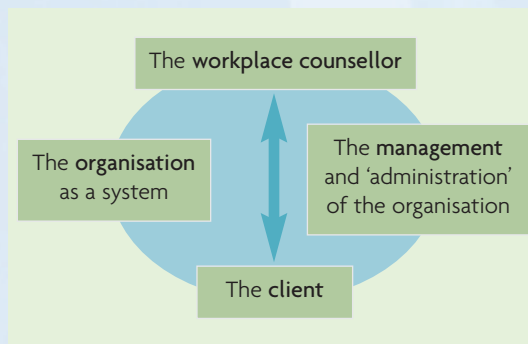
It should be noted that each of these perspectives will apply differing sets of criteria to assess the effectiveness and utility of the workplace counselling provided. It follows that what will be looked for as key 'deliverables' will differ depending on which of these four perspectives is highlighted. Furthermore each of these perspectives will be biased in what they look for and see as important and significant. Invariably, each of the four perspectives will have filtered out – and thus 'missed' or have downplayed – data which one of the other perspectives would consider to be significant about the workplace counselling being provided.

What may be less obvious though is how these different worlds may crash and collide as they interface with each other, resulting in dynamics and types of counselling issues which may be very different from those experienced in private counselling engagements. Collisions of meaning, of vested interests, of career vulnerability and of expectations about what the workplace counsellor will 'do' or 'deliver' for the client. The main point of all this is a reminder of just how complex, 'confused', fuzzy and incomplete workplace counselling will, invariably and necessarily, be[1,2]. It's tricky!

So … what about each of these four world views, perspectives, frames of reference?

The four world views outlined
1 World view of 'the client'
The focus here will be pretty much as with many clients: What do they want? Why might they have elected to want to meet a counsellor in the first place? And what are their expectations about such a venture? However, in workplace counselling other dimensions come into play. Have they been sent, perhaps? And could they be attending under duress? In addition, colleagues may know that they are seeing the staff counsellor or that they have visited the medical department, occupational health or perhaps that they have been sent to the EAP. The client may also wonder if they will be quizzed by their boss on their return and what they should say, if asked. Finally, attending the counsellor may have implications for their job security, promotion prospects and maintaining their sense of identity and reputation within the

Figure 1: Four 'world views' impacting on workplace counselling

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organisation at large. While it will usually have been emphasised that making use of staff counselling will have no effect on such matters, the threat, real or imagined, that it will do so, may nevertheless remain in the mind of the client.

2 World view of 'the workplace counsellor'

The workplace counsellor's primary orientation is likely to be that of engaging appropriately with the issues presented by the client: ie What do the issues seem to represent and be about? How is the client presenting (and how is that changing, session by session)? What are the emergent dynamics etc as the counselling proceeds? Working with the client, the counsellor's personal orientation may well emphasise humanistic, existential, psychodynamic or a more integrative approach. In turn this will be influenced by the orientation of their supervisor and their continuing professional training and development.

Interestingly Grey has cautioned that 'spending all one's time with individual clients can lead to a lack of awareness of the processes of the organisation which provide the opportunities for the clients' particular neurotic, existential or psychotic imperatives to emerge'. The organisational context exerts a significant influence, not just on the administrative side of counselling, but on the interpersonal dimension as well. He goes on to propose that workplace counsellors need to be aware of, and manage, such influence effectively, otherwise 'pathology can be chased around the system and organisations may never be aware that the counselling they have set up is part of the problem and not part of the solution'[3,4].

Thus the workplace counsellor has a significant additional responsibility to integrate the contextual organisational influences with the personal client-oriented material presented by their clients. To do this the counsellor needs to have acquired a body of knowledge and experiences about organisational life, internal politics, business practices and procedures, the deployment of positional power and corporate decision-making. In other words, they have to become 'savvy' about working within a corporate setting as well as retaining their role as a counsellor. While many workplace counsellors have previously worked in other roles within organisations – and thus may be 'organisationally savvy' – this is not the universal situation and thus we may need to do more to enable otherwise excellent counsellors to become readily equipped for the application of their skills in workplace settings. Readers are invited to suggest the ways and means through which this could best be accomplished in addition to existing initiatives.

3 World view of 'managers and leaders' (of the 'administration')

The sponsors of the workplace counselling have a vested interest in what goes on, or else they would not have supported and funded this service in the first place. What can be unclear is how they will assess its value to the business as a whole and determine its cost effectiveness. So the workplace counsellor should expect that, in some way or another, information about usage, types of issues raised, performance improvement and suchlike will be of interest to those sponsoring the service. This is where organisational politics may exert an influence and power plays between executives may become apparent and influence the shape of the service provided.

How any information can ethically and appropriately be elicited needs to be examined and disclosed. One simple approach is to set out up-front what and how any information will be shared so that sponsors, potential clients, counsellors et al all know what and how any information will be fed back to the organisation. Ideally, clarity about such matters can best be done during the discussions about introducing workplace counselling in the first place. Transparency about what, if, and how information about the workplace counselling service is to be provided enables managers – and the 'administration' at large – to position and place the function of workplace counselling within their organisation.

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4 World view of 'the organisation' (as an entity in its own right)

The focus here is on the unique culture and tone of the organisation and its constituent departments and sections and so is quite different to the third 'world view' outlined above. These cultural 'tones' will be influenced by the primary work the organisation was established to accomplish, the mix of personnel doing the work and the history

and heritage of the organisation. For instance an organisation's culture and traditions may have institutionalised particular ways of working and have defined how certain topics are addressed. Embedded too within an organisation's culture will be unique patterns of behaviour that may have little to do with work accomplishment but a great deal to do with maintaining the ethos of that particular organisation or the power profile of a particular function.

