<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Counselling: Adopting a more personal approach</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Author(s)</td>
<td>Esther Tan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Source</td>
<td>Curriculum Planning Division Annual Seminar “The CPD Officer: Role and Image”, 6 November 1991, Singapore</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Copyright © 1991 The Author

This document may be used for private study or research purpose only. This document or any part of it may not be duplicated and/or distributed without permission of the copyright owner.

The Singapore Copyright Act applies to the use of this document.


This document was archived with permission from the copyright holders.
COUNSELLING:
ADOPTING A MORE PERSONAL APPROACH

Dr Esther Tan

Paper presented at the
Counselling: adopting a more personal approach
at the Singapore Indoor Stadium
on November 6, 1991
COUNSELLING: ADOPTING A MORE PERSONAL APPROACH

Esther Tan


Understanding The Nature of Counselling

The term "counselling" is so loosely and widely used nowadays that there are many misconceptions of what it is. In order to understand what counselling is, therefore, a good starting point may be to dispel some of these common misconceptions:-

1. **Counselling is not advice-giving**

   Many people equate counselling with advice giving. They have an over-simplified picture of what counselling is - someone is troubled or is in need and you offer him/her some advice, which, hopefully, would solve the "problem" as well as put an end to the worrying or anxiety. Counselling is not simply the giving of advice or the provision of "solutions". In fact, such behaviours run counter to the basic belief in counselling that individuals have within themselves their own resources for change and decision-making.

2. **Counselling is not persuading or convincing**

   Some people believe that counselling involves persuading or convincing a person to take an appropriate "course of action". This is another common misconception of what counselling is. Actually one basic principle in counselling is to respect the autonomy and self-determination of the individual and a good counsellor does not try to influence his client one way or the other, either directly or indirectly.

3. **Counselling is not interrogation**

   Very often, the person in the helper position asks many questions in an attempt to understand the "problem" instead of lending a listening ear. Such a behaviour is not helpful at all as it would only engender resistance or even resentment on the part of the counselee. A good counsellor listens for feelings rather than questions for facts.
Counselling is not simply giving advice. Nor is it interrogation to establish facts. Neither is it persuading the other person to pursue a course of action. What then, is counselling? Perhaps we can get some clues from the following definition by John R. Cavenagh

"Counselling is a definite, dynamic, interpersonal relationship in which the counsellor assists another individual who is troubled, to reach a beneficial self-solution of a mutually defined problem which is within the normal range of behaviour, thinking or feeling"

This definition reveals 4 essential components of the counselling process:

1) It is an interpersonal relationship, a two-way communication and an exchange which can be therapeutic in that it often results in personal growth and personality development on the part of the counselee.

2) Counselling is usually a problem-solving process.

3) There is also the element of choice. However, instead of the counsellor actually making the choice or solving the problem, the counselee is helped to reach a "self-solution".

4) The counselling process is essentially a learning process. Its main focusses are self-clarification, self-determination and the development of insight by the counselee who emerges from the counselling process knowing more about himself, is more effective in social functioning and becomes more competent in problem-solving.

Understanding the Counselling Process

Having established what counselling is, we shall now examine the process involved in counselling. Generally speaking, the counselling process goes through 5 stages of development and certain counselling techniques are more appropriate than others for a particular stage.

1). Establishing the Helping Relationship"

The counselling process begins when two persons, the counselee needing help and the counsellor in the helping position, are brought together. At this stage the counsellor may encounter resistance or even resentment. One way to deal with resistance is to bring it to the open by helping the counselee verbalize it so that he is aware of its existence.
The essential feature of this beginning stage is the establishment of rapport. Rapport is a term used to designate psychological contact between the counsellor and the counselee. Only when rapport is established can real counselling take place. According to Carl Rogers, the father of counselling, three factors are necessary for the establishment of rapport:

a) when the counsellor is able to communicate his non-judgmental attitude and unconditional acceptance of the client as a person of worth, dignity and self-directive capacity.

b) when the counsellor attempts to understand behaviour and motivation from the client's internal frame of reference and shows his empathy.

c) when the client is able to see the counsellor as a warm, accepting, non-threatening and non-punitive person.

At this stage, as with all the other stages of the counselling relationship, the most important and most powerful technique to be used by the counsellor is Active Listening. The key to active listening is empathy. The counsellor must attempt to get himself into the counselee's frame of reference and sense his feelings about the topic of discussion. He should also try to see the latter's point of view in the light of his (counselee) background, attitude and need. In short, when we engage in active listening, we listen for facts, ideas as well as feelings.

