

BACK TO BASICS: THE COUNSELLOR-COACH

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Abstract

This article portrays the counsellor as a life-skills coach who is able to assess human needs and to provide both developmental and remedial instruction in critical areas. Three salient fields for teaching basics are identified and six arenas in which the counsellor-coach may work are suggested. Counsellors are advised to ethically advertise their service and are urged to attend to their own personal development.

Résumé

Cet article le dépeint le conseiller comme un entraîneur dans les compétences de la vie, une personne capable de mesurer les besoins humains et de fournir un enseignement qui vise à la fois le développement et le rattrapage dans des domaines importants. On identifie trois domaines clés où on pourrait offrir un enseignement de base. On identifie six secteurs dans lesquels un conseiller-entraîneur pourrait évoluer. On suggère aux conseillers de faire connaître leurs services tout en suivant les codes d'éthique. Enfin, on leur rappelle de veiller de près à leur propre développement personnel.

CASE I

My wife and I had just separated; for the first time I had my own apartment. The prospects excited me, but the glow of swinging bachelorhood began to fade as each day became increasingly more difficult. My sleep was sound, but as I lie in bed contemplating the day ahead I became frightened, confused, cold, and depressed. I wondered what I should do. Was 26 years of joyful living soured by the stress of separation and the vision of divorce? Was therapy my only way out?

CASE II

Teaching this class had usually energized me, but this day the ideas and interactions left me down. I walked, hoping that fresh air and exercise would turn things around. It did not, so I wondered what it all meant. How was I going to make it through my next class? When would the spark of life return? I did not feel like doing anything and did not want to live under these conditions.

As a counsellor, what do you think, feel, and do when a client confronts you with these issues? As a private individual, what do you think, feel, and do when you experience such things. Before you read on, please take a few minutes for reflection.

For Cases I and II, I solved my problems by getting back to basics. Before accepting the hypothesis that my life was crumbling under the stress of separation, I decided to test a simple alternate hypothesis: my distress was caused by

my physical coldness. I experimented by closing my bedroom window before I went to sleep. Miraculously, my problem vanished. Case II was solved when I remembered that I had not eaten for ten hours. Failure to attend to the basics of body heat and nutrition because of poor planning had precipitated my psychological problems. But, these problems were solved when attention was given to the underlying basics.

BACK TO BASICS

In the world of sports, a team often excels by virtue of the competence of its members in the basic skills required for the game. Slumps in performance are overcome when the coach notes flaws in basic skills and then provides corrective instruction. Since living life is the most sophisticated sport of all, the counsellor must be a sophisticated coach. When problems in living occur, the wise counsellor-coach will search for flaws and provide corrective instruction in three fundamental areas: physiological maintenance, planning and decision making, and interpersonal communication. Attending to the developmental as well as to the remedial aspects of their role, wise counsellor-coaches will also provide and advertise services that help individuals and groups to increase their knowledge and level of functioning in these three areas.

After discussing the principal fields in which counsellors teach basics, I will share some of my ideas about reaching a greater number of clients. The following discussion is not exhaustive, but

hopefully will stimulate further thought and exploration.

PHYSIOLOGICAL MAINTENANCE

All biological, social, and technological systems play a role in the ecology of existence and all must be maintained if they are to perform their functions effectively. People maintain healthy bodies by devoting energy to eating, breathing, relaxing, sleeping, exercising, and preserving body temperature. Unfortunately, many people neglect their physical maintenance and the result is a progressive diminution in their effectiveness in social, vocational, and avocational pursuits.

It is widely accepted that a large portion of physical ailments are caused or exacerbated by psychological processes. There is also increasing recognition that many social and psychological problems are related to physiology. Counsellors would be wise to give more attention to this topic and to increase their knowledge of the relationships between the biological and the psychological.

PLANNING AND DECISION MAKING

Planning and decision making skills are highly developed, clearly valued, and consistently applied in such projects as putting a rocket on the moon. Yet, these same skills are virtually ignored in the design of satisfying individual life-styles. Because many people have never had the opportunity to develop these skills, because their application requires time and effort, and because the plans and decisions of others are occasionally forced upon us, the skills of planning and decision making are often viewed as tools for construction rather than liberation.

