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PART ONE

Understanding People and Their Problems

Introduction

As mentioned above, Part One of this book is an extended essay which has the aim of (i) providing a general introduction to the subject matter of problem solving in relation to people, and (ii) setting the scene for Part Two and the various tools, methods and techniques contained therein. Many people can work in the people professions without realizing that problem solving is a key part of what they do. For example, I have come across many managers who complain of people getting in the way of their doing their job – as if they fail to grasp that helping people solve their problems (so that they work to their maximum output) is a key part of any manager’s role. Similarly, I have come across many social workers who get bogged down in ‘providing services’, who lose sight of the rationale for providing such services – that is, to solve a problem or meet a need. Many more examples could be provided of managers and professionals engaged in a wide range of settings who have fallen into the trap of failing to appreciate the problem-solving nature of their work.

For some people, problem solving is an explicit part of their role – for example, a community psychiatric nurse trying to work with somebody with mental health problems to avoid an eviction from their flat, or a debt advice worker trying to help a family to resolve financial problems that are spiralling out of control. For others, however, direct problem solving may not be a key part of their role, but problem-solving skills are required to enable them to do their bread and butter work. For example, a youth worker may be trying to develop a particular scheme or project, but finds that there are obstacles in the way of doing so (perhaps a conflict between two or

more of the participants). Problem-solving skills will then need to be drawn upon, even though direct problem solving is not the object of the exercise. For people involved in management roles, both sides of this particular coin can be seen to apply – that is, a manager will have responsibility for certain areas of work and will, at times, need to adopt a problem-solving approach in order to achieve the particular objective. However, he or she is also quite free to become involved in problem-solving activities as a direct part of the managerial role – for example, in dealing with grievances, disciplinary matters and so on.

An important distinction to draw is that between people problems and problem people. By people problems, I mean the sort of difficulties and complications that arise when people come together – for example, conflict, stress, communication breakdowns. This is not to be confused with ‘problem people’. Problem people is a term I prefer not to use because of its unhelpful connotations. It implies that somebody is ‘by their very nature’ difficult or a problem. This is a gross oversimplification of some very complex issues about how problems arise and how best they can be dealt with. To label individuals as problem people is to indulge in a judgemental attitude. This is a situation to be avoided because adopting a judgemental attitude means making a value judgement about an individual’s worth and assuming that they are responsible for the problems concerned. There are a number of reasons why we should steer clear of this sort of reaction:

1. *It is often not fair* For example, someone may be labelled as lazy, but this is likely to mask underlying issues of motivation which are just as much a managerial responsibility as that of the individual (this is not to say that people are never lazy but, rather, that it is much more appropriate to try and find out why their motivation is so low rather than just write them off as a ‘lazy person’).
2. *It is rarely effective* Being judgemental simply does not help. It does not take us any further forward in our problem-solving activities and, in fact, can often act as a block to such activities.
3. *It can be counterproductive* Tensions and conflicts can be generated by adopting a judgemental attitude. Applying a negative label to somebody can actually, in some circumstances, encourage them to adopt the behaviour you are implicitly criticizing. For

example, labelling somebody as ‘obstructive’ may actually make that person less co-operative, rather than more.

4. *It fails to see the situation from the point of view of the person concerned* I shall be arguing below that the important part of effective problem solving is the ability to put yourself in other people’s shoes, to see the situation from their point of view. Being judgemental about somebody prevents us from doing this. If we fail to take account of the individual’s point of view, then we are likely to generate resistance, rather than commitment, to making progress. This relates to the important concept of motivation, an issue that we shall explore in more detail below.

What is a problem?

Before going any further it is important to clarify what I mean by ‘problems’, given that the book is about problem-solving strategies. For the purposes of this book, a problem is anything that either brings about negatives (pain, suffering distress, anxiety and so on) or blocks positives (health, fulfilment, satisfaction, progress in achieving our goals and so on) or a mixture of the two. In a sense, having a problem can be defined as being in a situation that we want to get out of. Problem-solving methods are therefore tools we can use to help people get out of such situations.

Problems can come in all sorts of shapes and sizes and varying degrees of severity or intensity. They can reinforce one another and one can be the root cause of others – the issue of cause and effect is not a simple one. Sometimes problems can be manageable on their own, but in combination they can prove overwhelming. Problems are certainly not entirely subjective, but there is none the less an important subjective dimension. That is, if somebody perceives a situation as a problem, then it *is* a problem, in so far as that is how it will be experienced by the person(s) concerned – as a problem. As it was expressed quite some time ago now, ‘the definition of the situation is real in its consequences’ (Thomas and Znaniecki, 1958). For example, if someone is worried about something, even if this worry is unrealistic, it does not alter the fact that he or she is experiencing worry and thus has a problem (as defined above). It would be a serious mistake to disregard this problem by assuming that it is not a ‘real’ problem. If it is

perceived as ‘real’, it will be experienced as ‘real’ and will therefore be ‘real in its consequences’.

There is a close relationship between problems and unmet needs, and it is a two-way relationship. That is, unmet needs can cause problems and experiencing problems can lead to our needs not being met. An example of the former would be someone’s need for affection leading to low self-esteem, while an example of the latter might be an aggressive manner leading to a need for affection not being met.

What is a ‘people’ problem?

As noted above, problems come in all shapes and sizes and can have different causes. They can be technical (the new software is incompatible with the existing software we use), financial (outgoings exceed income) or logistical (the equipment we need is not where we need it to be) and so on. While problems such as these will generally have human consequences (frustration, poverty or other such negative outcomes), what I refer to as ‘people’ problems have not only human consequences, but also human causes for the most part. This is primarily, but not exclusively, a question of relationships. Relationships can be wonderful and a great source of strength and joy. However, they can also be terrible and a source of great pain and problems. This can arise because of the nature of the relationship, a change in it or the ending of it.