2. The helping situation is defined

At the second stage of the counselling process the two persons in psychological contact work together to define the problem situation and to establish the helping goal - it could be to help a teacher cope with stress, or to help a Head of Department handle the resistance of his colleagues. It may also be a case of resolving some conflict situation involving certain members of the staff. At this stage "problem ownership" is important. Unless the counselee sees that he has a problem, he will never be motivated to seek help to bring about change and improvements. Thus, through counselling techniques such as exploration, focussing and clarification, the counsellor helps the counselee to define the problem situation and to set mutually agreed and realistic helping goals.

It is important to structure the counselling relationship at the onset by exploring what kind of help is available and what sort of goals can be established. This will impress on
the counselee that there is a shared task ahead. It will also help him to have realistic expectations.

3. Development of Insight

The key word for this stage is "insight", when the counselee is helped to gain a true understanding of the problem, its causes, effects and possible solutions. While encouraging the counselee to share his concerns, the counsellor can use counselling techniques such as making reflective statements or using interpretation to help the counselee develop insight into the problem situation. Sometimes, when all other techniques fail, the counsellor may have to use confrontation as a last resort to "jolt" the counselee into realistic perception of the problem.

4. Growth of Confidence and an Ability to Make Decisions

The key to this stage is independence and self-direction. Having gained confidence and developed insight, the counselee is now helped to the stage that he can help himself. On the part of the counsellor, the appropriate techniques at this stage would be support and confirmation to reinforce positive actions initiated by the counselee.

5. Termination

Correct timing is important in terminating a counselling relationship. While unnecessarily prolonged counselling may result in an unhealthy dependency on the counsellor, premature termination may arouse anxiety or even a feeling of rejection on the part of the counselee.

The Counselling Roles of CPD Officers

Although all counselling relationships go through more or less the five stages described earlier and there are common counselling techniques that may be appropriate for more than one kind of counselling situation, it is still important to be personal in our counselling by adjusting our approach according to a) the nature of the problem at hand, b) the context of the problem situation and c) the personality of the people involved. In this section of my presentation, I would like to look at three possible areas of need in the schools in which CPD officers may have a "counsellor's " role to play and discuss how the counselling in each situation can be "personalized" to suit the situation.
1. Helping Teachers Cope with Stress

It is a widely accepted fact that teaching is a stressful occupation. In 1985, a stress survey conducted amongst 160 teachers from both primary and secondary schools revealed that for majority of the teachers (73.1%) the number one stressor was job-related. The most cited stressors were work overload (18%), time pressure (13%) managing difficult children in class (11%) and marking (10%). While some teachers were troubled by strained relationships at work, a few complained about lack of support from their principals. (Tan 1985).

In monitoring and appraising the implementation of curriculum in schools, CPD officers often come across teachers who have difficulties coping with the demands in teaching - the endless marking, the many deadlines to meet and the "naughty brats in class" who drive them up against the wall!. As if these were not enough, some are further stressed by hard-driving principals and uncooperative colleagues. To top it all, for some there are domestic problems at the home front - demanding in-laws, children's schooling and maid problems - and the list goes on and on. It may be that to these teachers who are under stress, your paying them a visit could be the last straw that breaks the camel's back! When that happens, you have a delicate situation in hand that requires understanding and tactful handling.

To adopt a personal approach in helping teachers cope with stress, CPD officers need to understand first of all the teacher's reaction to stress and his/her coping strategies. Is his reaction one of fight, flight or freeze. Fight reactions are those acting out behaviours when one confronts the stressor (which could be a person or an event) in an aggressive manner. Common examples of Fight reactions are showing anger, confrontation or retaliation. Flight reactions are those used to avoid an open confrontation such as "withdrawing" and "retreating" or those used to run away from the stressor such as "denial" or "escapism". Freeze reactions to stress refer to the silent, tense immobility when one is faced with a threatening situation. Examples of freeze reactions are giving up, despair or even depression.

Once you have helped the teacher identify and understand his stress reaction, you can employ counselling skills to help him develop insight into his methods of coping with stress, to decide for himself whether such coping strategies are effective or not. If he is not satisfied with his coping strategies, the next step is to help him explore and decide on alternative ways of coping.
2. Helping Teachers Cope With Change

Although change is inevitable to us all, it is also human nature to resist change. Human beings are creatures of habit and like to settle into a routine, especially on the job. This is especially true with teachers when it comes to curriculum implementation. It takes a teacher considerable time and effort to become familiar with a new syllabus and to feel comfortable teaching it. It is therefore quite understandable that any change in the curriculum often meets with resistance from the teachers. CPD officers, on the other hand, often have to play the role of "change agents" in introducing changes in the curriculum.

