
GUY, G.E., BIGGS, H.C. and ADIE, R.H.

Finding the root cause vs co-constructing preferred stories: Integrating systematic problem solving methods with narrative/constructive approaches to consultancy.
Abstract

Traditional approaches to consultancy and professional supervision have generally used a systematic, Problem Solving process. Such a process guides clients through a sequential series of steps which can be summarised as defining the problem, determining root causes, generating options, deciding on and implementing one option and evaluating the outcome. This approach is often conceptualised as an objective, logical and cyclical process with particular strategies associated with each step. The approach is therefore reductionist in nature and assumes the reality of a problem cause. Its danger is that personal blame can easily be attached to beliefs about the problem. Its strength is that the process is easily be attached to beliefs about the problem. Its strength is that the process is easily understood by clients and fits with their expectations about consultancy and supervision.

More recent writings in organisational consultancy, coaching and team development have intensified this Problem Solving focus with the term, Root Cause Analysis, increasingly used. In contrast, a very different perspective is gaining favour in professional counselling supervision and is starting to exert some influence in consultancy work. This approach has drawn from the constructive counselling theories of Solution-Oriented and Narrative Therapy. In organisational setting the term, Appreciative Inquiry, has been used for a similar approach. The basic principles of this perspective are very different from traditional Problem Solving. The focus is on uncovering strengths and resources; identifying and amplifying change; understanding how problems develop; building alternative, preferred stories of functioning; clarifying associated values and beliefs and linking future action with these beliefs; identifying and using audiences of support.

This paper proposes a combining of these two major perspectives rather than a discrediting of one by the other. In order to preserve the theoretical integrity of both, a model is presented in which the process of the Problem Solving approach is combined with the language and principles of constructive theory.
Management consultancy and professional supervision are two very similar endeavours and yet each has developed particular theories, processes and approaches in isolation from the other. Both areas focus on the facilitated reflection of work practices in order to produce more effective outcomes for clients and for service teams. Both areas focus on similar content such as client/case understandings, worker responses/needs, particular approaches utilised, team relationships, organisational/systemic issues, work procedures and ethical concerns. Both areas use similar processes that often include working with individuals on problem solving, mentoring, coaching and supervising or working with groups on team building and collaborative learning.

The separation and isolation of developments occurring across organisational consultancy and professional supervision theory and practice are due to a number of factors. Firstly, professional facilitators do not normally tend to work across both areas and secondly these facilitators often have different academic and occupational backgrounds. Professional supervisors tend to be expert service practitioners (eg in counselling, psychology, social work etc), whilst consultants tend to have organisational or management qualifications or experience. Thirdly, there are very few forums (eg conferences, courses, professional journals/literature) for
the sharing of theoretical perspectives and practical approaches across both areas.

This historical separation has resulted in two very differing, general practice philosophies and approaches. Organisational consultancy has tended to focus on a systematic Problem Solving process based on a rational, logical and step-by-step procedure. Each step has associated strategies and the overall focus is the identification of problem causation and the generation and trialing of alternative “solutions”. More recent writings have further entrenched this particular orientation by advocating a “Root Cause Analysis” (RCA) strategy. Here, possible contributions to problem development are subject to a thorough and disciplined methodology to determine the most basic or central causative factors. This approach, therefore, seeks preventative explanations and solutions rather than jumping quickly to corrective actions.

Professional supervision, in contrast, has generally drawn its process from the various counselling theories with the most recent approach coming from the constructive counselling theories of Solution-Oriented and Narrative Therapy. This “constructive” (Hoyt, 1994) supervision model differs from Problem Solving consultancy by emphasising the language used in the intervention rather than the sequence of tasks followed. The constructive supervisor hosts conversations which:
a) Identify strengths and resources in both the approaches of the worker and their clients

b) Uncover and amplify instances of change

c) Describe problems as external to the worker and for clients but which have particular effects and history and which exploit particular circumstances

d) Clarify specifically what the worker /client is wanting

e) Build preferred stories of functioning by linking past, present and future actions

f) Clarify associated values and beliefs associated with the preferred outcomes

g) Identify and use audiences of support.

Constructive supervision thus deals with problems using language frames that are built around preferred ways of working rather than around deficits, problems or difficulty. That is, the supervision identifies and expands already existing instances of the preferred worker story rather than converses about what is not occurring in the worker’s or client’s story. The experience of the conversation itself is presumed to create the change, rather than the experience of proceeding through specific problem solving tasks. The conversation enables the worker to embrace and thicken the reality of a preferred story of change alternative to the hopeless, problem centred and stuck meanings previously attached to the circumstances being examined.
This paper advocates a bridging of these two separate perspectives into an enhanced supervision/consultancy process, a process that integrates the unique theoretical principles of each. The systematic problem solving framework of the consultancy model is used as a starting point but modified to be consistent with constructive language usage and theoretical perspectives. Structural terms, such as “root cause”, which presuppose the reality of one central, underlying problem is changed. However, the strengths of the consultancy approach with its easily understood and accepted rationale and action oriented framework is utilised and enhanced.

