

# Organisations behaving

Marie Feltham and Jules Howdin reflect on how staff

Travelling by train to a staff counselling Special Interest Group meeting, we chanced to pick up a stray copy of *The Independent*, open at an obituary dedicated to Isabel Menzies Lyth. As a psychoanalyst and social scientist she was among the first to research ‘the functioning of social systems as a defence against anxiety’<sup>1</sup>. Many others have followed, trying to understand why human beings often behave ‘badly’ in work groups. As staff counsellors we are often called upon by clients as they try to find ways to stay well in the work environment. Staff counsellors in many organisations have been trying to find a way of working more proactively with their institutions in order to help those in charge understand how they can protect and promote the psychological health of their employees.

This is not an easy conversation to have, given a widespread distrust of the notion of workplace stress and an even greater discomfort about how to address the issue without ‘opening the floodgates’.

Menzies Lyth proposed that when the psychological needs of a workforce are not understood, the culture, structure and functioning of the organisation becomes determined by them to the detriment of its core task and aims. Her original thesis highlighted the need of nurses to protect themselves from feelings of distress associated with risk, death, suffering and illness. Patients were depersonalised by work practices evolved to meet these anxieties, which were not attended to by the management culture and wider organisation. Menzies Lyth concluded that it would profit an organisation to work more consciously with and through these anxieties so that detrimental practices did not become institutionalised.

We began to wonder how her hypothesis could be used to help the psychological health of further and higher educational communities. Her wisdom has been echoed in many subsequent schools of therapy and more recently, by the organising idea presented by Griffin and Tyrell<sup>2</sup> in human

gives therapy. This focuses on the core task for the therapist as understanding the client’s emotional/psychological needs and how they can find their own resources to address them either from within or from the external environment.

If we accept the hypothesis that unmet psychological needs impact negatively on an organisation’s core purpose, how do we begin to bring to mind the needs of staff in our educational communities? Which anxieties are held out of consciousness and which work practices allow this denial to continue to the detriment of all concerned?

Arthur<sup>3</sup> concluded that ‘work-related stress is a result of complex psychosocial interactions. In higher educational settings we are engaged in ‘emotional labour’. Arthur points out that this can present a ‘profound challenge to a person’s sense of self’. Hoschild<sup>4</sup> talks about the burnout, depersonalisation, exhaustion and lowered empathy that can result – all in an atmosphere of extreme competition, the quest for excellence, creativity, innovation and knowledge while characterised by short-term contracts, virtual organisations, loss of job security etc.

Herriot<sup>5</sup> points out that as the employer-employee relationship is a human one, with emotions a fundamental component, problems arise when the employer does not take account of the ‘self’. The psychological contract is breached with the potential for trauma, betrayal and hurt, but more importantly, unconscious acting out of the anxieties aroused. Many of us as staff counsellors are witness to these dynamics that lie at the root of much work-related stress.

How can we conceptualise an employee’s sense of self and how can the organisation relate to and understand such needs? A common language and point of reference can perhaps be found in the human givens understanding of an individual’s basic emotional needs, namely sufficient:

- security
- privacy
- control/autonomy

# badly: from anxiety to creativity

might help their institutions operate more effectively

- community
- fun and friendship
- status
- meaning and purpose
- stimulation
- attention
- sense of competence and achievement.

Although this may seem quite a list, an employer can go a long way to meeting these needs. Perhaps a way forward for staff counsellors is to help our clients and, more importantly, our organisations, to think of creative ways of meeting those needs. Further, if we accept the premise that stress levels return to normal when an individual's basic human needs are met, our organisation's responsibilities for the health and safety of their staff in relation to stress management can be achieved. In this way we can avoid the unconscious acting out referred to by Menzies Lyth and instead access our creative, imaginative, collaborating brains (our innate resources) and thereby empathy, learning and communication may be restored.