Some of the ways of working may be maintained as defences against anxiety[5] and some because those in positions of power do so to maintain their authority[6-12]. In factoring-in such matters the workplace counsellor needs to be able to make use of frameworks that can help him or her relate client material to the organisation's internal dynamics. Frameworks such as the Galbraith Model[13], the McKinsey 7S Framework[14] and Harrison's model[15] are very helpful in this respect.

For example, the Galbraith Model sees an organisation as a system in which each of his five constituent parts ie (i) the work to be accomplished, (ii) the personnel needed to complete the tasks required, (iii) the reward and payment arrangements, (iv) the information and decision-making procedures and (v) the organisational structure itself all need to 'fit' so that the organisation as a whole is able to function effectively in an integrated and mutually supportive manner. A mismatch between any of these elements is likely to generate issues, problems and tensions, which could result in organisational distress and a basis for consequent workplace counselling. The 7S Framework similarly suggests that an effective organisation is one where the Strategy, Structure, Systems, Staff, Style and Skills are all integrated with that organisation's core Shared values and where each of these seven dimensions is mutually congruent.

Harrison's model, on the other hand, looks at organisations in terms of their predominant cultural orientation and in this respect is quite different from the two outlined above. Is the organisation for instance primarily oriented towards (a) task achievement and competence, or (b) displays of power and decisiveness, or perhaps (c) roles, structure, order and control or maybe it is essentially (d) relationships focused? Again, mismatches between a staff member and the predominant cultural tone of an organisation in these terms can give rise to profound distress – and visits to a work-based counsellor!

So, a knowledge of frameworks such as these can be immensely helpful in enabling the workplace counsellor to get a better grip of what might be 'going on' in the organisations in which they are working. The interested reader may want to review their organisation in these terms and see what emerges. The results could be quite interesting and revealing!

Questions and challenges posed of the workplace counsellor

Given these different world views, the counsellor working in an organisation has some interesting questions to resolve, among them, the following three key considerations:

1 Who is the client?

Is it the person before them? Is it the organisation, their senior counselling colleagues, the EAP or indeed the departmental manager responsible for counselling provision? To whom do/should they respond, and in which ways?

2 What constitutes success?

In an organisation setting how is the success and utility of workplace counselling to be assessed? Will it be from client satisfaction feedback – like the 'happy sheets' you are given on training courses. Will it be from the numbers of clients seen, ie the more, the merrier? Could it relate to increased levels of attendance and thus a reduction in the number of days 'lost' each year? Or could it be, as posed by one of the reviewers, a reduction in 'presenteeism' and an increase in heightened levels of positive engagement while at work? In addition, perhaps the success of the service could be based on prescient summaries of 'what needs to change', which have been distilled from client work.

3 Clarifying the role of the workplace counsellor

In private practice the counsellor is solely a counsellor, but in the workplace the role is less clearly defined. For instance, is the workplace counsellor also a type of internal consultant, a workplace mentor to their clients, a 'change agent' and – possibly – a management spy!? Questions such as security of employment, pay levels, career progression, reporting relationships, internal management etc arise when considering the role and internal status of the workplace counsellor – questions that do not feature in the work of an independent private counsellor.

Collisions of meaning, vulnerability and expectations

The emergent picture is one of complexity and one that the workplace counsellor needs to be able to navigate for the benefit of their client, themself and the employing organisation. It may be worth

> **Establishing – and publicising – clear expectations helps clients to see how and where workplace counselling fits in within the power structure of the organisation**

noting that the counsellor in the workplace is vulnerable to being manipulated by the client, (i) through the disclosure, by the client, of false perspectives about the organisation, mischievously attributed to the counsellor, and (ii) through personally being organisationally naïve. Thus it is necessary – in my view – that the workplace counsellor acquires a sound appreciation of the dynamics of organisational behaviour, has specific knowledge – and understandings – of the history, traditions and structure of the organisation in which they are working, that they have models and frameworks about business life to use to help them make sense of presented client material – and all of this *in addition* to their core counselling skills and experience.

The potential for a collision between the four 'worlds' illustrated in figure 1 is increased unless the counsellor is aware of the differing bases and perspectives about workplace counselling each may hold. Thus it is advantageous for the workplace counsellor to proactively reflect about how their work relates to the needs, sensitivities and expectations not only of the client but also of the sponsors of the counselling services and with regard to the cultural heritage and history of the organisation. There is also considerable potential for confusion, mishaps, unexpected and unwanted outcomes from the counselling should the complexity already noted not be recognised and worked with appropriately by the counsellor. A key to maintaining a sufficient grasp of, and on, these complexities is managing the expectations of those involved and maintaining clear boundaries about what is and is not appropriate, acceptable, ethical etc from a workplace counsellor. This can be facilitated though repositioning the position and function of the workplace counsellor utilising the four 'world views' outlined.

Keeping safe and focused as a workplace counsellor – some ways through the mist

In summary, working through such a complex web of inter-relationships and dynamics can be eased through defining clear boundaries about the role, position and political neutrality of the workplace counsellor in the organisation. Establishing – and publicising – clear expectations helps clients to see how and where workplace counselling fits within the power structure of the organisation. Such transparency about what is on offer, and its limitations, also reminds sponsors and managers of the role and place of workplace counselling in their business.

In working with the complex mix of matters surrounding your work as a workplace counsellor therefore, you may wish to look beyond 'the face before you', beyond what you are initially presented with, and beyond what you initially may view as the key client issues, because of the wider organisational dynamics influencing your work which have been briefly noted in this article. ∎

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