

Response

Norman Claringbull shares his views on the BACP Workplace executive committee discussion document in the last issue of the journal: 'What makes workplace counselling different from therapy in other settings?'

The BACP Workplace executive wants to know if workplace counselling really is different from other forms of counselling. Of course, if it is, then inevitably workplace counselling will emerge as a discrete specialism, one with its own discourse and its own practitioner-training needs. That might even become true for the other counselling specialisms too. Therefore, by asking such a fundamental question, the executive is by default entering counselling's ongoing professionalisation and regulation debate. Is counselling (especially workplace counselling) a teachable, measurable, and above all purposeful, activity? Or is it a numinous, creative, indefinable calling, one that exists beyond the artificially narrow and restrictive boundaries of managers and bean-counters?

However, back to workplace counselling – is it really different? Is workplace counselling merely routine counselling that happens to be financed by employers or is it a stand-alone movement in its own right? Does the finance source matter or does 'he who pays the piper call the tune'? The purists will probably argue that the counselling relationship is sacrosanct and should be immune to external controls. It doesn't matter who pays, they say; the needs of the client are paramount – everyone else keep out! Counselling's realists take a more practical view. They have realised that all counselling takes place in context. This includes our clients' work/home life experiences. Therefore, debating whether or not our clients' employers have any place in counsellor/client relationships is a waste of time – the employers are already there! The real debate is around what we do about it. Managing such complex threesomes (or moresomes), obviously requires specialist skills. Perhaps this is part of what makes workplace counsellors different?

This leads us to another important question. Is workplace counselling only about meeting the needs of our employee-clients in the counselling room? As Derek Mowbray showed us in *Counselling at Work* (issue 72), corporations too have their needs. Perhaps for some counsellors it's not just

the notion that organisations too might need therapy just as much as their employees that is uncomfortable. For many of them it just doesn't seem very 'counsellorish' to measure outcomes in terms of 'added value' either. Of course, in many ways the employers' needs vs employees' needs debate is actually irrelevant. After all, how can we successfully offer therapy to 'sick' employees if we don't treat their 'sick' workplaces? How can we 'cure' psychologically disordered corporations if we don't 'cure' their emotionally disordered employees? Could it be that workplace counselling is really much more than a fairly simple three-way process? Is it actually a multi-purpose, multi-task, activity that benefits multiple stakeholders? If it is, then workplace counselling is indeed different from therapy in other settings.

What else might distinguish workplace counselling from other forms of therapy? Well, just have a look at recent issues of *Counselling at Work*. You will see articles on corporate depression, mediation, law, stress management, organisational dynamics, and so on. Look back anywhere in earlier editions and you will find similarly complex issues regularly discussed. Probably much of this higher-level knowledge is specific to workplace counselling practice. Therefore, as this new knowledge is incorporated into their skills-base, workplace counsellors increasingly differentiate themselves from therapists in other settings.

So, it seems that workplace counselling either is, or is becoming, a separate calling; one that will require specifically trained, advanced, therapists. As Chris Athanasiades tells us in *Counselling at Work* (issue 72), EAP provisions are rapidly expanding. Therefore, the specialist skills, training, and purposes of workplace practitioners must expand in parallel. Clearly the questions being raised by the BACP Workplace executive are not just about some parish pump issues that only concern the workplace village. These questions are central to the core debate about counselling's future. Are counsellors, especially workplace counsellors, differently trained professionals and proud to be so? Do we indeed want to be as respected as the other established professions? What about you? Are you content to stay in an alternative therapy backwater and keep company with the psycho-babblers, the crystal gazers, and all the other pseudo-healers? I'm not! ■

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