

Gower

# COUNSELLING for MANAGERS



Nigel  
MacLennan

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# PREFACE

The objectives of *Counselling for Managers* are:

- to make counselling both accessible and appealing as a performance enhancement/management tool
- to bring out the natural counselling abilities you already possess
- to give you confidence in your existing counselling abilities
- to show how easy counselling is
- to demystify counselling
- to expose the self-serving myths and propaganda of the counselling community
- to make you aware of the controversial issues normally smoothed over
- to make you aware of the realities of counselling – warts and all
- to provoke thought about, and analysis of, counselling issues
- to make the realization of your mastery of counselling as enjoyable as possible.

## Who is the book for?

Anyone who is serious about helping their staff to perform at the highest possible level. All those who are prepared to invest a little time and effort to learn how to protect their most valuable asset: their people. Your intellectual resources (people), like any other resource, have problems. You already have cost-effective methods of rectifying problems with your other resources – for example, you don't throw out a machine that merely needs some rapid and low-cost, non-specialist maintenance. This book is for those who can see that counselling is the rapid, low-cost, non-specialist way of supporting and maintaining your intellectual resources.

## What is it designed to do?

*Counselling for Managers* will enable the enthusiastic reader to attain all-round counselling competence in the workplace. It will introduce the commercially relevant Skills Training Model (STM) for counselling. It will give you eight guiding principles to which you can refer to make any counselling decisions. But, first, it will demonstrate that counselling is not the sophisticated science that its advocates claim it to be. You will see counselling in the flesh, stripped of all pretension and mythology.

The book is designed to be read as a companion to my previous book *Coaching and Mentoring*, also published by Gower. Collectively the two books form a complete work on performance management. As such, there will be only brief repetition here of material which spans both subject areas. For instance 'stress' is a significant field of study which you might expect to find covered in-depth in a book on counselling, but it has already received such treatment in *Coaching and Mentoring*. There are cross-references to the earlier book where appropriate.

## What are its limitations?

This is not a book which aims to create experts in counselling for any one problem area; it will not give you enough information to claim expertise in, say, drug counselling at work or redundancy counselling. But it will equip you with more than enough general counselling expertise in the workplace to handle most people problems more effectively than before.

## How to use the book

The text comprises four main sections. Part I gives you an introduction to when and how counselling can be a useful tool to the manager at work. It goes on to explore many of the myths and propaganda you may have heard about counselling – particularly those designed to make you doubt whether you, as a manager, are 'qualified' to counsel.

Parts II and III concentrate on counselling skills. Part II starts by looking at the counselling skills you already have and Part III goes on to show you how you can harness those in a more structured way. These two parts comprise the main body of the book and are designed to help you develop your abilities to use the simple, yet powerful, methods and techniques provided.

Part IV contains suggestions for handling specific problems: problems which require counselling; your problems, as a counsellor, with the counselling process and with the people you are trying to counsel. It also examines ways of handling many of the ethical and organizational issues you will and do face.

Those of you who have read my previous works will know what to expect in terms of the format and method of presentation. For the benefit of new readers, I will reiterate that I use the principles of effective education. To wit, the text is made accessible and more memorable with short paragraphs, numerous summarizing headings, easy flowing language, no jargon, cartoons, (attempts at) humour, interactive exercises and occasional summaries. In fact I have deliberately tried to do everything that academics try to avoid because they 'detract from the gravity of the message' in order to make your learning experience more enjoyable and effective.

At key points throughout the book you will find developmental exercises. Some are given their own heading; others are embedded in the text. Completing the exercises will help you become a more effective counsellor.

If you are entirely confident that you can quickly learn to counsel, you do not need to read Chapter 2. If you have reservations about whether you are capable of being an effective counsellor you definitely *should* read Chapter 2 – it will open your eyes. If you wish to plunge straight into the 'how to' of counselling, start reading from halfway through Chapter 3. If your first priority is a good theoretical understanding start by reading Chapter 6. Most importantly, to get the best out of the book, *do the exercises*.

Enjoy becoming a more competent counsellor than you already are.

