

PROFESSIONAL COUNSELING AS A TOOL TO FACILITATE ORGANIZATIONAL WELLNESS & TO PROMOTE HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

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My job consists in understanding people's needs and in helping them to analyze these needs, to classify them and to find out a way to satisfy them. It is a learning process that has to be activated and that is finalized to the clients' wellness.

In this modern age organizations, which have to cope with rapid and continuous changes, struggle to manage the changes that involves both the internal processes and the behavior of their human resources. Every change brings a set of macro and micro steps that causes stress to the life of companies and force them to re-define their systems, models and values. Besides, for those companies that succeed in remaining competitive on the market, the amount of work that personnel is required to fulfill, has greatly increased in recent years. Therefore, modern organizations face a new and substantial challenge: to lead the change without losing energy and the motivation of their HRs. But, what is energy? Energy in human sciences is a component of well-being, since it implies the mental, the physical and the emotional integrity which an individual can use to get his self-actualization [A. Lowen, 1977; A. Maslow, 1943]. Every human being develops throughout his life by facing both predictable and unpredictable changes, as well as predictable and unpredictable tasks [R. Havighurst, 1972]. In the old times and up to the 2nd Industrial Revolution these changes and tasks were codified within the societal groups of individual's belonging (family, religious community, political community, village/borough community) so that everybody could get both evidence of the need to change and also support to overcome the changing. A young man/woman that had finished school was 'naturally' brought to find a job and to work properly, as well as to find a partner and settle for a sexual and affective partnership. An enterprise was 'naturally' incline to produce added value inside the territory that hosted it, as well as to hire most of its human resources from the same local area. There was a mutual exchange between enterprises and local community, in terms of the so called 'relational assets' [M. Storper, 1997]. Values within the community and within the organization a man chose to join, were substantially coherent and workers could easily adhere to them. They could also make use of these values to build their personal identities as workers and as citizens.

The coming of the ICT Revolution and the new framework it has brought to the division of work and to occupations and labor market [J. Rifkin, 1996; D. Cohen, 2007] have greatly contributed to modify the relations within organizations and companies' link with their territories. In my daily activity on consulting firms about the management and development of Human resources, I realize that some criticalities that personnel point out, lay – more and more frequently - in the loss of boundaries between work time and private time, and also in the loss of the sense of belonging to the company. These two losses make people fragile and unprepared to the continuous challenges they have to face, both as workers and as citizens. In the first case, I notice that work-life balance is no longer a peculiar issue confined to top managers or professionals, but it has become a serious problem for lots of middle, or even low level employees. In order to balance the time spent on the job and the time spent on private/personal issues, you must be aware of *when* (and I'd also say "where") one time ends and the other one begins. It seems an easy question, but – as most of us perfectly know – in fact it is not. The reason is that the impact of high tech devices on

communication and knowledge management have deeply modified the traditional approach to management and to business communication. Today it's more easy to write texts, to take pictures, to create slide presentations and to transfer this media to another person. But what it is easy to do is not necessarily worth doing. In several companies I was told by top managers that the global yearly exchange of emails among personnel greatly exceeded the need to transfer functional information required by the work. It seems that the easiest the way to communicate, the worst the quality of the communication. Some managers have calculated that their companies waste thousands of hours of work-time because of thousands of useless emails/chats/sms sent and received by their employees. Moreover, until the ICT revolution, very few managers were willing to answer telephone calls at home, and there was no way to contact them once they were neither in the office, nor at home (for instance when they were on a taxi, or having dinner, or jogging). There used to be physical boundaries between work and private life and throughout the centuries these physical boundaries had been creating psychological, emotional, mental boundaries too. Nowadays we have a twofold challenge to cope with: we have extraordinary technological tools to assist us in our existence, but we have to learn how to manage them properly. They do not come with life instructions: their blueprints are technical pieces of information, but unfortunately they are not useful for our emotional balance or so good for our intellectual development.

I wish to provide an example about this statement. Let's think about writing (and specifically to business writing in its development): the act of writing had remained roughly the same for more than 5000 years. Scientists have proved that the part of human brain that was engaged in the process of wording was the same either when the man wrote on a stone or on a papyrus or on a sheet of paper. Neural-scientist and psychologists have recently demonstrated that in the process of writing an e-mail or chatting with a notebook or cell-phone, a few traditional neural parts (active in the traditional hand writing) are skipped over. The act of writing by means of a keyboard produces less learning than by hand writing [K. H. James, 2010]. Thus, the new quick writing by means of tech devices causes a deep linguistic change, a change that modifies lexicon and syntax, and by doing this, it modifies also the way of thinking, the memory and the way of communicating [V. Berninger, 2010].