To be effective in playing the role of change agents, it is important for the CPD officer to understand the nature of resistance to change and learn tactics in handling this resistance. First of all, resistance to change arises from a fear of the unknown. Typical of these deep-seated fears underlying resistance to change are:

- Fear of having to work harder to deal with something new.
- Fear that the change implies criticism of the individual's or the group's past performance
- Fear of losing power over an area that one previously has control
- Fear of impaired status and/or recognition within the group
- Fear of inability to learn new methods

In helping teachers deal with change, it is important to help them understand their fear towards the intended change and the reasons for their resistance to change. It is also important to recognize that the same change may elicit different fears within individual members of the group, simply because different people often perceive different meanings in the change. Furthermore, in schools where fears, insecurities and frustrations are already present, even relatively minor changes of any kind may evoke profound reactions of resentment and hostility; in other words, any added fears only reinforce and accentuate the existing ones. Of course, the best way to understand this resistance to change is to develop empathy on the part of the change agent (in this case the CPD officer) - the ability to put himself in the other's shoes in order to understand how the latter feels.

Secondly, the CPD officer needs to be discerning to recognize the form of resistance which can range from direct or indirect aggression against the change itself or against the originator of the change to such reactions as withdrawal or apathy. Such resistance often results in efforts to block the introduction of new methods, to discredit them or, in extreme cases, even to sabotage the new procedures!
When introducing changes, adequate preparation through effective communication is important to decrease resistance and to ensure effective implementation of the change. I can see the role of the CPD officer in the change process as basically involving three steps:

1. Unfreezing (casting doubt on the existing curriculum)
2. Changing (trying out the new curriculum)
3. Refreezing (reinforcing the new, more desirable changes)

Once a change has been announced, the maximum possible information should be communicated to the administrators and teachers in the schools in order to allay as many of their potential fears and anxieties as possible. This should be followed by a clear and complete explanation of the change. Resistance can be expected when the change is not made understandable to those who will be affected by it. On the other hand, the greater the degree of effective communication, the greater the willingness to accept and support the change. After the change has been introduced, efforts should be made to establish a continuing dialogue with those involved in the implementation to allow feedback as well as to ensure a channel for two-way communication.

3. Effective Handling of Conflict Situations in Schools

In the course of his work, a CPD officer often gets caught in conflict situations in schools. The conflict may involve two or more teachers; it may be a difference of opinion between the Head of Department and colleagues in his department; the conflict may be between the school principal and his HOD or a group of teachers. Whatever it is, it is a delicate situation requiring careful handling. To deal with such situations effectively, it is important for the CPD officer to understand the nature of conflict and both healthy and unhealthy ways of handling conflicts.

People behave differently when confronted with a conflict situation. Some face it squarely and try to come out a winner by being aggressive or persuasive. Others try to avoid a head-on confrontation by employing strategies such as yielding, withdrawing or even compromising. All these are win-lose strategies from which one emerges either a winner or a loser. In all win-lose situations, relationships may be strained as a result. Moreover, the loser may develop unhealthy coping mechanisms such as rebelling, resisting, defying, blaming others, retaliating, curry favouring, conforming, forming alliance, dropping out or even retreating into depression. Thus win-lose methods are definitely not satisfactory ways of resolving conflicts.
In order to resolve the conflict situation to the satisfaction of all parties concerned, the CPD officer caught in the conflict situation needs to employ effective and constructive negotiation skills to bring about a win-win situation. This win-win (sometimes also known as the no-lose method) sees conflicts as healthy and non-destructive which can be resolved in a friendly and non-threatening manner. This method involves six steps as suggested by Thomas Gordon:

Step 1: Defining the conflict  
Step 2: Generating possible alternative solutions  
Step 3: Evaluating the alternative solutions  
Step 4: Deciding on the best acceptable solution (joint decision)  
Step 5: Determining how to implement the decision  
Step 6: Assessing the success of the solution

It goes without saying that throughout the negotiation process the CPD officer needs both active listening and effective communication skills to bring about a successful negotiation!

Qualities of the Effective Helper

Research on counsellor effectiveness has identified 8 qualities that are essential to an effective helper, namely,

1. Self-awareness

When the counsellor has enough insight into his own strengths and weaknesses and does not let the latter interfere with the counselling process.

2. Acceptance

Recognizing and accepting the counselee as an individual of worth and dignity

3. Empathy

When the counsellor has enough sensitivity and understanding to enter into the counselee's world emotionally and perceives it as the latter does.

4. Trustworthiness

When the counsellor is honest, reliable and observes confidentiality.

5. Warmth

When the counsellor is attentive, caring and considerate of feelings
6. Congruence

When the counsellor is consistent both in his attitude and his behaviours

7. Knowledge

When the counsellor has sufficient knowledge of why people behave the way they do and how problems arise.

8. Counselling Skills

Just having a kind heart and an eagerness to help does not necessarily make one a good counsellor. The counsellor needs sufficient interpersonal and communication skills to be an effective helper.

When these qualities are present, it will then be possible for one to build that wonderful counselling relationship as described by Carl Rogers:

"If I can provide a certain type of relationship, the other person will discover within himself the capacity to use that relationship for growth and change and personal development will occur".

References