Nigel MacLennan

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS AND DEDICATIONS

To you, the reader of this book, the manager seeking to improve your skills to make yourself a better leader, without your noble intentions this book would not exist. To the world's best business leaders who have, over their years of service, developed such advanced counselling skills (without even knowing it) that they will never need to read this book, you inspire confidence in us all. To all the professionals everywhere whose self-taught counselling skills have made, and continue to make, the world a better place: although your skills are unrecognized and unrewarded by most, some of us know the value of your work and thank you.

To the governments all over the world whose wisdom blocks the efforts of the vested interests to regulate who provides counselling: as individuals, you counsel your families, your friends, your colleagues; you know how important your knowledge of, and interest in, those people is to your ability to counsel; you know how much good you do by counselling and you know what folly it would be to prevent yourself and others from doing the good you and they do. Long may your wisdom prevail.

To all the thinkers in this field, some of whom have taught me how to, others how not to, thank you. To all thinkers past, present and future whose ideas have been or will be superseded, thank you also: without your ideas to build on, progress can never be possible. To those who will go beyond my ideas, thank you for using them as your springboard.

To all the clients whose successful outcomes inspired and enthused me, thank you. To the clients whom I failed to help, you developed my thinking without even knowing it, and I thank you. To the many staff, clients, friends and acquaintances with whom I have had long hours of discussions about counselling, psychotherapy, coaching and training, thank you for your insights and criticisms.

Once again to all the staff at Gower, particularly Malcolm Stern and Solveig Servian, who take wonderful care of my literary babies, thank you. To

David Newton – a real professional – for yet again doing such a splendid job of turning my cartoons into something worthy of that description, thank you. To Sarah Allen for yet again editing the first draft of this manuscript and for supporting my crude efforts with such patience.

Again to my mother, Patricia MacLennan, for the long years of help and care, for the hundreds of positive attitudes and beliefs you taught, for the empowering example you set then and continue to set now, thanks. Somehow, thanks does not seem enough for the thousands of acts of good so unselfishly provided or sufficient for the encouragement provided, by example, in showing that a young widow, with two children, can be a successful businessperson against all the odds, including pervasive sexism.

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# **Part I**

## **The context**

**You have probably heard much about counselling from the media, from friends and colleagues and others. You may have a counsellor in your company. You may have used counselling yourself. But few people outside the counselling profession know how easy it is to be an effective counsellor and in how many different situations counselling can be a useful performance management tool. Part I of this book is designed to give you that inside information.**



# 1

## INTRODUCTION

At various stages in this book we will look at the failings in counselling. The purpose of doing so is to demonstrate that counselling is not the sophisticated science that its advocates claim. If I can show you the realities of counselling you will lose any sense of foreboding or awe of the subject. If I can debunk some of the commonly held myths that previously stopped or discouraged you from counselling you will embrace counselling with the level of confidence which is essential to obtain results (See the section on placebo management, p. 54, for more on confidence as an influencer of outcome.)

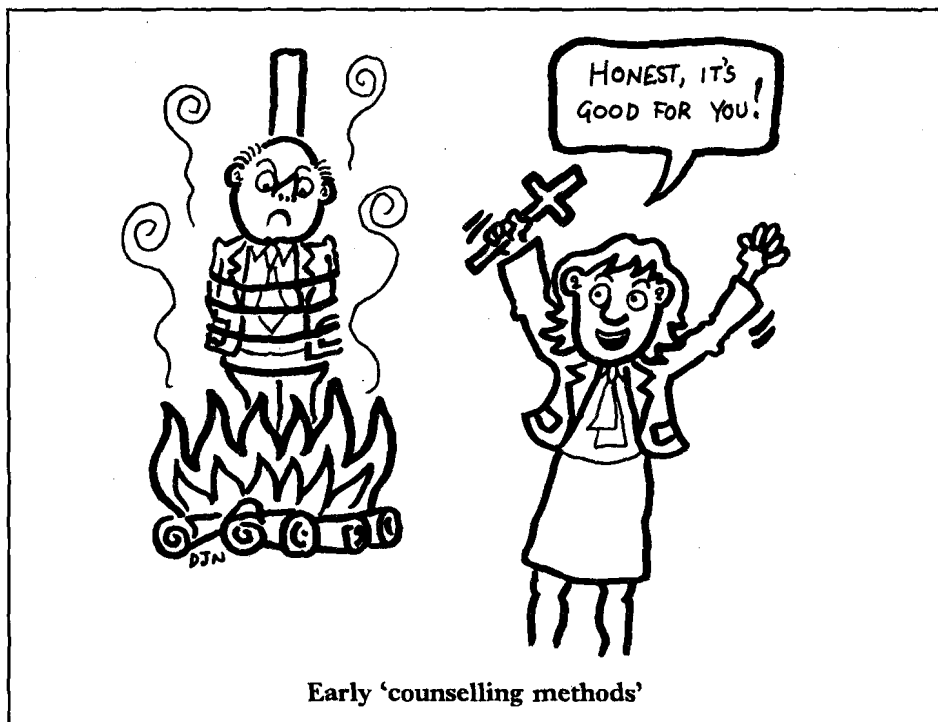
### What is counselling?