Relationships are not only individual matters, of course. Problems arise because of relationships between groups or other ‘factions’ (genders, ethnic or religious groups and so on). We should therefore be wary of adopting too narrow a perspective on this.

Relationships involve a number of dimensions, but four in particular merit our attention here:

- *Power* We should be wary of seeing power as something an individual either has or does not have. Power is, by and large, a matter of relationships. For example, a manager may have power over an employee in the workplace, but that relationship may be reversed outside work if, for example, that employee is a special constable. Power is a very complex issue, but for present purposes we should note that it is an important

dimension of relationships (and relationships are an important dimension of power).

- *Conflict* A common mistake is for people to assume that conflict is what occurs when relationships break down. However, in reality, relationships can be characterized by conflict over a very long period of time without ever breaking down. Conflict, or at least the potential for conflict, is present in all relationships.
- *Communication* Relationships exist through communication and are also a major channel of communication (consider, for example, how much of your communication is with people you are in some sort of relationship with, compared with communicating with people who are peripheral to your network of relationships).
- *Identity* Our sense of who we are arises, in part at least, from our relationships. For example, being a parent is not only a status, it is also a relationship. (In my own case, my identity as a parent stems from my relationship with my daughter.) Where there are problems in relationships, there can be problems of identity. Indeed, people experiencing major problems (a bereavement, for example) will often say: 'I don't know who I am anymore'.

Another important point to recognize about 'people' problems is that someone experiencing a problem can lead to other people experiencing problems. For example, someone who is having personal difficulties may, as a result of the build up of tension, indulge in bullying behaviour. Indeed, it is very commonly the case that someone *causing* problems is also *experiencing* problems. It is therefore important that we do not fall into the trap commonly known as 'the blame game'. Unacceptable behaviour is precisely that – unacceptable, but rather than simply condemning people for such behaviour, it can be far more fruitful (in both the short and long term) to look at why such behaviour is occurring and see whether action can be taken to change the underlying causes. This does not mean that people should not be held responsible for their actions – they certainly should – but, if we want to resolve problematic situations, then we need to go further (and look wider) than simply allocating blame.

All action is interaction

This is a point I was lucky enough to learn at an early stage in my career. All action is interaction means that we do not operate in a vacuum. What I do is influenced by the actions of others around me, and my actions in turn will influence, to a certain extent at least, the actions of others. We go about our business in a world where people influence each other, where people influence the circumstances in which they live and work and the circumstances influence the people. If we want to develop an adequate understanding of people and their problems, we need to bear in mind that we are dealing with complex interactive situations rather than individuals in isolation.

An important concept here is that of ‘the person in context’. What this refers to is the need to recognize that, although each of us is a unique individual in our own right, we are all unique individuals in a social context. So, while I am a unique individual, I also am a member of a class group, a gender, an ethnic group and so on. There will be wider sociological factors that have a bearing on who I am and how I go about making my impression upon the world. It is not uncommon for people to forget about the person in context and focus all their attention on the individual, as if he or she lives outside of this context. Sometimes we can make the opposite mistake and see the context and put great emphasis on the significance of wider factors, but lose sight of the actual person at the heart of a situation. The key point to remember here is that we need to bear in mind the person *and* the context and not fall into the trap of looking at either the person or the context.

Another important dimension of this notion that all action is interaction is that problems will actually intertwine – that is, it would be naïve to look at particular problems in isolation. For example, the problem of one person being aggressive may be linked with another problem of someone else being subdued or even depressed. This is not necessarily to say that one problem causes the other, because sometimes they may cause each other or both may be caused by another set of circumstances. But, what it does mean is that we need to look at the big picture. We need to look at how problems may be interacting, perhaps reinforcing each other at times, cancelling each other out at others (although it has to be recognized that the former is much more common than the latter!). Someone who wants to be a skilled problem solver must therefore

become accustomed to thinking more widely than seeing just individuals or just individual problems. One of the tools to be discussed in Part Two is that of helicopter vision, and this is a notion closely linked to the point I am making here – the need to get an overview or, as it is often called, ‘the big picture’.

A third important point to note in relation to this central idea that all action is interaction is that the helper becomes part of the problem scenario – that is, in engaging with people who are experiencing problems, our input becomes part of the dynamic. This can be positive or negative, in the sense that our input can help, but can also hinder or even make the situation worse (see, for example, the discussion of the drama triangle in Part Two).

This third point is particularly important as it puts a lot of responsibility on our shoulders. When we enter a problem situation, it is to be hoped that we are doing so with the genuine intention of making the situation better or, where possible, resolving the problems we encounter. However, it also has to be recognized that our intervention can be detrimental. We can make a bad situation worse.

Problem identification

When we endeavour to tackle people problems, one thing we need to be very clear about is: what precisely is the problem we are tackling (or what are the problems)? A very common mistake is for people to try and come up with solutions before they have carefully worked out what the problem is. Sometimes the pressure of the problem situation leads us to feel that we need to come up with something very quickly. This can be quite dangerous, as we can often suggest or implement actions that are not appropriate. A key problem-solving skill, then, is the ability to resist the temptation to rush into attempting to provide solutions before we are clear what problem it is that we are dealing with.

Linked to this is the importance of establishing who it is a problem for. The significance of this lies in the fact that a situation could be problematic for different people in different ways. For example, in a situation involving conflict between two people, each of them may see the situation in very different terms and may have very different ideas about the nature, causes and possible solutions to the problem. A situation that can very commonly arise is where

something can be a problem to one person, or group of people, but a benefit or a positive development for another person or another group. For example, where a project is cancelled, this may present significant headaches for one group of people but may be a source of great relief for another group who may have had doubts about their ability to fulfil the requirements of the project.

