

A year in the life of a newly trained counsellor

Nicola Banning completes her first year

There is nothing like new year to evoke a bit of introspection. Like many of my clients at this time, I am reflecting on what 2006 meant for me. A year ago, when I started this series, I had just completed three years' counselling training, I was planning to take redundancy from the BBC, and as a newly trained counsellor, I felt like a small fish in a large pond with no paid work on the horizon.

A review in the counselling relationship can be so useful for client and counsellor. It allows the space to reflect on where you have been, where you are now and where you are going. So one year on, as I have my own review, there is much to celebrate. Now I work two days a week as a counsellor in an occupational health unit for a local authority, have developed successful training partnerships with two colleagues and am employed regularly as a trainer on work-related issues such as managing stress and countering bullying for managers in the workplace. I wrote 10 freelance articles, turned down some offers of work and attended my diploma awards ceremony which made a neat end to the year. That makes it sound as though it has all been rather easy. So was it?

I am aware of my British compulsion towards modesty in most things, so learning to celebrate my achievements as I did in counselling training helps me to wince rather less as I write this. But there has been an ease about my journey through this last year. Clarity has come easily to me. I knew I wanted more autonomy and freedom to create work in areas that are meaningful to me as a counsellor, trainer and writer. The feeling of being institutionalised, office politics and feeling like a wage slave are now distant memories.

To start the new year, BBC Radio 4 ran a series on books that change your life. I heard the psychologist Dorothy Rowe, author of *The successful self*, talking about how we create structures of meaning. She challenges us to think about the often-asked question 'why me?', and urges us instead to question our structure of meaning constructed in childhood. As adults, the world is available to us and we can

create our own meaning; Rowe proposes that we could choose instead to ask ourselves 'why not?' In the last year, asking myself the 'why not?' question has been key to seizing some opportunities, creating others and holding my nerve as I navigate some uncharted territories.

My greatest professional challenge has been developing my knowledge and experience as a workplace counsellor and applying that to the training environment. Now as a trainer and facilitator on workplace issues, I am learning what it means to hold a group, the truth of the statement 'every group is different' and the power of the facilitator to hold, heal and potentially to hurt. It is a balancing act and one that, having had the experience, I prefer not to be doing single-handedly. What helps is trusting in the value of offering core conditions to the group, using my reflective skills and collaborating with my training colleagues, knowing that we will support one another. We too are learning about how to work together, what works well, what could be better and how to share the experience as trainers.

Facilitating offers me some kind of space that feels 'natural'. I am both a part of the group, and yet outside it – it is a space I have occupied for years, largely unconsciously, and which only became apparent to me during my counselling training because of the experiential learning that comes with the group process.

For some staff, the training environment (along with the counselling room) may be one of the few places in the organisation where difficult issues can be heard and validated without fear of recrimination. The local authority culture is highly political, where much organisational change, budget constraints, increased accountability and growing demands on staff are the bread and butter of daily working life. Within that culture, providing a safe and reflective training space that acknowledges complex issues such as countering bullying and harassment, and managing work-related stress in highly pressured departments, has enormous value. The evaluation sheets testify to this and the feedback unanimously reflects the very real need staff have to pause and reflect, be heard and gain some input as part of their professional development as managers.

Working downstream in my client work and upstream with managers looking to improve workplace health, I am part of the feedback loop. Developing healthy working relationships with managers who commission the training has become integral. Encouraged by their commitment to look at additional ways of supporting staff, as well as by my growing knowledge of the organisational needs, we are now discussing further training workshops and looking at how facilitation might benefit some teams that



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have experienced conflict, for example in the aftermath of workplace bullying. Education and training always costs an organisation but, we all agree, the cost of ignorance is far greater.

One highlight for me came during a session on managing conflict at work for a workshop on managing stress aimed to help managers recognise stress and reduce staff sickness. Mindful that the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) identifies seven key categories that contribute to work-related stress, I reflected on my working life at the BBC and two periods of intense stress that led to my own stress and absence from work. Looking at the HSE's categories of Culture, Demands, Control, Relationships, Change, Role and Individual Factors, it became blindingly obvious to me that what both periods of work-related stress shared above all else were poor working relationships, conflict and a breakdown in communication. Thinking about the clients I see experiencing work-related stress, I am struck by how often the source of stress and anxiety is rooted in conflict in relationships.

All too often, where there is conflict in an organisation involving powerful emotions it may be easier to ignore it, or 'brush it under the carpet' – because dealing with conflict openly may be regarded as too dangerous, difficult or time consuming.

This has left me wondering about our models for dealing with conflict in life from childhood onwards. If the average child in the western world finishes their schooling having witnessed over 18,000 murders and 100,000 acts of violence on television¹ and as a nation we have been fighting a war for over three years, where do we learn another way of dealing with conflict that does not resort to bullying, fighting or killing? For me, it was counselling training and the experiential process of being part of a group, the processing of hurts, angers and resentments, that helped me to be alongside conflict and manage it. By that time I was in my late 30s.

Using my experience appropriately in my training work helps me make sense of former struggles, which in a new context has an educative value and meaning, as well as connecting me with the group. Working on reframing conflict as a normal and natural part of life in the workplace, where diverse groups of people bring with them their different values, wants, needs and expectations, is

important. I encouraged the group to explore their own responses to conflict situations and looked at scenarios where conflict became covert and went underground, and the consequences of this. At the end of the workshop, one trainee commented that he could now see that managing stress was not 'some fuzzy grey abstract thing' but that most of the stress experienced in his team was in fact rooted in conflict and relationships. He became aware that if he could manage conflict better, he could manage stress better. Moments like this are the best.

Combining my roles as both counsellor and trainer is mutually beneficial, as my client work informs my training work, and the training work informs my client work; in the process my understanding of the local authority as an organisation both deepens and broadens. Looking ahead to 2007, I continue to work towards accreditation, develop more training work with colleagues, build working relationships with organisations and work towards establishing my own private practice – ideally within walking distance of home.

A recent investment in a one-to-one coaching session on setting up my private practice was money well spent. I haven't done it yet but I now know what I need to do. My coach recommended the essential companion to this journey, *Twelve months to your ideal private practice*, which does exactly what it says on the tin. She asked me how many clients I envisaged seeing a week initially in my private practice. Five felt about right for starters. So I was told that if I wanted five clients a week I had to invest five hours a week into generating those five clients. I love the simplicity of this equation. Attending networking events, lunches, developing contacts, researching rooms, clients, EAPs and organisations all count as part of my weekly five hours of investment.

I reflect, not for the first time, that it is no accident that I end up as a workplace counsellor working with organisations on workplace issues; having written two dissertations over the last 10 years on gender, identity, work and culture, I have long held an interest in this arena. In a quote in *The artist's way*² series, Katherine Whilehaen writes with wisdom on life, our talents and work: 'The best advice to give the young is, find out what you like best and get someone to pay you for doing it.' Young is a relative term and, as I'm approaching 40, I'm not sure I qualify – but I am being paid and I am doing what I enjoy best. ■

References

- 1 Johnstone C. Find your power. London: Nicholas Brealey Publishing; 2006.
- 2 Cameron J. Walking in this world. New York: Tarcher; 2003.