CHOOSING A HELPING STRATEGY

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CHOOSING A HELPING STRATEGY (1)
The first of two articles on this subject by Julie Hay. Sequel in our next issue.

The term ‘counselling’ as used in organisations covers a multitude of sins as well as some virtues – being applied to describe events as varied as disciplinaries, performance appraisal, welfare-type assistance and, sometimes, even counselling itself! In training managers I have found it helps to clarify the distinctions between counselling, non-directive counselling, and counselling skills. In my view, organisational constraints tend to restrict managers to the exercise of counselling skills, albeit in a wide variety of settings.

A combination of frameworks helps to show why this distinction is so important. It also provides managers with some guidelines for selecting helping strategies that match the individual, the problem and the situation. Their awareness of their own value systems and those of the organisation is also increased.

The first framework is a simple continuum of helping strategies, placed in order of the amount of effort and initiative applied to problem resolution by the manager, and hence, implicitly, by the subordinate.

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<th>Manager takes action</th>
<th>Manager does nothing</th>
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<td>At one extreme, the manager may decide that the problem is outside the scope of the subordinate and should rightly be tackled by the manager. For example, an inexperienced receptionist may need practical assistance when faced with an abusive customer; &quot;doing her best&quot; when she lacks knowledge and skills may not be an answer.</td>
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<td>At the other end of the continuum is a reminder that people often can and do solve their own problems without intervention from others. Watching from a distance while a more experienced receptionist handles a similar situation with tact and confidence may be more effective than succumbing to the temptation to take the problem over.</td>
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Between the extremes may be listed several options, including:
- Changing the system
- Encouraging
- Telling them what to do
- Empathising
- Teaching
- Listening
- Giving advice
- Using counselling skills
- Giving information
- Non-directive counselling
- Coaching

To illustrate selection from the continuum of appropriate helping strategies, consider the example of an employee who asks for help in writing reports.

Initial approaches by the manager might sensibly include instruction on the corporate requirements for content and layout or teaching of the rudiments of report writing. Later, advice may be mingled with a bit of coaching. As proficiency increases, the strategy changes to one of encouragement – maybe followed by empathising when the proposals in the report are criticised by the recipient.

By this stage, report writing has become a task rather than a problem.

So what determines the choice of helping strategy? Each party will have a perspective which colours their expectations; an amalgam that will include:
- Their perceived roles
- Their styles of transacting
- Their opinions of their own and others' abilities
- The "baggage" they carry with in their heads or hearts.
CHOOSING A HELPING STRATEGY (2)

by Julie Hay

In her first article on this subject, Julie Hay identified the range of strategies available to a Manager who wishes to help a subordinate. She put all-managerial action at one end of the range and all-subordinate action at the other. Then she began to consider the factors which influence a choice between these strategies.

In an “ideal” world of non-directive counselling, Manager and subordinate will share the same perceptions; these will include a belief that the Client (subordinate) seeks to solve his or her own problem, and that the agent (Manager) is there to facilitate this process. However, when both work within an organisation, that organisation places constraints on them. Both have contracts with the organisation:

Explicitly – an employment contract that defines their reward from the organisation in return for doing their allocated job in accordance with defined organisational requirements.

Implicitly – reflected in the organisational culture, the management style, the company policies.

In his article “The Three-cornered Contract” (Transactional Analysis Journal, 1975, 5), English suggests that we need to consider another side to the contract. The subordinate has a contract with the organisation; so does the Manager; and there will exist another between Manager and subordinate – which may be heavily influenced by the other sides of the triangle:—

Add to this the organisational pressures on utilisation of staff resources, beliefs about “proper” boss/subordinate relationships, concerns about job prospects and making mistakes...and it becomes surprising that some Managers still choose to operate towards the right-hand end of the continuum.

Awareness of this model makes it clearer to Managers that a choice of helping strategy is called for. A conscious decision becomes possible, with strategies involving reduced managerial action being seen as more appropriate when:

- Managers are dealing with personal or domestic problems rather than work-competence difficulties.
- They want their subordinates to develop problem-solving abilities of their own.
- They recognise the longer-term disadvantages of overly-dependent subordinates.
- They are working within an organisation which includes staff development amongst the criteria for assessing managerial performance.