Hence, there are multiple reasons that are influencing the quality of life and the effectiveness of people's behavior on the job. As I was saying, the continuous overlapping of work time and personal time make people more stressed, less concentrated and less motivated on the job. In my activity as professional counselor I meet several workers, both managers and employees, who are searching for help because they feel uncomfortable in their life and, in a few cases, they are experiencing illness because of that. In these situations counseling can be a good way to explore feasible solutions. As a matter of fact a large number of people experience stressful situations on the job, and in many cases the traditional HR tools at disposal within their organizations can provide only partial help. Besides, in the majority of SMEs they have not HR departments, so no tools are available at all. Why counseling (individual and group sessions) can be effective? First of all because counseling originates from a practical environment, that is vocational guidance [F. Parsons, 1908], a *milieu* where the urgency of "quick and good results" was a standing point. So, in spite of its subsequent psychological theoretical framework (it represents the social tool of short psychotherapies created by C. Rogers, 1942), counseling has been consolidating mostly in the field of social work, in the field of education, in that of occupational and career guidance. In fact, in a world of confusion due to rapid and pervasive changes, plenty of people need help, assistance, care (not *cure*) to recover a state of well-being. They need help because they can't cope with specific troubles, challenges, criticalities or problems, by means of their sole strength. They do have personal resources, as everybody has, but they feel so worried and so overwhelmed they can hardly manage to stop for a while and think it over. Therefore, the first competence a counselor provides is

listening, just listening in an emphatic manner. In this age of connectivity people has neglected authentic communication; they exchange pieces of information, pictures, snapshots, music and video clips by means of Youtube, Facebook, Instagram and all the other social media, but nobody is longer able to just listen empathically to another person. So counseling is primarily “listening with a value”, namely to establish a relationship with the client in order to assure him/her about the possibility to be listened without judgment. This first step contributes to build a mutual trust between Counselor and Client and it gives birth to the learning process whose final goal is the empowerment of the client. In this stage the client exposes what he feels as a problem, that is the issue which is worrying him. It is of great importance that the counselor helps the client to tell about the problem he feels by suggesting multiple ways to describe it, so that the counselor can understand properly whether that issue is manageable by him – as a counselor - or has to re-direct the client to a different professional (a lawyer, a physician, a psychologist, a social worker, ...). The second step is the dialogue that facilitates the analysis of the problem, in order to help the client to adopt multiple points of view, to examine what happens when he looks at it from different perspectives. It is also important to give attention to what he feels while doing this exercise. Counseling is a learning process, but not merely a cognitive learning, rather an emotional learning, since emotions play an important role in creating wellness by activating energy aimed to social goals. When the counselor helps the client to express his emotions and guides him to accept the energy they bring, the process of experiential approach to change takes place [R. Elliott, 1993; L.S. Greenberg, 2002]. That’s why the emerging of feelings and sensations, as well as thoughts, are very important and need a caring attitude by the counselor, who has to accept them, whatever they are and wherever they show up. The third step in the individual counseling session consists in helping the client to become aware of his personal qualities and resources, life skills that maybe in the past have helped him to cope with critical issues in his existence. Usually clients are excited when they find out that in the past they succeeded in overcoming hard moments, even if they are not able – without the help of the counselor – to focus on those life skills and to describe them accurately. The work of telling, describing, detailing their personal skills is a method to build competencies, namely personal tools they can, again, make use of when needed. Once the client has become aware of the personal resources he has got in his toolkit, the counselor asks him to imagine how he could apply one or more of these resources to the problem solving he needs in that very moment. The client is supported in examining alternatives, in evaluating them with his own judgment, without receiving any judgment by the counselor. I say it again: the counselor does not advise; he facilitates, helps, supports without suggesting any solution, since it is always up to the client to find them.

Once the client feels he can adopt a solution, the empowerment has taken place. The client feels more at ease, he knows he can cope with the situation that beforehand he felt as too big to face, and this feeling of power produces personal wellness.