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COUNSELLING: A KEY TOOL FOR TODAY'S MANAGERS

Dr. Anubha Ray

Associate Professor, Business Communication

Centurion University of Technology and Management, Odisha

Introduction

There are many reasons why today's managers are turning to counselling as one of the methods, among many, of caring for their teams. Managers definitely feel responsible for the welfare of their workforce. More and more employers realize that productivity and passivity do not go hand in hand; only a healthy and a vibrant corporate environment can produce results. As management theories and practices keep evolving, radical changes also do take place in the HRM activities. In this context, the employers are taking to counselling as a way of helping their teams to manage the huge changes taking place in the organizations. Counselling can be seen as a way of enhancing mental as well as emotional health of the employees in the organization. The health of the employees could be disrupted or disturbed due to various professional or personal reasons. Change in the organizational culture can disorient, cause grieve; change is never easy. Counselling can be a way of helping or supporting employees as they try to cope with organizational change. Counselling itself can be an organizational change, which can bring values, a sense of acceptance and realization among employees of who they are and what they are capable of in the very dynamics of organizational life. It can also empower the troubled or distressed employees to learn to manage their lives, to take up social or professional responsibilities and also how important decisions can be made and executed.

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Counselling in the Workplace

Modern employers introduce counselling into the workplace for various reasons. As per research, 76% of employers see counselling as a caring facility; 70% employers think that counselling can help employees deal with workplace change; and 57% of employers take counselling as a way of managing stress. In fact, employees spend about one quarter of their lives in work settings; that here some important relationships blossom and grow and become part of their life and work. Most importantly, personal identity is often bound up with profession. Employees also integrate personal and professional lives to a great extent. Making counselling as a facility in the organization means problems can be dealt with much more quickly and can be solved in the very set up from which they have often emerged. There are professional counsellors or psychotherapists who are trained and paid for their counselling services in the organization. There are also para-professional counsellors; people trained in basic counselling skills and who use their skills as part of their jobs yet do not have any formal counselling qualification.

Whether a manager in an organization can take up the counselling role for his workers is still a debate. Though not very wide spread, there is a tendency in some organizations to view managers as quasi counsellors or informal helpers for their staff. Since much of their managerial time and many of their tasks are involved with managing people, they are propelled to take counselling role not exactly as professional psychotherapists would do but understanding the basic human behaviour and enabling or improving communication by interacting positively with others. Blurring the boundaries between managerial and counselling role, Redman (1995) sees managers as on-going counsellors who regard counselling as part of a manager's everyday life, "We all have been counselled at some time. We all have been counselled by somebody else. It probably hasn't been called that, it was just something that happened as part of two people talking.... you have probably realized that you do some counselling" (1995). On the other side, we have management consultants who strongly argue against managers taking on counselling roles seriously. They argue that not only does it cross limitations but it places employees in more important positions. On the one hand, they are asked to share their personal issues with their managers, and on the other, they should be ready for their performance appraisal (their

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careers with the same managers). It creates role conflict for both the employees and the employers. The Institute for Personnel Management Statement on Counselling in the Workplace has tried to address this issue by explaining that "Much workplace counselling is not counselling in the modern definition of the term but relates to situations which require the use of counselling skills" (1992).

Interpersonal and communication skills which are often regarded as counselling skills are part and parcel of all interactive situations in the organizations. For this, the managers are required to undergo a brief training in counselling skills which will help them to recognize signs of disturbance in employees. Here, the distinction should be made to indicate what managers can and cannot do while considering counselling with employees. Managers must understand the limitations of what they can offer within the counselling parameter. They have to understand that counselling is a process which does not take place accidentally. It is effective when it is properly planned and organized. The manager's lack of time or skill can impede the counselling process. The manager has to be inclined to extend help proactively for the development of his team. The manager helps the employees to develop clear objectives, to form their own plan of action with his support of what can be achieved. Thus the manager helps the troubled employee help himself. For severe cases, he can arrange a professional psychotherapist to deal the problem much more astutely.

Counselling Approaches and Methods

Some theorists think that workplace counselling should only focus on workplace problems and not in other areas. Counselling in the organizational setting is definitely different from counselling in other context. The criteria of counselling here are performance and productivity and the responsibility of the manager-counsellor is to get the employees fit and ready for work. This is mainly to help the employees realize their self-actualization related to the workplace which will eventually fix the performance problem of the employees. The objective of this counselling is to get the employee back to work as quickly as possible. The employers do not have time nor interest in problems or issues that are not related to the workplace. Their aim is to help the individual overcome workplace challenges and go back to work as fast as possible. However, it is not all that easy in practice between what workplace

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problem is and what is personal problem especially when issue of identity is so closely linked to profession.