A further important point to consider in relation to problem identification is the need to take the problem to where the solution lies. What I mean by this is that there is little point focusing effort and attention on areas of a situation where a solution is not to be found. For example, if the solution to a particular problem relies on the provision of particular resources, then it will be necessary to take that problem to the person, or persons, who control those resources. To understand this further, consider the example of stress in the workplace. The traditional approach to stress is to perceive it as the sign of a weak individual, somebody who is not coping with the demands of their job. However, it is increasingly being recognized that stress is best seen in broader terms in relation to, for example, how the organization is managed. Giving a workload to somebody that he or she cannot cope with is not necessarily the sign of a weak individual, but could just as well be the sign of an organization that is being mismanaged (see the Health and Safety Executive Standards on workplace stress: www.hse.org.uk).

Motivation

Problem solving is something we do *with* people rather than *to* them. Therefore, it is important for them to have at least some degree of motivation to bring a resolution to the problems. To be an effective problem solver, we therefore need to have at least a basic understanding of motivation. It is beyond the scope of this book to provide a detailed exposition of what is involved in the complex psychology of motivation. However, what I can more realistically do is concentrate on four sets of issues and refer the interested reader to Part Three of the book where guidance on further learning in this area is provided.

1. *Pain versus pay-off* Very often the pain or suffering involved in a problem situation is enough to motivate the persons concerned to make the necessary changes. However, it is not

always that simple. Sometimes, despite the pain involved, the individual or individuals concerned may be receiving some sort of payoff or reward from the problem situation and this in itself can sustain it. For example, in a situation where somebody is developing a drink problem, he or she may be aware of the difficulties that this is causing and may wish to solve the problem, but the benefits that are derived from excessive drinking may stand in the way of this. Motivation, then, is not simply a matter of 'you've either got it or you haven't'. It can involve certain conflicts and, in particular, a trade-off between pain and pay-off.

2. *Balancing risks* People who are not motivated to tackle their problems often say that it is because they lack confidence in doing so. In my experience, lack of confidence can often derive from a person weighing up the risks of taking action and comparing this with what they perceive as the relatively easy option of doing nothing. However, this can be misleading. This is because there are risks involved in doing nothing. A more realistic approach, therefore, is to weigh up the risks involved in taking action compared with the risks involved in not taking action. Very often people become embroiled in a problem situation and can see the risks involved in trying to resolve it, but perhaps are less open to the suggestion that there are significant risks involved in not tackling their problems. A skilled problem solver can therefore often be involved in trying to help people get a more balanced perspective on the risks involved in their situation from the point of view of both taking action and not doing so.
3. *Resistance, change and grief* It is not uncommon for people to resist tackling their problems because to do so would involve some degree of change. When we enter into a change period in our life, particularly a significant amount of change, this can lead to a grief reaction. This is because even though the change may be very positive, we may lose certain things that we value as part of the change process. This is a point to which we shall return below in the section headed 'Promoting change'.
4. *Problem embedding* This is a term I use to refer to the process whereby trying to tackle one problem can bring us up against another problem, and trying to solve the second problem can bring us up against a third problem and so on. That is, sometimes problems are embedded within wider problems – in

the same way that Russian dolls are embedded one within the others. Where this 'problem embedding' occurs, it can be a real test of motivation. For example, someone can try very hard to solve the first problem, but when they realize that this leads to a second problem, they may give up. They may regard the situation as irresolvable rather than turn their problem-solving attention to the second problem they encounter. Practice focus 1.1 illustrates this.

Practice focus 1.1

Lin had a lot of experience of helping people solve their problems. She was aware that trying to solve one problem often unearthed another one. She was also aware that coming across a second problem would often lead to people giving up on the first – to adopt a defeatist attitude when they realized that one problem was embedded in another. She was therefore ready for this whenever the situation arose, as she could anticipate that it would be an issue. Her way of dealing with it was to make it clear from the beginning of her work with a particular individual or group that one problem might reveal another and that it would be important to then turn their attention to this second problem rather than give up. This did not guarantee that people would not become defeatist, but it did seem to lessen the chances of that happening, and it also gave her a good platform from which to challenge the defeatism if it did arise.

Problems not puzzles

Revans (1998) draws an important distinction between problems and puzzles. He argues that puzzles have a single, definitive solution. For example, in a crossword puzzle, there is only one correct answer (in principle) for each clue. A problem, by contrast, is something that can have many solutions. Each potential solution will have strengths and weaknesses, costs and benefits, advantages and disadvantages. It will rarely be the case that there is a solution that will be entirely positive without some sort of drawback. There are two key issues arising from this. First, there is the question of ownership. We have to remember whose problem it is. There is little point in our trying to impose our own solution on someone unless that person is committed to that particular solution. This is an example of working in partnership which will be discussed in

more detail below in the section headed 'PRECISE practice'. What it involves is working with the individuals concerned but without taking over – without trying to impose our solution. It is more a case of working together to identify possible solutions, evaluating them and coming up with what is perceived as the best way forward.

Second, this means that different problem solvers will adopt different approaches. It certainly does not mean that it is inappropriate or unacceptable that you are adopting a different approach from that adopted by a colleague, for example. It does mean that all of us involved in people problems can learn from each other and benefit from each other's experiences, but we must avoid coming to the simplistic solution that there is one right answer or one correct approach. Each approach, as noted above, will have its strengths and weaknesses.