Lacking skills in planning and decision making and having an aversion to developing and using such skills to manage their own lives, individuals are left with two choices:

1. they may reflexively submit to the pressures of parents, peers, and social norms: or
2. they may rebel against these pressures with "spontaneous abandon", mistakenly believing they are "doing their own thing". Ironically, in both cases, the person is still under the control of plans and decisions which have nothing to do with his or her unique combination of genes, skills, interests, fears, and hopes. In both cases the individual is truly constricted.

Script and life style analyses are merely attempts to clarify one's minimally conscious life plans and decisions. Such clarification, hopefully, permits the individual to construct more current and effective life plans, thus gaining greater control over life. Much of the alienation, unhappiness, and boredom, even among those who by traditional standards are successful, is the result of following life plans that are not of one's

own design and largely not in accord with one's own essence.

The skills of planning and decision making and an appreciation for their liberating possibilities are basic to successful living. Counsellors are in an excellent position to facilitate their development. Progress in this area is made when counsellors help people to develop effective study habits, plan their careers, or set their priorities. Unfortunately, many counsellors have an aversion to detailed planning and decision making and many lack sophistication with these skills. Many also seem to have a well established prejudice against that form of counselling which most emphasizes detailed planning and decision making — behavioral counselling. The bias and emphasis of many counsellors has been on feelings and self-awareness, but effective living also calls for the well planned use of time and effort. Counsellors do themselves and their clients a disservice when they rationalize their aversion to careful planning and decision making and when they fail to hone their skills in this regard.

A rough diamond is brought to fuller beauty through the skill of the cutter who has carefully studied the diamond and planned how it will be cut. A person is a far more precious and complicated entity that can have its many facets brought to brilliance through wise planning and decision making. When people take responsibility for their lives, they become the sculptors of their existence. Each day can be shaped into satisfying brilliance or dulled into another passage of clouded opportunity. In many cases the difference may be no more than failing to utilize effective planning and decision making skills. The faulty rocket, the dull diamond, and the depressed individual may all be less than adequate because of poor planning and decision making. The wise counsellor-coach, therefore, will develop and enthusiastically teach an appreciation for the sophisticated use of these skills.

INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION

Good communicators are aware of their wants and needs, able to transmit them accurately and assertively, and capable of understanding the messages of others regarding their wants and their needs. Client-centered counselling, Gestalt therapy, Rational Emotive Therapy, Transactional Analysis, Adlerian Counselling, Reality Therapy and Behavioral Counselling are widely used modalities geared towards helping people become more aware of their wants, needs, internal dialogues, life scripts, and effective strategies for relating to self and others. From these counselling systems, the counsellor-coach can readily design a communications curriculum that can be taught to clients in individual and group sessions. Of the three major areas for teaching basics, it is in this

area that counsellors seemingly feel more comfortable and are generally doing their most effective work. Much more, however, could be done.

The counsellor-coach who sees himself or herself as a teacher of basics will understand that these three salient fields of instruction are interdependent. The neglect of one area may lead to deficits in others. Moreover, improvement in one area can have enhancing effects on the others. The effective counsellor-coach must be able to assess current levels of client functioning in each of these areas and must also be able to provide strategies for bringing about change. We need less emphasis on the magic of rapport and more on disciplined effort. We also need to do our coaching (i.e., the teaching of basics) in several arenas.

ARENAS FOR TEACHING THE BASICS

The individual counselling relationship is not the only arena in which the counsellor can provide instruction in the basics. Unfortunately, many counsellors limit themselves to this arena because they view themselves as *professionals* who do counselling rather than *people* who assist others to effectively handle life's developmental tasks. Individual counselling is indeed an important arena for teaching basics. At its best, it can be a challenging tutorial. But even at its best it is an expensive proposition which sometimes must be reserved for remedial work. Workshops, organizational development programs, media presentations, and regular and continuing education courses are arenas for teaching the basics in which larger audiences can receive coaching that is preventative and developmental as well as remedial.