At one end of the scale, there is an aggressive manager who with hostility berates his underperformer and undisciplined employees repeatedly, throws all kinds of negative statements and rips them apart. With his overreaction, the angry supervisor shows nothing but his need or insecurities for power. Through his aggressive behaviour, he/she is not able to establish a kind of supportive relationship or effective feedback that will help the problem employee change for better. It only drives him further away and gives him a reason for continuing with his ill behaviour. On the other scale, a passive manager is the one who does not provide any feedback, not smiling, awarding the employee nor talking about the employee to others. He also fails to connect with his team in a positive way which is a dereliction of his duty. In between the two is an assertive manager who with his counselling and communication tools helps the other person have his say without inhibition. He himself speaks honestly not bluntly. He is forthright in his approach without blaming or denigrating others. Unlike a passive manager he does not let the problem situation drift. He handles the situation in a matured way and assist the troubled person understand the situation as it is without sounding harsh or impolite. His communication style is open and to the point. While counselling, a manager should be assertive and direct in his communication. He/she has nothing to apologize for, nothing to fear.

Managers repeatedly report that it is somehow not possible to counsel a problem employee. Often frustrated managers complain that, "I have told him a hundred times, and he just does not seem to hear or even want to hear. How can you have access to these people?" The exasperated managers do not believe in giving the problem employee "a talking to". They are out of patience or wit in dealing with these people. It usually kills their interests to sit and have yet another chat. They would rather take action than provide counselling. However frustrating their past experiences may be, managers have to understand that counselling techniques work and for that they have to study some of the major principles underlying human behaviour and communication. That will give the managers the opportunity to check their own communication methods that they apply to the problem people. Communication methods may have its limitations to change behaviour, but it is a great tool to help the

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managers in eliciting information that can help him diagnose the source of the problem. After gaining some meaningful knowledge, a manager can have greater confidence and decide what he/she is going to do with the person. A manager should have proper training on stress management and anger management so that he is in a position to support the employee understand his stress and also help him to find ways of managing so as to improve his life.

Communication Skill for the Counsellor-manager

The manager can use his/her communication skills and tools in the workplace for the purpose of counselling the troubled employee. Effective communication will enable a manager with better understanding of why employees behave as they do. This will help him identify the factors that motivate and prevent the undesirable behaviour and interaction of an employee. This also improves communication and essential feedback mechanisms that allow employees to communicate with managers. It enhances the loyalty of the employees as they feel they are cared and listened to in a supportive environment. This ultimately results in their commitment to organizational goals and job performance. Counselling helps in regaining the self-esteem and motivation of the employees, reduces the levels of workplace conflict, stress and moreover, workplace miscommunication. Counselling has been a powerful impact on the staff. Counselling involves not only a good talking but thinking, understanding human nature and having compassion and kindness on the part of the manager for his problem worker. The manager-counsellor must show the following qualities in order to counsel effectively.

Respect for employees: The manager has to be aware of an employee's individuality, must recognize his skills, special attributes, unique values. As he aims to bring a positive change in his people with counselling, he must not project his own values onto them. In his 1957 article Rogers included unconditional regard for positive personality change as part of counselling communication. The troubled employee is regarded as a person, not a collection of behaviour. The manager's attitude is non-judgmental without any reservation. It does not mean that the manager accepts the negative aspects of the employee's behaviour or agrees or condones the deviant act. Imperfections and mistakes are accepted as part of human conditions. Respect can be shown by listening to his story in a genuine effort to understand him better. Though respect is correlated to

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understanding, the same can be generated by accepting his/ her uniqueness. This can be expressed through warm gestures and comforting tones. Sometimes respect can be expressed through anger also. In the last analysis, it is the employee's experience of that expression that counts. Through anger, the manager can show his concern and his best intentions for the employee. Being open and genuine is often an expression of respect for the disturbed employee.

Empathy: It means being compassionate innately. It makes the leader understand his employee's situation. He travels with his employee's emotion, identifies the situation he is in and then develops a strategy to improve it. Empathic understanding has long been recognized as an important element in counselling. In Rogers definition "Empathy is an accurate, empathic understanding of the client's world as seen from the inside. To sense the client's private world as if it was your own, but without losing the 'as if' quality – that is empathy".

Winning Trust: The counsellor-manager can win the trust of his employees with his honesty in his statements and actions. He has to prove his credibility so that he can earn his sub-ordinate's trust and respect forever. The manager has to understand that this is not a one-time event but a process.