#### A brief history

Counselling and therapy for people in distress has the most dismal history. Throughout the ages, people with emotional or personal problems have been treated in the most appalling ways. In the Middle Ages, when the world was run by the *religiosi*, 'evil spirits' were thought to be at the root of all problems. The 'cures' ranged from exorcism to execution, all of which were done in the best (?) interests of the victim so that their soul might be 'freed from evil'.

A little later, 'loose morals' came to be perceived as the cause of all emotional or personal problems, particularly for women. The general attitude was that, if someone's standards fell below what was acceptable and 'they fell from grace', they should be locked up to protect them from themselves (well, from us actually). There are still people in mental institutions today whose only 'problem' was to show an interest in sex at an age when today's youth would be regarded as very late developers.

We only started to take a more civilized stance in this century – more civilized but no more rational. We have witnessed a range of entertaining



nonsense masquerading as scientific theory. Freud was a master entertainer, proving his credentials with an amusing little ditty about bad toilet training, penis envy, castration complexes and repressed emotions being the cause of all anguish. The (?) 'obvious cure' was to lie on a couch looking at a ceiling while some 'expert' 'ummed' and 'ahed' in the background for three or four hours a week for several years.

Others followed the series with some interesting fairy stories which included a variety of exciting episodes ranging from 'family communication' being the source of all problems through to the truly memory-jolting episode about electrifying aversion 'therapy'. Then there was the 'right yourself in your own time even if it takes forever' sketch laid on by the client-centred therapy production company – a timeless classic.

Some of the more scientific productions have failed to follow even the fundamental principles of science (always good for an intellectual suicide scene). A particularly powerful trilogy started with the 'attention discrimination theory' which suggested that emotional and other mental health problems were caused by the individual's inability to attend to, or discriminate between, the most relevant variables in the environment. The sequel, 'hemispheric asymmetry theory', was a little production about the two sides of the brain not working well together (relationship conflicts always were a good source of theatrical material). The follow-up to the sequel, 'concept formation theory', was closed and consigned to the psycho-thespian dustbin for the same reasons

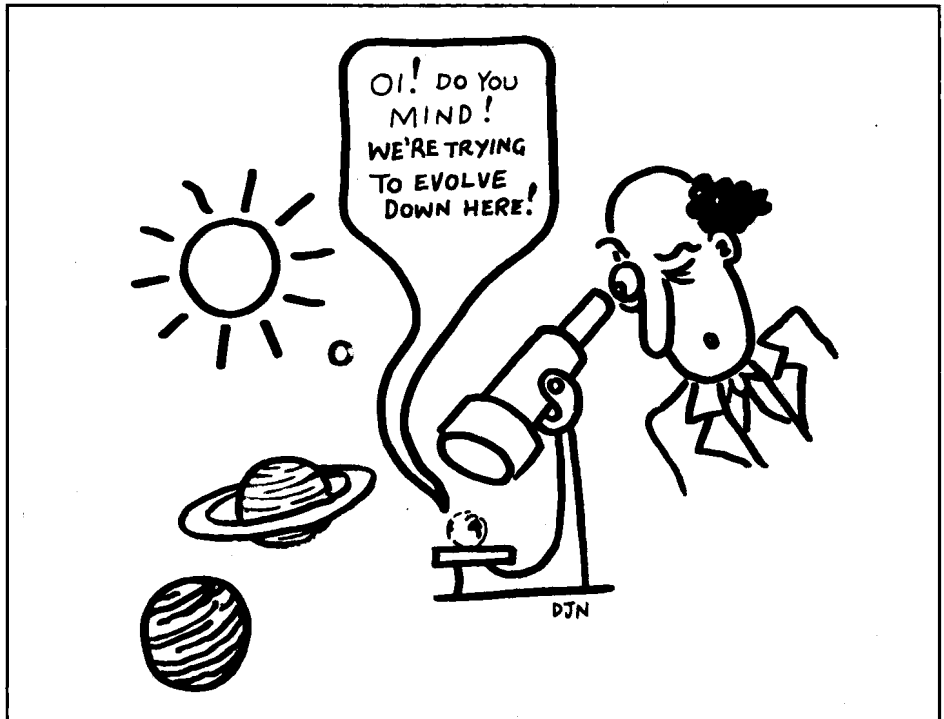
as its two predecessors: it was an observation passing itself off as an explanation. Each element in the trilogy simply described what any theatrical novice could have reported; none offered an analysis of the plot behind the narrative.

