

From counselling room to training room: stress workshop for managers – the process

Nicola Banning and **Karl Gregory** explain their role as trainers

In 2006, we were working as workplace counsellors within the occupational health unit of a local authority when we were approached by the deputy head of the unit to discuss how the counselling team might offer training sessions to staff on a range of subjects relating to wellbeing, managing stress and health promotion. Responding to the staff surveys and surveys from clients using the counselling service, it had become apparent that training in these areas would be of benefit to staff and the organisation. Having secured a training budget, the occupational health unit set out to offer a range of workshops that would meet the needs of staff and aim to reduce staff sickness.

Forming a partnership as co-trainers

Presenting a workshop in the workplace demands a number of skills and facilitative methods. Gone is the didactic imparting of knowledge which is done unto a group. In its place has arrived 'the complete facilitator'¹. Learning in such workshops is a process in which a group works together with facilitators to develop, enlighten, explore and understand more about a given subject. As trainers in the context of such an emotive subject as work-related stress in today's organisational culture, it is crucial for us to understand our process, the process of the workshop and how we work together.

Developing a new training partnership is a unique kind of relationship. A colleague involved in co-training work described it as an 'odd kind of marriage'. It requires an inherent trust in one another's knowledge and abilities, mutual respect and a willingness to learn and grow together. This was particularly relevant for us as we were reframing our relationship and collaborating as 'co-trainers'.

Before we formed our training partnership, we knew one another as tutor and pupil. Karl ran the Diploma in Counselling in Organisational Settings at the University of Bristol and Nicola was one of 20 students on the two-year diploma course he coordinated. The transition from 'student' to 'co-

trainer', and from 'tutor' to 'co-trainer' has required us to look at the power dynamic in our relationship and the conscious and unconscious processes at play.

For example, while teaching on the counselling diploma course, Karl would often use Powerpoint or overheads to impart information to students. Nicola noticed that when Karl used Powerpoint during the workshops they co-ran, she was reticent to be alongside him in the teaching and the imparting of knowledge to the group. On reflection, she realised that there was an unconscious element that was silencing her, which was possibly some transference from their former relationship as tutor/pupil. Having space to process what is happening between us and in relation to the groups, is important as we develop our working relationship.

As we reframe our previous relationship we also discover that we both bring 'the more than' strength to our workshops, we are more than counsellors/trainers, both having had other working lives: Nicola in broadcasting and communications as a programme maker and Karl as clinical services manager in the NHS. Both of us have considerable first-hand experience of work-related stress and within different organisational settings.

Role of two trainers – breadth and depth

A great strength of our partnership is that we offer the group both a male and female trainer and enable delegates to identify with either one of us, or both. This particular organisation has a higher ratio of women to men employees, and this is borne out in terms of the attendance of male and female delegates on our workshops. With men in a minority, it feels particularly important that there is a male facilitator particularly with a subject like work-related stress, with all the myths of stress being a sign of weakness.

At a practical level, we know we are both capable of presenting the entire two-day workshop single handed. Yet it is our belief and experience that as

co-trainers we offer an infinitely fuller workshop for delegates because we are able to process together what is happening and respond to the emotional needs of the group.

While one facilitator is speaking the other is observing the group process which is valuable when exploring attitudes, understandings and developing group member skills.

It is reassuring to have space during the day to check out the group processes as well as our own responses. We may need to acknowledge who is triggering us and our self-awareness usually means we know why. Knowing one another so well also helps us know one another's vulnerabilities too. We have come to realise that we complement each other well; Karl leaning more towards an activist style and Nicola more reflective. Nicola can be triggered and silenced by activists (and most workshops have a vocal activist) while Karl can sometimes be eager to move on, losing valuable reflections. We have learnt to keep good eye contact with each other at certain flash points in a workshop to balance this for ourselves but also to help those more reflective delegates take part.

So asking one another questions is important, such as, how are we responding to a particular individual or the group? Who is with us and who might we still need to connect with? Can one of us help the group process by adopting a different role? From this we may re-jig groups to enable a mix of skills, align ourselves with delegates or to give others space to participate or sometimes, adapt our presentation to facilitate further discussion.

Communication between us is key. Having time together before delegates arrive is important, helping us 'arrive' and check-in with each other. We review throughout the day, discuss what is working and what is not in the group and how we can facilitate any difficulties. We also debrief at the end of the day, even if just for 10-15 minutes and process what we need to.

What do we bring as counsellors to the training room?