The following table presents a comparison of the steps in the traditional consultancy Problem Solving model with a modified process consistent with constructive supervision principles and concepts. The modified process is referred to as Constructive Solution Building to emphasise the importance of using language which uncovers and extends the coping and existing strengths rather than the deficits and difficulties.
## TWO MODELS OF ORGANISATIONAL CONSULTANCY/PROFESSIONAL SUPERVISION

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SYSTEMATIC PROBLEM SOLVING</th>
<th>CONSTRUCTIVE SOLUTION BUILDING</th>
<th>COMMENTS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>STEP 1: Identifying the “real” issue involving:</strong></td>
<td><strong>Clarifying people’s position on the problem by:</strong></td>
<td>This step is very similar across models but the problem should be described using externalising language so as not to pathologise the worker or team. A purely Solution-Oriented perspective would focus on what is wanted rather than stay with the problem. The word “real” would not be used in the interview process.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• A consensus description of the problem</td>
<td>• Naming the problem(s) (using agreed upon words and descriptions)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• A listing and prioritising of the multiple issues</td>
<td>• Describing the effects of the problem(s)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Evaluating and justifying the commitment to change at this time</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>THE PROBLEM WOULD BE DESCRIBED IN EXTERNALISING LANGUAGE</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>STEP 2: Identifying the cause(s) of the problem involving:</strong></td>
<td><strong>Identifying the prior influence of the problem over the people</strong> (deconstructing the problem story) by:</td>
<td>The term “cause” would be replaced by “influence”, “effects”, “history” and “allies” of the problem.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Collecting data</td>
<td>• Describing the effects of the problem</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Analysing cause and effect</td>
<td>• Historicizing the development of the problem (how the problem came into being)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Outlining the chronology</td>
<td>• Identifying the allies of the problem</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Describing the problem’s tactics and strategies</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
STEP 3: Generating possible solutions to the problem involving non-evaluative, wide ranging, creative processes such as: brainstorming, brainwriting, round robin, synectics, using simple to elaborate metaphors. Alternatives are then evaluated in relation to the problem e.g. using force field analysis.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Building alternative solutions</strong> i.e.</th>
<th>The methods of the two models could be combined to include past, present and future instances of success and coping. The values associated with these instances could be discussed.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mapping the influence of the people over the problem (reconstructing alternative stories) by:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Identifying and accounting for past instances of preferred developments</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Describing present coping approaches</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Specifying desired ways of being and/or behaving</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Clarifying the preferred values, meanings, identities and story themes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Identifying past, present and future audiences of support.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| STEP 4: Evaluating each option and deciding on the option to be implemented.  
Approaches such as Force Field Analysis can be used. The effects or consequences on the person, group and organization are considered. Processes such as weighing against objectives and consequences, prioritising and combining are possible. | **Evaluating the options and describing the most desired outcome** | The description of the desired outcome could be preceded by an alternatives or options search and the effects on the team reviewed. |
|---|---|---|
| **STEP 5:** Implementing the selected solution i.e. the who, what, when, how, where and against what criteria. | **Implementing and extending the change** by:  
- Describing first steps, when and where and who would notice  
- Identifying audiences of support for change  
- Preparing for setbacks  
- Externalising possible blocks  
- Attending to change  
- Exploring opportunities for sharing expertise (worker as consultant) | The implementation and evaluation of change is an opportunity to “thicken” the preferred story by specifying and implementing the future actions (problem solving model) and by using audiences to support, validate, measure and celebrate the change (constructive model). |
• Providing opportunities to attach meaning and value to actions
• Celebrating change

STEP 6: Evaluating the change implementation and deciding on adjustments. Data might be collected and effects reviewed.

Self/team monitoring of change i.e. noticing change and monitoring its effects and influence.

It is evident from the above table that both models can be integrated provided that care is taken to use language that does not assume a structural reality to problem situations.

The Problem Solving process can thus be viewed as an opportunity to not simply generate and evaluate solutions but to negotiate preferred stories or narratives that are characterised by:

• Coping rather than failure
• Strength rather than deficit
• Competence rather than discounting
• Agency rather than non-accountability
• Change rather than impossibility and stuckness
• Multiple perspectives rather than one truth.

(Adapted from Bertolino and O’Hanlon, 2002)

For such stories to gain power, they require audiences to help in their validation and extension. The consultancy or
supervision process is an opportunity to achieve this through conversation. Stories define the worker’s relationship with the problem and establish how the problem is defined, related to, dealt with and understood. Stories are built from different discourses or related words expressing a particular way of perceiving the world e.g. conflict, economic, medical, developmental etc. The words used in the consultancy/supervision interviews are therefore central to the problem meaning and definition. Some stories are privileged while others invalidated in particular organizations and workers could be invited to consider the beliefs, stereotypes and “taken-for-granted” views present in their own work settings.

Alternatively, constructive theory and approaches lack credibility and acceptance within the business and organisational community and would gain from a more systematic, rational process framework. Such a logical and well accepted framework is provided by the Problem Solving cycle. It is easily understood and provides a comprehensive process which is cyclical and inclusive. An integration of these two very influential models is therefore advocated in both consultancy and supervision contexts.

References

competency based counselling and therapy. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.