The writer suggests that counsellors conduct a morphological analysis of the possibilities for teaching the basics. Such an analysis will assure that they miss no opportunity to provide cost-effective life coaching. Figure 1 presents a three dimensional model which serves as a "net" to capture and draw to our attention the many opportunities available to us. The first dimension comprises the instructional fields of major relevance to the counsellor: physical maintenance, planning and decision making, and interpersonal communication. The second dimension contains the arenas in which counsellors can do their coaching. These arenas include individual counselling, group counselling, family counselling, courses and workshops, organizational development programs, and media presentations. A third dimension, the focus of the counsellors efforts, has two levels: the developmental/preventive and the remedial. Each of the 36 cells of the model represents a unique intersection of a field of instruction, an arena in which counsellor-coaching can occur, and a focus for teaching the

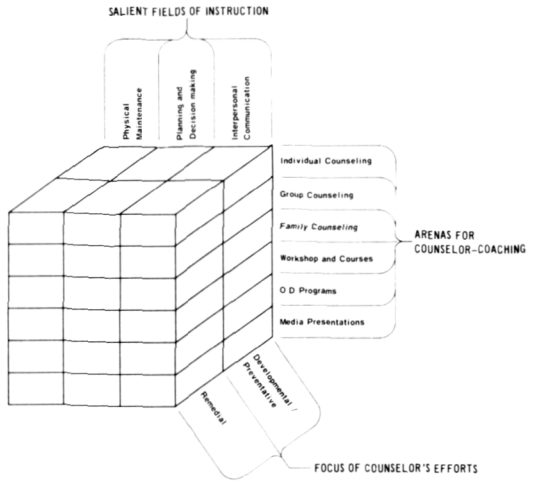


Figure 1 Model for Analyzing Opportunities to Teach Basics

basics. Figure 1 is presented for its heuristic value. Counsellors who wish to emphasize other fields of instruction or who find other arenas for their work are encouraged to develop their own models.

ADVERTISING FOR CLIENTS

Advertising is necessary to increase the probability that we will attract a wide range of people to our instructional programs. Before rejecting this notion on ethical grounds we should re-examine the possibility that there is nothing inherently wrong with advertising. We advertise to inform people of a service or product in hope that they will use it. The ethical problem arises when we use advertisements to mislead the public: to promote a product or service that is not needed or does not perform as indicated. The Salk and Sabin polio vaccines were effective and needed. Not to have advertised them would be unethical. If we believe our counselling services are effective and needed then it is unethical not to advertise. We must advertise to reach and stimulate people who normally might not avail themselves of our work.

If we get back to basics and see ourselves as counsellor-coaches who assess human needs and provide relevant instruction, then we need not shy away from advertising. We will have a service to provide that is both needed and effective. By perceiving and advertising ourselves as counsellor-coaches or teachers of basic life skills (the life skills pro), rather than continuing to portray ourselves as "psychotherapists", we might lower the attitudinal barriers that now inhibit people from seeking help from mental health specialists ("those skinks"). Seemingly, fewer people have "hangups" about getting instruction from the pros in swimming, skiing, tennis, or hockey than in getting help from counsellors, psychologists, and

psychiatrists. Less emphasis on professional posturing and more attention to basics should result in more satisfied clients and also in greater satisfaction for the counsellor-coach than any prestigious title could bring.

CONCLUSION: THE ULTIMATE BASIC IS YOU

Attention to basics, the ethical use of advertising, and competent work in the domains represented in Figure 1 will increase the effectiveness of a large number of people. However, our effectiveness is also dependent upon our own level of functioning: the extent to which our life serves as a model of careful attention to physical

maintenance, planning and decision making, and effective interpersonal communication. Hypocrisy is a deterrent to effective teaching and learning; concurrence of words with actions is a facilitator. To be optimally effective as a counsellor-coach we must value ourselves and make time for the basics in our own lives. We are as important as any of the people we strive to help. Sacrificing our health on the noble altar of social interest is a disservice to others as well as to ourselves. The writer believes that we best encourage others to care for themselves when we demonstrate that we rationally and responsibly care for ourselves. A LIVE model of effective living is worth at least a thousand words.