Promoting change

Problem solving can be seen as a process of moving from an undesirable situation to a more desirable one. Change is therefore essential to that process. When we are talking about problem solving, we are, of course, talking about promoting change. This can be seen to apply at six levels:

1. *Individuals* The resolution of very many problems involves changing the behaviour or attitudes of one or more individuals. Sometimes the behaviour of one person can cause problems for one or more others – for example, when a key person is behaving in an insensitive way. However, what can also occur is when an individual, through his or her behaviour and attitude, causes problems for him- or herself. An example of this would be somebody who perhaps adopts a confrontational attitude towards other people which results in a far higher level of conflict or even aggression than is necessary. The individual concerned may not realize that it is his or her behaviour that is leading to the problematic reaction being experienced.
2. *Families* The point was made earlier that individuals need to be understood in context. The family context is a big part of this. Even where an individual lives alone and not apparently as part of a family, it is unlikely that relationships with family

members or the influence of family members through upbringing, for example, will not still be a significant part of the situation. The family context is therefore an important part of understanding problems. This is largely because families develop a set of unwritten rules – their own culture, as it were. Families also tend to have sets of power relations and certain channels of communication. Problems can arise in relation to any of these – that is, culture, power relations and communication. What is also interesting, and important to note, is that problems within families can lead to problems elsewhere – for example, in the workplace. Someone who, within their own family, is in a relatively powerless position may therefore lack confidence in dealing with the exercise of power in the workplace. However, we should be careful not to oversimplify here, as the transfer of problems from one domain (that is, the family) to another (the workplace) is not inevitable.

3. *Groups* This can refer to formal groups, such as staff teams, project teams, committees and so on or, more importantly, to gatherings of people who come together for a particular purpose, or just by force of circumstance. A key concept here is that of group dynamics. There is an extensive literature (see Part Three) which addresses the way in which individuals, when combined in a group, can produce complex patterns of interaction. As with families, much of this can relate to cultures based on unwritten rules, power relations and communication.
4. *Communities* When an individual is experiencing problems, these can affect not just that individual and his or her immediate family and perhaps colleagues, but also the wider community. For example, somebody experiencing mental health problems can cause distress and concern within a community. However, it is not simply the case that individual problems can become translated into community problems; communities themselves can have problems – for example, as a result of the lack of certain resources or amenities. There may also be tensions or conflicts within a community, perhaps for historical reasons, perhaps linked to social problems like racism or sexism. It is sadly the case that the community level is often one that is neglected by many people in the people professions. It is a very easy mistake to make to concentrate predominantly on individuals, perhaps paying some attention to their family or work context, but without considering the

wider community, both in terms of how the individual can be affecting that community and how that community can be affecting the individual.

5. *Organizations* I have previously made the point (Thompson, 2003a) that organizations are dangerous places. What I mean by this is that organizations can have a very detrimental effect on us. For example, the organization we work for can have a hugely influential impact on our lives, sometimes in a negative way. Consider, for example, the following scenarios:
 - (a) An employee is devastated by being made redundant and is extremely worried about how he or she will be able to manage financially without a regular salary to rely on.
 - (b) A staff member is bullied by a manager to the extent that he or she becomes ill as a result of the stress involved.
 - (c) An applicant for promotion feels bitter, angry and distressed when his or her application is declined.
 - (d) A whole group of employees are extremely concerned when they are told that their team is to be disbanded as a result of reorganization.

Of course, these are not the only examples of how organizations can have a negative impact on people within them. Problems often have their roots in the way organizations work and the way they treat people. Although the idea of an organization is traditionally presented in very rational terms, in reality organizations are very emotive places. By this I mean that emotions play a very important role in how business is conducted and how organizational life is experienced by its participants. When the emotional dimension of organizations is neglected or mishandled, significant problems can arise.

6. *Society* Some problems can be seen to arise from the very workings of our society – that is, they have their roots in complex political and socioeconomic matters way beyond the scope of individuals. While as problem solvers we may be in no position (apart from voting every so often) to change the nature of society and its political workings, we can at least take account of them in understanding the complexities of the problems we deal with at the other five levels.

This brief overview of the six levels should be sufficient to paint a picture of just how complex the notion of promoting change is. One

key point that I wish to emphasize is that it is important that we move away from the idea that promoting change is exclusively, or even predominantly, about promoting individual change. Very often the need for change lies elsewhere, and it would be foolish for us to ignore that fact.

PRECISE practice

PRECISE is an acronym for **p**artnership-based, **r**ealistic, **e**mpowering, **c**reative, **i**ntegrated, **s**ystematic and **e**ffective practice. This is a framework that I have devised to try and get across the point that good practice in problem solving needs to fit in with these seven areas. Let us look at each of them in turn.

Partnership based

The point was made earlier that there is little point in trying to impose a solution on people, as this is very unlikely to work. There are also ethical considerations about whether we have the right to try and impose a solution on somebody else. This approach is therefore best avoided. What is much more appropriate is an approach based on partnership. What this involves is working closely with the people concerned to:

- (a) identify what the problem areas are;
- (b) establish possible solutions;
- (c) evaluate those solutions and choose the most appropriate way forward; and
- (d) implement together, where appropriate, a plan of action.

In some circumstances, our role will be to help people understand how best to move forward and then leave them to implement the plan themselves. But in other circumstances, we will also have a role in working in partnership with them actually to implement the plan itself.

Realistic

This can be seen to apply in two senses. First of all, we need to be realistic in the sense of making sure that our proposed solutions

are workable. It can be harmful and counterproductive to generate unrealistic expectations. We therefore have to make sure that our feet are firmly on the ground when it comes to tackling problems. We also need to be realistic in the sense referred to earlier – namely, to avoid the unhelpful extremes of pessimism and negativity on the one hand, and naïve optimism on the other. Realism, in my view, is the healthy balance between these two extremes. It involves recognizing that, in any situation, there will be positives, but there will also be negatives. The danger with pessimism is that we see the weaknesses, but fail to address the strengths. The problem with optimism is that we see the positives, but do not take adequate account of the negatives, thus leaving ourselves very vulnerable.