Understanding of self: The leader, before counselling, has to understand himself first. He should be aware of his own values, needs and prejudices so that he will be careful before projecting his feelings onto his employees. He has to understand that counselling is not a trick nor it is simple. It is not easy to see things from another person's point of reference. Moreover, the manager has to be fully convinced of the benefits of counselling, its short-term as well as long-term effects.

With all these, a manager should demonstrate the qualities of an effective counsellor with skills of good communication. Before counselling he/she should be aware of the topic of the session. The major topics include performance counselling, problem counselling, individual

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growth counselling etc. And all these things he can handle really well if he has acquired some counselling knowledge and through effective communication as part of counselling.

Establish a Connection

In counselling, what matters most is the extent of help a manager-cum-counsellor can show to establish a connection with the troubled employee. As a practical matter he/she is trying to figure out what is going on in the other person's head without worrying or assigning any psychological labels during the process of counselling. Counselling can be fruitful only when the troubled employee feels a connection with the manager. He might cross the bridge or barrier for better behaviour since he understands that his behaviour is undesirable, not him. He comes to realize that the manager desires to do some good for him and his career.

The only caveat that should be observed here is that when the problem employee is truly distressed or emotionally too disturbed, even a helpful manager can be a suspect. But with genuine care and interest, a supervisor can, in certain cases, be as effective in getting through the problem employee as a trained psychotherapist. It is not to disparage the professionals of psychotherapy. The managers need not be thorough psychologists to be able to reach out to the other person, but with a trusting bond and sincerity, there is a great possibility of salvaging the troubled person and his career.

Connection through Communication

All of us know that communication is more than just sending or receiving a message. Communication has its root word 'unity'. To have communication is to have co-unity, to have oneness with each other. When message passes through the perceptions of the sender and the receiver, it is a complex process riddled with many internal barriers. There are many barriers to communication that can affect the manager's ability to get his/her own message out. When we have trouble with communicating with our spouses and relatives, communication with the troubled employee should be handled sensitively and delicately. The barriers should be overcome to make the process effective.

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We communicate through our own views and experiences of the world. Our personal biases and prejudices which remain in our subconscious can have subtle yet strong influence on the outcome of the entire effort. One of the most common barriers that a manager has to deal with while conversing with the problem employee is his own internalized values about achievements, the need or way to do things correctly and so on. A dedicated manager might look askance at people who are not guided by the same values of excellence and attitude at work as he is. He should be in a position to keep aside his beliefs and values to be more open to other's ideas and attitudes. Controlling barrier within ourselves is probably more difficult than having control over the external noises. Therefore, a manager should ensure that the serious discussion takes place in a closed office with telephone messages held and other disturbances kept at bay. During one to one counselling session, the troubled employee would not like his facial expressions to be seen by other people. The manager should ensure that the windows and doors are closed. The manager on his part should suspend his internal feelings or opinions while giving a sympathetic ear to the man. If he faces the troubled employee with even a trace of doubt in his mind, counselling is bound to fail.

The counsellor has to use communication skills as he encourages the problem employees to open up. With his verbal communication he can use the power of vocal communication which consists of messages sent through one's voice, for instance, using the appropriate volume, pitch, articulation, speech rate and emphasis on words etc. His tone signals that he is deeply interested and concerned. At the time of counselling, his voice should exude warmth and empathy. He also can also use his bodily communication which consists of messages sent by the body, for instance, through eyes, facial expression, posture, gesture, physical closeness, etc. Touch is a special category of non-verbal communication. Messages sent by touch will include what part of the body one uses, what part of another's body gets touched and how gentle or firm is the touching.

A counsellor's posture should be welcoming like his body should lean towards the employee in a more encouraging manner than turning away from him. Height tends to be associated with status. Managers with small height may be at a disadvantage unless the other person's

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body posture is changed, for instance, sitting down. A manager should be careful with his posture. He/she should not sit with arms and legs tightly crossed as it might suggest being stiff and rigid. The zone of physical closeness will vary according to the nature of the relationship. The faulty eye behaviour like staring and unnecessary eye movements can disturb the counselling sessions entirely. Facial expressions like smiling, nodding, raised eye brows show that the manager is with the problem employee.

A manager has to have enormous amount of conviction on counselling as well as confidence to deal with these people. Without confidence on his own counselling skills and methods, he will be more pre-occupied with how he is conducting the counselling session rather than focused on the problem person and his problems. Confidence is not just about the smart use of language as managers are generally good with language skills, but to be able to see the limitations of those skills. He has to have the keenness and seriousness to do such a job. He might sometimes with his distracting behaviours, body language or facial expressions can hinder the very process of counselling. Without realizing, he might send a facial signal like "I don't believe you or I have no time for you or I don't want to hear this". The inability to listen openly and non-judgmentally creates a huge barrier between the troubled party and the employer.