The theme of this year's AUCC conference 'Who do you think you are?' is a timely invitation to staff counsellors to think about how to develop their roles in ways that reflect rapidly changing individual/societal needs and trends. How can we proactively embed ourselves within the complicated day-to-day functioning of the institution as well as support and assist communication, and feel positive about our service as well as use our relational skills to promote ethical and supportive working conditions? Many counsellors have experienced the consequences of institutional knee-jerk reactions to incidents as opposed to a measured response when dealing with such issues as stress at work, managing anxiety etc. As a consequence, concerns are expressed about the ability of organisations to effectively manage issues such as

bullying as an organisational rather than a personal issue.

A workshop at the 2008 AUCC conference brought together a large group of staff counsellors. When thinking about their own needs the following were identified as lacking:

- the need for recognition and attention
- the need to have a sense of control over the working environment
- a need for a sense of fun and enjoyment
- a need for a sense of continuity, community and support.

Interestingly, issues of lack of privacy, or meaning and purpose, were not identified as concerns.

This shifted when the focus moved to which needs were least met in their organisations as a whole (for themselves and others). Themes that emerged were:

- a marked sense of competitiveness and stress from the institution striving for excellence, challenging a sense of security and competence
- limited services and lack of attention for therapists when they themselves needed emotional support
- restricted resources at a time of increased emphasis on widening participation and the subsequent rise in requests for psychological and other support such as a mental health input leading to reduced control and autonomy
- the need for stronger communication links with higher management to promote an understanding of the role and function of counselling, lest status, meaning and purpose become compromised.

## Creative solutions

Positive and creative solutions that were suggested included:

- finding creative and playful ways to explore how current policies and procedures exist in relation to the overall vision of the institution eg a large public jigsaw as a visual representation of their interconnectedness

- decreasing the use of email and encouraging more face-to-face meetings
- providing a separate service for staff to enable the focus on specific staff-related issues
- connecting with other systems, such as occupational health and human resources to establish joined-up support
- providing middle management with training in relational skills to promote a healthy approach to interpersonal interactions
- to explore how collaboration can be established in the face of competition.

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## Conclusion

The culture of life within educational institutions has inevitably been changed with the emphasis on widening participation and the push to raise funds through increased student numbers, all of which has a considerable impact on employees. It is therefore more urgent than ever that we find coherent shared strategies throughout our institutions that allow us to cater simultaneously for the fundamental human emotional needs of our workforce as well as the corporate task. In this way we may avoid the unconscious acting out and burnout referred to above, and protect against the negative influence of stress on the organisation and the individual.

The credit crunch, disillusionment with our financial institutions and worldwide financial instability must be impacting on employees in terms of their needs for security, autonomy and a sense of control. We know that people are prepared to work even longer hours in times of recession due to job insecurity, real or imagined. This will have a negative impact on individual needs for fun, relaxation and a sense of community. There will be worries over status as organisations make changes in an attempt to survive the downturn.

Staff counsellors may help by informing and educating their organisations about the negative impact that these worries might have on the workforce/corporate task. When change happens, policies and procedures could be employed which are mindful of human needs and resources, as outlined by the human givens model of optimal functioning. Reassurance, information and practical help may become very important, ie by providing prompt access to financial advisors or debt management professionals.

A fulfilling organisation is normally comprised of happy, secure individuals. Such an organisation is unlikely to 'behave badly'. Instead we could create communities characterised by low anxiety, high creativity and productive collaboration. ■

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## References

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- 2 Griffin J, Tyrell I. Human givens, a new approach to emotional health and clear thinking. Sussex: Human Givens Publishing; 2003.
- 3 Arthur AR. Work-related stress, the blind men and the elephant. *British Journal of Guidance & Counselling*. 2004; 32(2):157-169.
- 4 Hoschild A. *The managed heart*. Berkeley: University of California Press; 1983.
- 5 Herriot P. *The employment relationship*. Hove: Routledge; 2001.