Empowering

Literally, the term ‘empower’ means to give power to. However, we cannot do this in a direct or literal sense. What empowerment is really about is helping people gain greater control over their lives and circumstances. This can involve helping them to recognize obstacles to progress, both within their own mind, where appropriate, and in their wider social circumstances – for example, if they are being discriminated against or disadvantaged in some way by other people. Empowerment also involves helping people solve their own problems rather than making them dependent on us. This is because, in the former case, the power mainly lies with the individual concerned. Once we leave the situation they are in control of their circumstances to a larger extent than they were before if our attempts at empowerment have worked. However, if we act in such a way that creates dependency, then this sets up a power relationship in which the person we are trying to help is actually less powerful because they are now in a subordinate relationship to ourselves. A key part of effective problem solving, then, is that we make sure that, as far as possible, we empower people to resolve their own difficulties rather than do it for them and, in the process, risk making them dependent on us.

An important part of this is to recognize people’s strengths and seek to build on them. It is very easy, when dealing with problems, to lose sight of the strengths dimension and thereby adopt an unduly negative perspective on the situation being dealt with. We all have strengths to draw upon, but it is not unusual for the pressure of

certain problem situations to cast a shadow over them, perhaps to the point where we forget to take them into consideration and make full use of them.

Similarly, resilience is a characteristic that can usefully be fostered as part of an ethos of empowerment. Being 'resilient' means being able to withstand pressures and adversity and, where possible, using the situation as a basis for developing new strengths – 'growing' as a result of the experience. The notion of resilience as part of empowerment helps us to appreciate that people problem solving is not about doing things to or for people, but rather doing what we can to help them resolve their own difficulties, to draw on their strengths and to use the experience to develop new strengths where possible.

Creative

In the very pressurized work settings in which so many people professionals operate, it is very easy to get into habits and patterns, to get into a rut. This can be very destructive in a number of ways – for example, in the detrimental effect it can have on morale. Another problem that it causes is that such an approach closes off our ability to be creative, to find a range of potential solutions and to explore these together, rather than simply to opt for the first solution that comes to mind.

There is a common stereotype that associates creativity with being artistic. This is misleading as some of the world's greatest scientists have been very creative indeed. Art may indeed involve creativity, but creativity does not need to involve art. Being creative means not getting stuck in ruts and coming up with standard solutions. It involves being able to look carefully at a situation and to be able to generate a number of different outlooks, a number of different ways forward.

Integrated

In many situations, there will be more than one person trying to help. If we are not careful, this can lead to a very fragmented approach, where some people's efforts actually get in the way of or counteract the efforts of others. It is therefore important that we adopt an integrated approach – that is, one which takes account of the various issues involved, the various people involved, rather

than working in an isolated, fragmented way. This is more easily said than done, but the efforts required to adopt an integrated approach are none the less, well worth the investment of time and energy involved.

Systematic

Systematic practice is a concept discussed in *People Skills* (Thompson, 2002a). In a nutshell, it refers to the importance of being clear at all times about what we are trying to achieve, how we intend to achieve it and how we will know when we have achieved it. This is very important because, without such a framework, it is very easy for the pressures and demands of the job to push us into a situation where we lose focus, we drift and become prey to a great many distractions. If you are not familiar with the concept of systematic practice, it is highly recommended that you read the relevant chapters in *People Skills*.

Effective

It perhaps goes without saying that there is no point in putting a great deal of time, effort and energy into attempting to resolve problems unless we are to be effective in doing so. The reality of the situation is that some problems, despite our best efforts, cannot be resolved. However, it is vitally important that we 'give it our best shot' and try to make sure that our efforts are as effective as possible. Much of this will come from the accumulation of experience and wisdom. However, there is also much to be gained, even for those of us in the early stages of our people problem-solving careers, to maintain a clear focus on the principles underlying our practice, and make sure that, in being 'precise', we are maximizing the chances of being effective.

Problems and challenges

Tackling problems involves coming face to face with certain challenges. Indeed, it could be argued that one of the rewards of being a people problem solver is that there can be great pleasure and satisfaction derived from rising to, and meeting, challenges. In order to understand the complexities of problems and challenges, it

can be helpful to divide challenges into three categories: existential, interpersonal and sociopolitical.

Existential challenges

This refers to the type of challenges that we face simply by being human beings, by being in the world and seeking to make sense of it – our ‘spiritual journey’, as it were, of finding our way through life and maintaining a thread of meaning through it (Moss, 2005). These involve the challenges of growing up, developing our own identity, finding our place in the world, coping with the anguish or ‘angst’ involved in transitions and losses, and so on. While these may be experienced differently by different people, they are the sort of challenges that, by and large, we all face as we work our way through life. The emphasis here, then, is on rising to these challenges rather than avoiding them. Existential challenges can generally be seen as crises or turning points in our life – for example, adolescence. Making the transition from childhood to adulthood may well present us with certain problems, but there are also tremendous gains to be made. Responding to existential challenges therefore will often involve trying to make the best of the situation to maximize the positive potential of the crisis (Thompson, 1991). These are the sort of challenges that we all have to go through at some time or another, and so there is a wealth of wisdom and experience to be drawn on in dealing with these.

However, balanced against that, it must be remembered that each of us will experience a crisis in our own personal way. However much we may have in common with others who have experienced similar crises, it still remains our own personal crisis, a unique experience for each of us.