But, more seriously, all these theories breach the fundamental principle of science in that observation is passed off as explanation. It's like saying the earth is spherical because the earth is spherical. Or gravity is the attraction of one body to another because gravity is the attraction of one body to another. Any theory of human emotional problems is only useful if it leads to a means of actually helping the client. It is useless if it just offers observation or a description of what is happening. Most do that. Most don't help at all.

You may have been led to believe that all the problems with counselling are in the past. Dream on. As you will see in the next section, even now counselling is a semi-formed art at very best, and at worst a pseudo-science more at home with those trapped in the naive idealism of student life than in the achievement-oriented world of top-class professionals.

### Evolution of thought in counselling

The evolution of counselling thought has paralleled the evolution of thought in Western societies as a whole. We have moved from thinking that people problems were caused by religious factors through a range of explanations to more realistic theories. In living memory we have moved from 'breeding' being the



basis of performance (or lack of it) to learned behaviours conditioned by the environment being the cause of people problems, both of which were explanations mirroring the predominant viewpoint in society at the time. Now that we have moved (societally) on to a model of competence based on skill, it is only natural to expect the emergence of a skill-based model of human problems and performance. We now have just that and will present it later in this book.

## A definition of counselling

Counselling is extremely difficult to define, for reasons that will become clear in the next section. But a definition we must have in order to be sure we are talking about the same thing. So let's try:

Counselling is the creation and maintenance of an environment in which a person can be helped to help themselves to overcome the difficulty that led them to seek assistance, for as long as the person seeking help requires that environment.

The more people there are at work able to provide this self-help environment, the better for all of us. For that reason alone, counselling and psychology must be demystified, defrocked and exposed as being made unnecessarily complicated and deliberately ambiguous by those with vested interests. It must be made usable by one and all. So let's practise what we preach by amplifying and clarifying the above definition:

In practical terms, counselling is the manifestation of knowledge, attitudes, skills and behaviours which are aimed at helping people to manage/solve their own problems, ideally by encouraging them to harness their own means.

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### EXERCISE

*Now devise your own definition of counselling. Once now and then again after you have finished the book. Compare the two and the difference will be a guide to your development progress.*

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## The differences between counselling and conversation

### *Conversational imbalance*

A good conversation is more or less balanced between the two players. Counselling, on the other hand, is highly imbalanced. The person providing counselling is willing to temporarily suspend their needs and desires to help the other person. The client does most of the talking; the counsellor does most of the listening.





The difference in 'balance' between counselling and conversation

### *Not thinking about your responses*

In normal conversation most of us are ready to respond immediately as soon as the other party finishes speaking. Usually we can do so in less than one second. That's remarkably fast and is easy to do if you have been, on some level, formulating your response as the other was talking. In counselling, your response is of little significance compared to the client's need both to express their position and to have you understand so that you can be able to help them. Paradoxically, in many instances all the client needs is the opportunity to share their problem with someone else; no further action is required. Obtaining that understanding is your prime motive. You therefore have little need to come back with a fast and flowing response. In fact you should preferably take a little time to reflect on the client's statements in order to actually understand them. Taking your time shows you are trying to understand, whereas, in a social context, the same behaviour would be interpreted differently. How can you ensure you take some time to respond? How can you ensure that you keep your mind empty of distractions so you can listen effectively when the client is speaking? (See the listening skills section on page 129.)