Language of the Manager

A manager has to be aware of the inherent language fallacy while communicating. A manager might say, "I've told this guy a hundred times" perhaps means to say that, the person is deliberately disobeying. The fact is that words uttered are not necessarily words received. So, the selection of right words is of great importance. We have different meanings and connotations for the same word in the dictionary. Words have the power to create emotional responses. So, the manager should avoid using words that deliberately provoke negative reactions. He should also be aware of the fact that, other people may have vocabulary or linguistic limitations. Managers have to understand that generally they have more education and exposure than their employees. They use more advanced and sophisticated language and concepts about the business. So, they should choose the words, phrases or terminologies which are to be understood by the people. The counsellor-

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manager's use of appropriate style or words in language is of immense help. During counselling, the language should be informal or conversational. Here a careful use of "You" message and "I" message should be done. 'You' message focuses on the other person and it can be judgmental, for example, "You don't appreciate what I'm doing for you" or "You are not talking/listening to me at all". 'I' message can be used this way, for instance, "I feel appreciated" or "I'm expressing happiness being with you". Words like 'must', 'ought' or 'should' are usually avoided.

Questioning and Listening Skills

Since problem employees are often emotionally troubled, supervisors or managers should allow them to verbalize or talk out their problems, thus providing them the opportunity to open up with their concerns. The manager should use the counselling session as an opportunity to sharpen his understanding of what is going on in his mind. Both the parties, in this sense, use questioning and listening skills during the process of counselling. The manager should ask more of open-ended questions to send a signal like "I want to know more". This process of asking question and listening actively indicates acceptance. By asking broad and open-ended questions initially like "Tell me what's been going on with you lately?" can throw considerable light on the thought process of the employee. From this type of broad questions, he can gradually narrow down his questions to more specific ones to get to know the bottom of things. By the time the employee comes down to his specific problem, he has already said a lot about his life and his surroundings. This might help the manager to understand the employee's grief or pain taking his background into consideration. Some employers go directly to the problem at the start of the discussion. They can use basic interrogative questions like what, where, when, how and who. These six 'whs' will help the manager most of what he needs to know about the employee. A close-ended question on the other hand does not propel the subordinate to offer any additional information about himself and the manager might end up asking questions after questions, like, "Have you been coming late every day?" or "Have you stopped selling drugs yet?". With the close-ended question, the manager loses, because he will not get the answer with simple 'yes' or 'no'. These questions will not give him any additional information or clue about the real concerns of the troubled party.

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With active listening skills, a manager gives the signal that he/she is going along with the troubled employee. While listening, restating or rephrasing techniques can be applied to say that he understands what the other person intends to say. In the process of echoing the employee, the manager should be careful not to parrot every word that the person utters. It can be annoying and might not be effective at all. Paraphrasing gives the manager a chance to summarize what he has understood. A manager should come up with encouraging responses at the time of listening. Although the employee is communicating, he/she needs a little encouragement to go on. In the situation the following remarks like “Uh-huh”, “go on”, “tell me more”, “I see”, “really” etc. can be helpful. They might not indicate agreement but are part of normal courtesy to let the other person know that he is being heard and encouraged to continue. The manager should be careful to curb his temptation to intervene and stop his diagnosis while listening. Use of “silence” technique can be very powerful in listening skill, which says eloquently that we want the other person to continue and we are impressed with what he/she has said. While remaining silent, perhaps nodding one’s head and maintaining the look of interest on the face are probably most appropriate.

Conclusion

Counselling service can change an organization’s culture because it introduces alternative ways and perspectives of working with people, viewing people in relation to organization and each other. It provides a system where people are held and heard and moreover helped to make important career growing decisions. The “people” side of the workforce is essential and thus counselling speaks of the organization’s values and the importance of people within the system. Every value-conscious manager who has ever tried to help or counsel his problem employees, uses some special communication approaches to deal with particular type of problem employees. While counselling, the employer or manager shows that he cares and has concern. While disciplinary procedures to correct employee behaviour are of great importance, they are required only when other positive measures have failed. If the manager uses the correct management technique like counselling for problem employee, not exactly in the literal definition of psychotherapy, it can positively prevent undesired behaviour or attitude. It can be done through orientation, training programme, and effective one-on-one

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communication also. If everything fails, the manager has no choice, but to follow the steps of employee discipline procedures.

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