Interpersonal challenges

Based on the theme of ‘all action is interaction’, as discussed above, we can recognize that many of the challenges we face in life are interpersonal challenges. By this I mean that they arise from our relationships with other people. We live in a social world and this means that other people play an important role in our lives, whether we like it or not. Many problems arise as a result of conflict, and this in turn is frequently due to interpersonal issues.

In many cases, helping people to solve their problems involves a large amount of work geared towards managing relationships.

Sociopolitical challenges

These are the types of challenge that arise because of who we are in relation to broader society. They are connected to such matters as 'social location'. This refers to our position in the social hierarchy in terms of power relations connected with, for example, race, class and gender. An example of a sociopolitical challenge would be that of dealing with poverty. We all have the challenge of making ends meet but, for some people, their social circumstances mean that this is a much greater struggle than it is for the majority of other people. Traditional approaches to people and their problems have tended to individualize matters, to focus on what relates to specific unique individuals. And, while recognizing the uniqueness of the individual is clearly important, this also has to be balanced out by recognition that each person is an individual in a social context. We can produce a very distorted perspective on the situation if we ignore the social context, as argued earlier. However, I am not simply reiterating that point here, I am making the related point that often the challenges we encounter are not only experienced in a social context but *arise from* that context.

Practice focus 1.2

Rachid undertook a project on depression as part of his course. He obtained permission to interview a number of people who attended a mental health day centre and who had been diagnosed as suffering from depression. He felt it would be better in terms of privacy and confidentiality to carry out the interviews in people's own homes rather than at the centre. This proved to be a very significant decision as it meant that Rachid visited the homes of several members of the day centre – and from this he saw for himself the powerful role social circumstances can play in people's problems. He saw evidence of considerable poverty and deprivation, very poor-quality housing, stigma and discrimination, high crime rates and little social cohesion. He began to think that he would be depressed if he lived in circumstances like that. When he discussed the situation with his tutor, the point was emphasized that, in order to understand a person's problems, we need to understand issues relating to the individual *and* to his or her social circumstances, and that we should be careful not to oversimplify by looking at one set of issues without considering the other.

To connect this with another point made earlier, this is another reason why it is important not to adopt a judgemental attitude, as often what are perceived as personal inadequacies on the part of a particular individual may owe more to the social circumstances of that individual than to any personal characteristics.

The problem-solving process

Perhaps a more appropriate title for this section would be *a* problem-solving process. This is because there is no single, definitive approach. As I argued earlier, we are dealing with problems, not puzzles, and so there will be a multiplicity of ways in which we can tackle the issues arising and there is no simple right or wrong to this. We are dealing with much more complex issues than that. It is important to emphasize, then, that what I am presenting here is not a dogmatic approach, but rather a set of guidelines based on experience and research which I have found to be useful in my own extensive experience of problem solving and in my equally extensive experience of teaching others how to tackle such problems.

The process can be divided into a number of sections or subsections. I shall discuss each of them in turn.

Information gathering

It is dangerous to try and tackle problems in the dark. We need to have information about key aspects of the situation. We need to gather information about people's perception of the problem(s), their feelings about them and reactions to them, the factors that appear to be significant, and so on. Knowing what information to gather is a skill that takes time to develop. To explore these issues further, a useful starting point would be the chapter on 'Assessment' in *People Skills*.

Analysis and problem definition

Gathering information can lead us to a situation where we have a lot of data, but it does not really tell us anything. This is where the analysis comes in. It involves piecing together the relevant bits of information, forming patterns, making sense of what we see. From this, we can then start to engage in the process of problem definition:

What precisely is the problem/are the problems? Who is it a problem for? and so on, as discussed earlier. An important pitfall to avoid here is that of drowning in information. This seems to be a characteristic of our modern age – the fact that we have access to so much information. On occasions, problem solvers can cause problems for themselves by gathering so much information that they do not know what to do with it. They fall into the trap of gathering as much information as possible rather than gathering the relevant information they need. Well-developed analytical skills can therefore be seen as an important part of the effective problem solver's repertoire.

Identification of strengths and opportunities

It is very easy when dealing with problems to focus predominantly, or even exclusively, on the negatives, to fail to see that situations also involve strengths and opportunities. This is something that will be discussed in more detail in Part Two under the heading of 'SWOT analysis'. However, at this point, it is important to emphasize that we should not allow ourselves to produce an unbalanced assessment of the situation that fails to take account of the positives as well as the negatives.

Exploration of possible solutions

Following on from our discussion earlier of the importance of creativity in problem solving, we can note that there is much to be gained from exploring a range of possible solutions, rather than simply opting for the first one that comes to mind. The chances of the first solution that occurs to us being the best one possible are clearly pretty slim. We therefore have to be careful that we do not allow our anxieties to produce a fairly rapid solution to a problem or set of problems to lead us into a situation where we fail to consider other options.

Evaluation of possible solutions

Once we have a good understanding of the potential solutions, the next step is to weigh them up, to work out which in the circumstances is likely to be the best way forward (or which combination of solutions is likely to be the most effective). It should be remembered

that this evaluation needs to be undertaken in partnership – that is, we need to work together with the people concerned to identify what is likely to work best. It is not simply a matter of our prescribing the cure.

Formulate a plan

Sometimes gathering information about a problem, analysing it, and discussing this with the person concerned, can be enough to free them up to take the initiative and resolve matters. However, this is not always the case and, in many circumstances, what is needed is to formulate a plan of action. Having evaluated the possible solutions, we now need to look at such matters as the timescales involved, who is going to be responsible for what, and so on (this links closely with systematic practice as discussed above). Having a plan is very important because, on the one hand, it helps to maintain a structure and discipline to the work being undertaken – it prevents drift and a lack of focus. On the other hand, it also enables us to monitor progress and to ensure that we are in fact heading in the right direction.

