

A year in the life of a newly trained counsellor

Nicola Banning continues to chart her journey as a newly qualified workplace counsellor – part 3

Becoming a self-employed counsellor is a journey of discoveries. One of mine is that it requires building a good relationship with one's accountant. My accountant came through a recommendation from a friend, and although I don't doubt his financial wizardry I am left realising that, for me, the relationship is still key. I am wondering how I ever said the words, 'Yes, I think we can work together' while aware that my internal supervisor was saying, 'Oh no, you can't'. After just one encounter, in which he was robust and I was less than robust, I am aware of some work on myself that I need to revisit and am left searching for a new breed of accountant altogether. This time I am after the slightly less alpha-male variety, with some stage 1 listening skills – and one fewer Porsche in the drive is desirable though not essential.

I know that he would not have approved of one of my recent business decisions but instinctively I know it is the right one. When my manager at the county council's occupational health unit approached me to see if I was interested in running a series of training workshops for staff, I did not need to be asked twice. Responding to both the staff survey and to figures of staff sickness, the council have listened to their employees and are investing in training their managers to manage work-related stress and bullying and harassment in the workplace. The workshop on work-related stress is a day's training followed by two further half days to review progress, feedback and consolidate, showing a significant commitment to and investment in staff training. My manager wanted counsellors to offer the training because of our awareness of the issues and our organisational knowledge. It was explained to me that there was a fixed day rate. I had the option of working solo as a trainer or splitting the fee and running the workshop with a colleague.

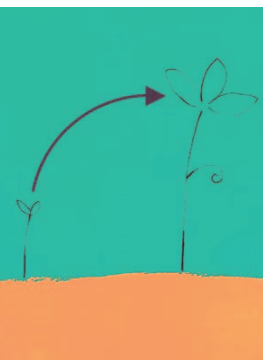
It was not a difficult choice. Alongside my counselling work, I want to develop my skills and experience as a trainer and learn more about holding and facilitating groups. I have colleagues I want to work with, who have both a wealth of training and teaching experience from which I can learn. Last week, I met up with my tutor from my diploma

course to plan a series of workshops on stress for managers in social services. We had already had the discussion about how I was no longer 'the student' and that this was a new working relationship we were in together. Even still, I felt I needed to begin our meeting by explaining to my former tutor how I felt about our pending series of workshops: 'Doing this is exciting' I explained. 'But I'm also right outside my comfort zone right now.' He looked at me, nodded and said 'good'.

It is good. Our meeting illustrated our different learning styles and how we can complement each other in both planning and running training courses. I am a reflector with a journalist's need to pinpoint the what, how and the why. I particularly need this rigour and clarity when I am on unfamiliar turf, as I am now preparing and running workshops. My ex-tutor has confidence and experience with scheduling the day, intuitively knowing how long is needed for an exercise to make it meaningful, allow time for feedback and processing, and I know I can trust in that. Creative, productive and stimulating are the words I would use to describe those planning meetings. It gives me energy to be working in a creative partnership and not trying to have that kind of meeting with myself, regardless of what my ex-accountant might think.

Referring to my departure from the BBC eight months ago, a colleague recently asked me, 'So how does it feel to be out there creating your own future?' The word that came to mind was 'free': free to say 'yes' to what I want to do, free to say 'no' to what I don't, free to choose which colleagues I work with. And free to enjoy early morning swims and lunchtime spin classes – something I never did when I worked full time.

So what is it that I am now free of? I am glad he asked me the question. It focuses my mind on what it is about life in an organisation that I feel was so unhealthy and yet it is regarded as 'normal'. Reading about some organisational cultures I have come across the term 'the toxic environment' whereby a workplace is characterised by high levels of staff absenteeism, bullying and work-related stress. When some clients present with workplace issues such as



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dealing with bullying and conflict, relationship issues or appraisals that are used as a form of punishment, I am mindful of the shadow side to organisations that can hold such misery. Similar issues punctuated my own professional life and it was my journey through these minefields that initially led me into counselling and ultimately onto counselling training. But I also feel free of something that I now regard as being so pernicious. It is the hierarchy of a system that attempts to stifle and contain the truth of who we are, and what we can be.

One of my bibles for thinking about the work I now do in organisations as a trainer is Nancy Kline's *Time to think*¹. In it she sets out her principles for creating a thinking environment, and central to an environment that encourages people to think is the quality of the listening on offer. 'Listening this way is a radical act' because what it communicates to others is 'you matter'. It is remarkable in its simplicity in which every person has their turn to speak, is not interrupted and is respected for having their viewpoint. As useful in family life as it is in the boardroom or the training environment, it respects the quality of people's thinking regardless of where they are in the hierarchy.

I know this is not news but so much of what goes on in the world of work appears to be based not on cooperation but on competition. Tim Campbell, winner of the BBC's first series of *The Apprentice*, summed this up when he challenged why the producers of the show, colleagues and Sir Alan Sugar assume that work/business has to be a 'dog eat dog world'. In a short film, on the utterly addictive and thought-provoking website www.Monday9am.tv.com, he questions some universally accepted truths about how the workplace should operate. Not the bookies favourite to win the show as Campbell was deemed 'too nice', he posits his view that what works for him is a more cooperative style of leadership which does not require stepping on anyone and which allows individuals to grow and collaborate. The film asks whether Campbell's approach might not be the face of a new generation of enterprise. If so, might such an enterprise be capable of being both successful and an inspiring place to be?

Thinking about the course content for the workshops, I have reflected on my clients' struggles within their working lives and on my own experience of testing times within the BBC. I recognise that often the greatest source of stress and anxiety is sometimes not the work itself, but the relationships within which the work takes place.

Managing relationships and managing conflict are key issues within the world of work but these phrases are so well-worn that in order to find out how to communicate it I have to question what they really

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mean. My need is to return to some fundamentals about who we are, how we experience ourselves in relation to others and about how we find our personal power.

Within a day of the bullying and harassment promotional material being emailed around the county council, the training was fully booked. And there is now a waiting list, which perhaps shows the appetite employees have for help and support with this aspect of their working life. I now have training dates pencilled in my diary taking me into 2007. My client work in the occupational health unit at the council continues to be enriching and my brain is starting to engage with thoughts of setting up my own private practice. A friend told me that the people he knew that were doing what he regards as the most interesting things workwise are only doing it today because of the journey that brought them to that place: five years ago what they were doing did not exist. My journey of thinking, generating, creating and working is rewarding. I keep trusting that I can do this – and it is working.

Whenever I have doubts, and I do, I remind myself of the words my counsellor once drew my attention to. It captures my sense of freedom and journey away from aspects of organisational life that I feel did inhibit, limit and define my sense of who I was. Often attributed to Nelson Mandela, are the words of the American author and lecturer Marianne Williamson who writes so eloquently on personal power: 'Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness, that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous? Actually, who are you not to be?'

Hear, hear. ■

Reference

1 Kline N. *Time to think. Listening to ignite the human mind*. Ward Lock; 2004.