It’s ‘complex’

Approaching workplace bullying from a systems thinking perspective could help develop a more holistic understanding, suggests Damian Stoupe

On 12 June 2012 one of my academic heroines died. Elinor Ostrom received a few paragraphs in some of the more ‘distinguished’ papers but for many her death would have gone unnoticed. Elinor had a great belief in ‘common-sense’; that if you left people to themselves they would sort out their differences and get along. She spent much of her life working in the area of institutional economics, or what she described as the ‘study of social dilemmas’, eventually becoming the first, and only, woman to be awarded a joint Nobel Prize for economics. She focused her research on the decision-making processes of individuals, and balancing group and individual self-interest through increasing collaboration.

Her work was a response to what had become, and I would suggest still is, the dominant economic theory of collective action; which simply assumed that, although it would be in each of our own best interests to cooperate, we will sacrifice the collective goodwill for our own self-interests because of our environment or the perceived pay-off we may gain. In her Nobel Prize lecture she argued that: ‘Models have been used to view those who are involved in a prisoner’s dilemma game… as always trapped in the situation without capabilities to change the structure themselves… It is assumed that the momentum for change must come from outside the situation rather than from the self-reflection and creativity of those within a situation to restructure their own patterns of interaction, however humans, unlike lab rats, are frequently in a position not just to react to external variables, but to alter those external variables’.

How does this relate to workplace bullying?

The primary focus of bullying research has been to understand the prevalence, antecedents and impact on individuals and organisations alongside identifying the costs of bullying. The research has followed a classical scientific worldview which has dominated research since the 1940s wherein each event is believed to have a cause which in turn has its own cause. This approach seeks to identify a root cause for events, resulting in what may be described as event-driven solutions to problems. I would suggest that since Leymann identified bullying as a ‘work environment problem’ much of the research has been focused on assisting the development of anti-bullying policies which identify rules and regulations aimed at achieving optimal behaviour from employees, which in turn seek to maximise the optimal social benefits in the workplace. In other words, as individuals cannot be trusted to look after each other, interventions need to be imposed from outside to ensure that ‘scientifically proven’ optimal behaviours are adhered to.

The effectiveness of such policies may be questioned with the findings of the UNISON (2011) workplace bullying survey, which identified an increase in the number of bullying incidents since their previous survey in 2009 despite 49 per cent of respondents reporting that their organisation clearly understood what is meant by bullying. This ‘clarity’ contrasts with an academic awareness of the difficulty in defining bullying or what acts constitute it leading to a possible bias in favour of the ‘victim’, and have to a large extent avoided discussion of intention. However, intention must be accounted for if we are to avoid merely becoming tolerant of the intolerances of others.

Over the last 20 years the focus on workplace bullying has been on developing an acceptance of the existence of the phenomenon in the workplace. This has by and large been achieved, if not acted upon. However, I would suggest now is the time to fully explore the meaning of the
Bullying as a complex problem

In the ‘systems world’ problems are either ‘tame’ (for example, identifying the square root of 356.396 or finding an NHS dentist) or ‘complex’. Complex problems are characterised as unique problems, or situations, which can be viewed from more than one perspective, which can be hard to resolve as there is no right or wrong answer, and where there is no real possibility of validation as each stakeholder can find a different explanation to suit their own viewpoint. Importantly, each problem is actually a problem that resides within, or is a symptom of, another problem.

In counselling individuals and working with organisations, it is clear that workplace bullying falls into these criteria.

There are standard responses to complex problems that many organisations, and individuals, deploy: firstly, redefine the problem so it becomes easier to deal with (for example, it is a personality clash or it is just ‘strong’ management); set up some policies and procedures which reflect the current research paradigm of focusing on individuals’ behaviours; measure the effectiveness of the policies and procedures and declare the problem solved (because the number of complaints has reduced). This is the same approach that we took to the next problem (ignoring the wider issues of people being too scared to complain because of the repercussions for their jobs).