There is no need for the plan to be rigidly adhered to if it is not working, as there is always scope to review the plan. However, at this stage, it is important to map out the route we intend to follow to arrive at the problem resolution. It is unlikely that we will simply arrive there without having first worked out our route plan.

Revisit the information and analysis

Before implementing the plan that we have formulated, we just need to make one further quick check. We need to go back to the information that we gathered and the analysis of it that we performed, partly to reassure ourselves that we have got it right before we start taking important steps forward, and partly to see whether the situation has changed or is changing, as we go through the problem-solving process.

Implement the plan

Once we have reassured ourselves that we have produced the right information and analysis as far as we possibly can in the circumstances, we are now ready to implement the plan, to take

the steps identified in that plan in order to work towards our desired outcomes.

Monitor and review

People and circumstances change, and so it is essential that we keep the situation under review. It would be very naïve indeed, and it would also be dangerous, simply to allow situations to move on without keeping a clear focus on whether things are moving in the desired direction. Often, what enables us to be effective problem solvers is that our presence and support can give a sense of confidence and security to the people experiencing the problems. If we fail to monitor and review the situation, then that confidence can be lost. That security can disappear and we can very quickly find ourselves back at square one, having wasted a lot of time, effort and energy. In so doing, we may also have 'blown it' in terms of any future work because, if in failing to monitor and review, we have lost the trust of the people concerned, then it is going to be very difficult, if not impossible, to regain that trust.

Conclude involvement when appropriate

A very clear trend that I have noticed in works which discuss problem solving or helping processes is that they often fail to mention the conclusion or termination of that process. It is as if it is assumed that work will continue indefinitely. Given our discussions above of empowerment and the need to avoid creating dependency, clearly this is highly problematic. Considerable attention therefore needs to be given to the question of when and how to draw involvement to a close. Timing will be important. We do not wish to withdraw too soon and run the risk of our good work unfurling. Nor do we wish to stay involved longer than is necessary, thus wasting our own time resources and risking creating dependency. How to conclude is also important. There are skills involved in how to bring our involvement to an end.

Problems and opportunities

You will probably be familiar with the idea that 'there's no such thing as a problem, only an opportunity'. This idea is both inaccurate and

dangerous. If we were to say that problems also present opportunities, then that is something that I would fully agree with. However, to argue that there is no such thing as a problem, only an opportunity, is naïve in the extreme.

Reference was made earlier to the notion of crisis, a turning point in somebody's life – a situation that cannot stay the same. It will either get better or get worse. Often the problems that people encounter are indeed crises and, as such, they can be quite threatening, but they can also be a gateway to growth, improvement and development. A skilled and experienced people problem solver will therefore be trying to capitalize on problem situations, particularly those that are crises, in order to maximize the positive potential to bring out the silver linings, as it were. This is something that has to be handled carefully and sensitively. For example, when somebody is very distressed or worried about their situation, if we are trying to be positive about the situation in an insensitive, ill-thought through way, we may only serve to alienate that person from us. They may see us as somebody who does not understand what they are going through because we are trying to put a positive gloss on something that they perhaps find acutely painful. We should therefore be wary of tackling these issues in an insensitive way. They call for very careful and sensitive handling.

Reflective practice

The final chapter of *People Skills* is devoted to the topic of reflective practice. This is an approach to professional practice and management which seeks to avoid the extremes of (i) adopting a mechanistic approach to the use of professional knowledge (research, for example) and (ii) of rejecting the professional knowledge base in favour of a 'common sense' approach. There are two ill-informed and ill-advised schools of thought. There is the school of thought that sees research, theory and professional knowledge more broadly as the source of 'the answers', and adherents of this school are often disappointed because the knowledge base does not tell them precisely what they need to know. It does not give them a clear plan of action to follow. At the other extreme is a school of thought that says 'I prefer to stick to practice', as if research, theory and professional knowledge have got nothing to do with the work they undertake. In between these two dangerous extremes is

reflective practice. Reflective practice involves a number of things but for present purposes, I shall concentrate on three in particular; three that are very relevant to this particular book.

1. *Not just using tools mechanistically* The point was made earlier that the tools provided in Part Two of the book will not do the job for us. They are a means to an end, but they cannot be relied upon to do our work for us. One of the tenets of reflective practice is that we need to act like skilled tailors cutting the cloth of the professional knowledge base to suit the specific measurements and requirements of the garment we are trying to create. That is, we need to draw on the professional knowledge base in such a way that it fits the specific practice realities – the problems we are seeking to solve – as closely as possible.
2. *Art and craft* Traditional approaches to research and theory have tended to emphasize science and rationality, but the proponents of reflective practice (for example, Schön, 1983) have emphasized the art and craft involved. What this refers to is that the knowledge and understanding available to us have to be crafted to suit circumstances, just as an artist or a craftsperson has to draw on a set of skills and the benefit of experience in order to produce the desired outcome. But, to return to the point I made earlier, it is important not to confuse the creativity involved with being an actual artist. In parallel fashion, having a degree in science and technology does not make someone into an engineer. It may provide them with much of the core knowledge that they need to be an engineer, but actually achieving the status of an engineer means developing the artistry and the craft skills to be able to use that knowledge in practice. This is very much what reflective practice is about, not simply having the knowledge but having the craft skills to be able to use it appropriately in real life problem-solving situations, whether we are engineers working with materials and natural substances, or problem solvers in people professions working with people.
3. *Analytical skills* The point was made earlier that well-developed analytical skills are an important part of a problem solver's repertoire. This is largely because analysis is a key part of reflective practice. To be a reflective practitioner, we need to be able to make sense of the complex realities we deal

with, to be able to cut through the confusion and the indeterminacy, as Schön calls it, of real life situations. We need to be able to create a picture of what we are dealing with that is sufficiently clear to enable us and the people we are working with to understand the nature of the problems and the possible solutions.

