

BACP Workplace executive committee discussion document

What makes workplace counselling different from therapy in other settings?

This article represents a framework that introduces a series of considerations and issues relevant to the workplace counselling profession. We hope this will encourage you, as members, to add to the debate with your thoughts, opinions and views. The workplace counselling community is a broad church where provision is offered in many different contexts, each within its own idiosyncratic workplace environment and complex set of influencing variables. With your feedback and support we aim to develop a stronger position from which we can better champion the provision of workplace counselling whilst advancing standards and sound ethical practice.

Why now?

The 2010 BACP Workplace conference, held in London, was entitled 'Fit for Business?' and sought to tease out the impact and challenges facing the workplace counselling community in response to the relationship between counselling and the organisation, and, in particular, the NHS replacement of the 'sick note' with the 'fit note'. At this event some delegates expressed genuine concern about the extent to which the organisation could, or should, influence the work of the counsellor and client in a workplace counselling setting. Further letters and articles in subsequent editions of *Counselling at Work* (see <http://www.bacpworkplace.org.uk/journal.php>) suggested a division between those who offered 'workplace counselling' with an agenda heavily influenced by the employer, and those offering 'counselling at work', a support provided by the employer, but without the organisation being directly involved in, or influencing, the nature of the counselling. Questions were raised about a perceived erosion of counselling values, the sanctity of the therapeutic relationship and the ethics of allowing the organisation to intrude into the counselling space on one hand, and counsellors feeling that innovative workplace initiatives had been misunderstood on the other.

As an executive committee, we want to clarify where we stand in this debate which we believe goes to the heart of the developing profession of

workplace counselling and what we do as a BACP division. We offer our thoughts in the spirit of finding a framework with which we hope many people will agree, but also in the hope that it will stimulate BACP Workplace members to add their own thoughts. We believe that it is in this way that we will articulate what is special about the workplace setting and how it is evolving. We have not included every important nuance about workplace counselling, rather we offer an overview of the issues that are central to our discussions at this time.

The organisation is always present

Workplace counselling is defined by the fact that the service is provided, and usually paid for, by an employing organisation. Even if the content of the counselling is personal rather than work-related, the employer wants to ensure that the individual is appropriately supported to carry out their organisational role. The workplace counsellor attends both to the client's need to be an individual, with a unique set of feelings, attitudes and experiences; and the client as an employee, experiencing the full range of joys, frustrations and constraints of working within a complex institution.

The counsellor holds both the individual and the organisation in mind

The emphasis which is placed on the client as an individual, or as an employee may differ between counselling services and at different times within a particular counselling process. It may be helpful to imagine a continuum, with individual needs at one end and the perceived requirements of the organisation at the other. Workplace counselling may start at one end, but move up and down the continuum at different stages. A personal problem has an impact at work, and the workplace has an impact on how the problem is experienced by the client.

Take, for example, a client presenting to counselling with a significant bereavement. The initial focus might be on the individual's loss, the story of the bereavement, the reaction of family members and their feelings of isolation and loneliness. As the

work progresses, the client may start to think about returning to work, perhaps fearful about whether they can perform their job effectively, and concerned that their manager will expect them to fulfil all their responsibilities as soon as they do return. The counselling focus now moves along the continuum, beginning to explore the client's feelings and attitudes towards work and the impact of workplace tensions on the client's bereavement process. The focus can move from one perspective to the other, and it is the job of the workplace counsellor to hold both in mind. By focusing on the individual's problems, the client may regain the strength to discuss a realistic return-to-work plan with their manager, and work colleagues may be able to offer the support needed to reduce feelings of isolation. Alternatively, the client may decide they want to leave the workplace and the counselling can assist the client to plan and implement a successful resolution or ending. Other possible outcomes include the client being motivated to return to work, but the bereavement may have affected their psychological health to such an extent that they are not able to manage all their responsibilities, or they may not want to return, but feel compelled to do so for financial reasons. Helping the client to negotiate these tensions is a central part of the workplace counsellor's role.

When does the organisation intrude on the counselling process?

The workplace counsellor also has a responsibility to understand and minimise the potential impact of organisational impingement on the counselling process.

Referrals may come to the counsellor with an expectation that information from the counselling session will be shared with the referring manager. In this case, it would be appropriate for the counsellor to explain the importance of confidentiality to the referrer and clarify what is ethical and appropriate. The counsellor needs to be confident that the counselling process is not compromised when feedback is required and that the client is able to feel completely safe and open, so the true value and benefit of counselling to the client is maximised. Even when clients consent to a report being written at the end of the counselling process, there is potential for the client to adopt a child-like position, with the two 'professionals' sharing information and making decisions for the client. The workplace counsellor's task is to empower the client to give their own feedback to the manager about the conditions and changes they need in order to function optimally.



JOHN WOODCOCK/GETTY

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The referring manager may attempt to set the agenda for the counselling when they request interventions such as anger management, return-to-work counselling or coaching for performance issues. The workplace counsellor can explore the context that surrounds the request with the referring manager and set realistic expectations. Doing so can help to isolate any of the referrer's personal projections, bias or influences so that the counsellor is free to explore and negotiate the nature of the work directly with the client. Apparent intrusions on the counselling process can help the counsellor understand managerial pressures: a management referral can be seen as the workplace inviting the counsellor to make a useful intervention into a stuck and often painful situation.