Delegates notice not just the content of the workshop but how we facilitate it. It has been consistently commented on in their evaluation forms that, as trainers, we bring something unique with us. We believe it is our ability to offer individuals and the group the core conditions and to make psychological contact.

Once, where unbeknown to us 20 delegates were booked on to the course in an administrative error, there were too many people for us to make and maintain psychological contact. It still worked but not with the depth we have had with smaller

groups. A maximum of 12 we have found enables breadth and depth, while providing a safe enough and confidential environment.

Discussing work-related stress inevitably opens up the potential for delegates to get in touch with emotions. It is our intention that delegates learn to talk about their own stresses in order to be able to hear those of their staff.

Admittedly, some managers struggle with this more than others depending on their own levels of self-awareness and comfort with expressing emotional issues. Occasionally we have had a delegate break down in tears as being listened to can bring forward powerful or suppressed emotions. We acknowledge this as a reality of talking about work-related stress, responding accordingly with respect and unconditional positive regard.

Providing safety for individuals and the group is critical and we draw on our experience as counsellors to look at boundaries and ground rules for working together as a group, and encourage the delegates to think about their self-care during the two days.

It is usual for the delegates' feedback to reflect

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their appreciation of the safety within the group that allows them to be honest and open about their experience and so get the most from the workshop. Often the workshops will raise self-awareness and insight in ways that can be moving for us to observe. Our aim is for the delegates to feel as comfortable as they can while processing what might often feel extremely uncomfortable.

Bringing our own experience of work/organisations to the workshop

Both of us also bring other experience to the training partnership. Nicola came into the partnership aware of her strengths in a facilitative role but seeking to gain experience as a teacher. She actively sought to facilitate aspects of the workshop to take ‘ownership’ of this, such as teaching a section on conflict in relationships as a source of work-related stress, which had particular resonance for her. Interest in this aspect of organisational life had come from her own personal experience of work-related stress where it was rooted in unresolved and unmanaged conflict.

In the counselling room we have found that conflict within working relationships is one of the biggest motivations for clients seeking counselling. We bring this knowledge into the training room as well as using appropriate self-disclosure to illustrate to delegates the value of paying attention to conflicts in their teams and in their relationships.

With Nicola taking independent ownership of this subject, researching, writing and thinking about how to teach the material, it has highlighted to us both the value of our uniquely different styles and approaches. There are few managers who are untouched by managing complex conflicts in their teams, and Nicola’s style has helped some managers in reflecting, thinking and relating this to their experiences.

One particularly experienced manager commented at the end of this session that he could now see that managing stress was not ‘some fuzzy grey abstract thing’ but most of the stress experienced in his team was in fact rooted in conflict in relationships. He became aware that if he could manage conflict

better, he could manage stress better. This kind of feedback is so valuable and affirms the value of our particular experience as both counsellors and trainers.

Supervision

We chose to use supervision in order to explore how we worked together and to give space to some of the less conscious processes. Within our first year we met with a supervisor experienced in working in organisational settings to explore our work together, to celebrate, consolidate and plan how we might develop our partnership in the future.

Supervision is now a regular arrangement (bi-annually) and she has also helped us to consider practical issues, such as both of us being able to facilitate all aspects of the workshop. As noted above we each have different strengths, areas of interest and lead different aspects of the workshop accordingly. We are both comfortable teaching our chosen areas but know that it would be useful to facilitate each other’s chosen area of interest.

Conclusion

We use the information from our processing and feed this back into the further development of our workshops. Although the basic structure of our workshop that we designed two years ago still stands, we have been able to add and incorporate as we have learnt more about what might help support managers managing work-related stress. We bring with us a wealth of experience from being with clients experiencing work-related stress and we bring a particular depth that is beneficial and which, we believe, conventional stress management workshops would be less likely to cover.

Since we began to write this series of articles, we have run a further two workshops. We have noticed with some interest that the process of writing the articles has already had a beneficial impact on our work together as co-trainers. It has brought to the fore unconscious processes or unarticulated thoughts allowing us to work together and communicate in a way that feels seamless. Interestingly, we have realised how this writing process has become part of our feedback loop informing not just what we do, but how we do it and, in our view, it is all the stronger for it. ■

Reference

1 Heron J. The complete facilitator’s handbook. London: Kogan Page; 1999.

Additional reading

HSE. Managing the causes of work-related stress – a step-by-step approach using the management standards. HSE Books; 2007.