Reflective practice, then, is clearly an important basis for good practice in working with people and their problems.

It is important to recognize that some problems are more difficult than others to solve and that some may not be capable of resolution at all. An important concept to note in this regard is what Clarke and Stewart (2003) describe as ‘wicked issues’:

Wicked problems . . . are those for which there is no obvious or easily found solution. They seem intractable. . . . There can be hope that wicked problems will be solved over time, but that requires learning of the nature of the problems and of their causes. They require a capacity to derive and design new approaches for their resolution and to learn of their impact. They are likely to be resolved not directly but through an iterative process – learning, trying and learning. (p. 274)

They go on to comment on how such problems can be addressed:

Tackling wicked issues therefore requires:

- holistic not partial or linear thinking, capable of encompassing the interaction of a wide variety of activities, habits, behaviour and attitudes;
- a capacity to think outside and work across organizational boundaries;
- ways of involving the public in developing responses;
- embracing a willingness to think and work in completely new ways. While most people will come to this trapped or constrained by conventional organizations, labels and assumptions, what is needed is willingness to entertain the unconventional and pursue the radical. (p. 275)

The idea of an iterative process plus the notion of being willing to think and work in new ways are both strongly consistent with reflective practice. A reflective approach to the complex, often ingrained problems we so often encounter can be therefore be seen as a much better option than a mechanistic approach that seeks to

apply a similar formula or that tries to achieve a simple solution. The fact that so many of the ‘people problems’ we deal with can be seen as ‘wicked’, in Clarke and Stewart’s sense, shows how important it is to adopt an approach premised on reflective practice.

Operacy

Operacy is a term introduced by Edward de Bono (de Bono, 1983), the writer best known for his work on lateral thinking (de Bono, 1990). He presents it as a term parallel with literacy and numeracy. Literacy refers to the ability to use words to good effect. Numeracy, similarly, refers to the ability to use numbers appropriately. Operacy refers to our actions and is used by de Bono to mean the ability to get things done, to ‘make things happen’. While we can never guarantee success in our problem-solving endeavours, we can at least adopt a ‘can do’ attitude, a positive commitment to achieving the outcomes we seek as far as we reasonably can.

Operacy and a ‘can do’ attitude are the opposite of the defeatism, cynicism and ‘learned helplessness’ that is unfortunately far too common in some sectors of the helping professions. We are often trying to make progress in very difficult circumstances, perhaps having to struggle by without the resources we need and not receiving the support, appreciation or recognition we deserve, and so it is understandable that there is a tendency to feel cynical and defeatist. However, the fact that it is understandable does not make it acceptable. This is because a negative, defeatist attitude makes it less likely that we will be able to help people solve their problems rather than more. And, as noted above, given that our intervention can actually make people’s problems worse in some circumstances, adopting a defeatist attitude is a very dangerous undertaking.

If we are being defeatist or cynical because we are feeling stressed, then I would argue strongly that we are duty bound to take steps to deal with that stress, rather than allow the people we are trying to help lose out because of our own problems.

Practice focus 1.3

Robbie had been in post for just over a year when his enthusiasm started to wane. Within a few months he was at a very low ebb indeed – he had become quite cynical and defeatist. His supervisor should have been in a position to help

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him tackle the issues, but he too was at a low ebb and they were both part of a culture of cynicism and defeatism that had developed over time. Things came to a head for Robbie when he applied for a post in another department within his office and was not even shortlisted for it. When he sought feedback from the section head in the department he had applied to work in about why he had not been shortlisted, he was told quite clearly and firmly that there was no room in that department for people who were paid to help others with problems, but who appeared to make no attempt to solve their own difficulties.

Conclusion

Part One has covered a wide range of issues, and it could be argued that it has not done justice to any of them. However, my intention here has not been to provide an in-depth exposition of problem solving. That would be far too unrealistic in the space available. Rather, my intention has been to provide an overview which will, it is to be hoped, alert you to some of the complexities involved and give you a framework for developing your studies of problem solving in greater depth and breadth. In this respect, this book parallels *People Skills* which provides an introductory overview to a wide range of skills, but does not have the luxury of examining any of them in any great detail. That is a task that must be left to other texts and other occasions.

My advice to you would be to begin now to explore the methods, techniques and tools in Part Two. Once you begin to read each of them, if it is something that appeals to you, then please read it in detail and take careful note of what it is about. If it is something that, for some reason, does not appeal to you, then feel free to move on to the next one. It is unlikely that all readers will find all fifty tools to their liking or suitable for their style of working. That is not a problem. Of the fifty presented, there is likely to be plenty of value for everyone. I would also suggest that, once you have finished working your way through Part Two, you return to Part One and re-read it. Reading something for a second time will in itself give you a greater depth of understanding but, reading it after having read Part Two, is likely to give you an even deeper understanding, as I anticipate that many of the points I have made in Part One will come to life much more fully once you have read (and better still, implemented) the tools and strategies presented. Once you have re-read Part One, you should then be in a strong

position to engage with Part Three and to follow up on those references, websites and so on that will offer you further food for thought, debate, analysis and learning. Indeed, there is a huge theory base underpinning the ideas presented in this book. It would not be realistic to attempt to cover that vast and complex theory base within the book itself, but it would certainly be wise for you to follow up at least some of the suggestions for further reading, as there is so much more that can be learned about this demanding but rewarding field of practice in dealing with people and their problems.

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