I have been deliberately cynical here to make a point. People act in good faith, we are trained from an early age to adopt problem-solving approaches in a mechanical cause and effect way that is overly measurable, but we tend to treat all problems in the same way as ‘tame linear problems’.

The issue is that wicked problems are not linear: they are interconnected and interdependent. The people involved, they are fundamentally problems with the social process in which people cannot agree on what the problem is. If we take a brief look at workplace bullying, definitions change over time. With the exception of physical acts of aggression, there is no agreement on other behaviours which are classified as bullying. Bullying is sometimes called ‘cyberbullying’ or ‘cyber terror’ which expresses the full extent of the trauma seen in clients, rather than the more subjective, as it seems to have become, term ‘bullying’.

Bullying as a complex problem affects all age groups in schools, workplaces, family homes and care homes. The focus should move away from the internal organisational environment to a systems thinking paradigm, which seeks to explore the world through a lens of interconnectedness and interdependence.

As counsellors we need to be aware of the whole range of systemic issues that a client brings to the counselling room, whether they are accused of, or a recipient of, bullying; and the subjectivity that is brought into the room by the client needs to be fully explored. The accused has a right to be heard and to listen to as much as the victim; there is nothing stopping the development of a victim-bully – someone who uses their status as victim to bully others – where the victim’s story is privileged.

Increase face-to-face communication

Organisations that have tried to encourage groups to work for the common good. In these days where electronic forms of communication appear to be dominant, her findings – increase face-to-face communication and develop innovative forms of governance – may seem to be quite radical and scaring.

Ostrom’s argument was, as with most of her work, quite simple, although difficult to do in practice because of its counter-cultural nature. She identified what may be described as a trinity of characteristics of good communication and trust, reciprocation and respect. This refers to the way we generally think of other people (reputation), how we expect them to respond if we act first (trust) and understanding when the other person is aware of their own behaviour and the consequences that may have (reciprocation). All three areas are interdependent; if one factor is damaged, the others are affected. Any breakdown may be an important aspect in the development of workplace bullying.

Ostrom also called for forms of governance based upon mutual agreements of conduct within a group. This means that the promotion of inclusion, autonomy, empathy, neutrality and transparency, none of which can be imposed from outside – they need to be developed alongside face-to-face communication. She identified the position of a situation in which an individual is often called ‘a monitor’ whose role of trust and standing within the group is sufficiently high, is able to deal with the group on such a way that does not lead to further conflict. Importantly also, the individual who is ‘punished’ accepts the punishment from the ‘monitor’ because they can see the greater benefits for themselves that can be achieved from continuing group membership. It is evident that this already occurs in all organisations, but the UNISON survey results show that more militant management style emerging from the current economic climate. If this approach is successful, then self-interest will lead to command and control techniques being mimicked by the next managerial generation.

Conclusion

Carroll and Walton20, and Claringbull21, along with employee assistance organisations, have called for counsellors to be more business aware and to understand how they may add value. I believe counsellors are well placed to be the trainers/facilitators for organisations to develop these skills. It is our DNA; we work with clients with a preformed solution and ensure that the problem fits our solution, as is the case with many consultants; we explore issues, seek the ‘optimum’ solution and the solution that adds ‘value’ to the employee. We can take those skills to the wider organisation.

Is this outside the role of the traditional counsellor? Yes it is. It is a move towards a counsellor who is confident in using their skills to counsel the organisation, working with the ethical and boundary issues. It is the development of the ‘specialist type of counsellor who is able to see the interindividual relationships within the organisation, one who sees that what happens in the counselling room has an impact on the organisation and society as a whole, and vice versa.’
embedded counsellors are under threat, maybe we need to have more research into ways that counsellors can add value outside the counselling room so we can hear their stories. It may not be possible to tackle the economic, evolutionary, psychological, societal or theological roots of destructive competition tomorrow but increasing the awareness of the economic benefits, and therefore the competitive advantage of improving authentic dialogue in the workplace is possible.

References

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