In-house counsellors may have particular challenges to manage their boundaries with clients appropriately. A client may be attracted to counselling because they have met the counsellor in another context, and this can be helpful in forming a sufficiently trusting therapeutic alliance. For another client, encountering the counsellor in other contexts may be disturbing and awkward. The counsellor's sensitivity to the client and their ability to raise the issues in order to manage and forestall problems is crucial, and may enable the counsellor to successfully operate a range of interventions such as coaching, mediation, training and committee work within one organisational context.

The workplace counsellor's specialist expertise

The workplace counsellor's specialist expertise lies in being able to see the individual in the context of the system. The dynamics of working in a police force, for example, will be different to those in an advertising agency. The conscious and unconscious motivations that draw people into different fields of work can be understood and may shed light on the unfulfilled fantasies and expectations which may underlie problems of stress and anxiety. Workplace issues can be understood in the context of the client's whole life, so that work problems can be put into perspective, neither overwhelming the individual, nor being avoided and split off.

Workplace counselling also pays particular attention to how the current state of the organisation or employment context may be impacting on the individual. Periods of downsizing and redundancy may create fear and insecurity, or excitement at the potential for something new. Some clients are insightful and are able to articulate the impact of workplace changes on their psychological wellbeing. Other clients may present feeling confused and

disoriented but have not made any connection between their own feelings and the changing dynamics of the workplace. It is part of the workplace counsellor's role to identify or be aware of both the obvious and subtle dynamics of the workplace setting and hold them in mind when listening to clients' stories and tensions. The parallel processes occurring between the client's feelings and the workplace dynamics are often a useful and valuable focus for the workplace counsellor.

The organisation can also benefit from the statistical information counselling services can provide. Problems and trends can be identified, and interventions such as policy development and targeted training can be recommended for ongoing organisational development. The capacity to analyse the information in an objective way, not unduly influenced by individual, and perhaps unrepresentative experiences, is another aspect of holding a balanced position between the organisation and the client.

The workplace counsellor has their own workplace context

In addition to the employing organisation which commissions the counselling, the counsellor will have their own workplace context, perhaps an EAP or a counselling department within the institution. They will frequently be expected to share responsibility for therapeutic work with a case manager in order to have consistency of practice. This, of course, can create another systemic influence on the counselling dynamic.

As a workplace counsellor, it is important to be able to relate to other wellbeing professionals in the workplace, such as occupational health staff, employee relations managers, human resource managers, and company doctors. The capacity to hold firm with client confidentiality but still be a respected and credible team player is essential. The workplace counsellor needs to be flexible along another continuum, that of being able to hold client distress and childlike states, whilst maintaining an adult professional identity within their working context. Supervision and training can help to maintain this potentially difficult balance by bringing the reflection process of client material on professional relationships into conscious awareness.

Workplace counselling may appear to be just a client and counsellor alone in a room. In reality, it always takes place within a complex organisational system which will inevitably shape the process.

BACP Workplace

BACP Workplace division aims to protect and promote standards and sound ethical practice within any workplace setting, irrespective of the

nature or delivery of the provision. Whether within an EAP, an in-house service, an individual counsellor based on site or freelance workplace counsellors receiving referrals, the counselling service has to gain the respect of employees and management in order to function. The service has to communicate with the workplace and maintain a dynamic interaction between managers and employees, such that counsellors and clients are free to move along the workplace counselling continuum.

So does this mean that anything goes? How do we recognise if something is not working properly? Just as BACP has moved away from prescriptive 'code of practice' to a system of ethical guidelines, those very same questions apply. In addition, we can also ask whether the balance is being struck in the workplace counsellor's relationship with all the elements in the system. If we start to see all our clients as victims of a demonised organisational regime, or conversely, that we accept organisational directives without thought and question, then this may be a signal that something has become unbalanced and we are failing to maintain a good relationship with all the parties involved.

Just as workplace counsellors have to hold together all the opposing tensions outlined above, we applaud, support and encourage all the counselling systems that exist in workplaces and promote best practice within the huge range of counselling contexts.

Next phase

This article represents a first stage exploratory discussion and reflects both the thoughts and views of the BACP Workplace executive committee as well as feedback from the many members who have contacted us.

But we're aware of many other issues that warrant further discussion and debate, such as:

- training for workplace counsellors
- accreditation for workplace counsellors
- nature of supervision for workplace counsellors
- specific ethical issues, such as counselling the victim of bullying and counselling the alleged bully
- being caught up in the dynamics of the workplace in the same way as the client, such as redundancy of the client and closure of the counselling service
- the role of the in-house counsellor when the counselling service is being replaced by an EAP
- negotiating support for clients when they have been dismissed from the workplace but their counselling contract has not been completed.

We are working towards creating a workplace manifesto that sets out a strategic agenda for

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BACP Workplace and we will share this with you as it evolves. We've already referred to the workplace counselling community as a broad church, and whilst we value this diversity we also recognise that this can create its own tensions, stretching further the application of and adherence to standards and sound ethical practice.

To help us better represent the workplace counselling community, we need to hear your views. If this article has triggered any thoughts for you, please contact us via any of the following options:

- contact one of the members of the executive committee directly (see page 31 for the committee contact details)
- write a letter or article for this journal (please contact the editor, Rick Hughes: rick@thecreativewritingservice.co.uk)
- request that your feedback is passed to the whole committee for review and consideration at the next meeting (please contact divisional officer, Julie Camfield: Julie.camfield@bacp.co.uk).

For and on behalf of the BACP Workplace executive committee

Kevin Friery (Chair)
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