

## A PROBLEM SOLVING APPROACH TO GROUP EMPLOYMENT COUNSELLING

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### *Abstract*

It is becoming increasingly recognized that a group employment counselling approach presents many advantages in addressing some of the job readiness, job research and job search maintenance needs of clients. This article outlines a group problem solving model which can be applied in an employment counselling setting. There are seven stages in this model: (1) Identifying and sharing problems; (2) accepting responsibility for the problem; (3) accepting responsibility to do something about the problem; (4) stating the problem concretely; (5) exploring alternatives for resolving problems; (6) practising new behaviours; and, (7) group feedback and support. Each of the stages is described using related employment counselling examples.

One of the major challenges involved in developing counselling approaches for the unemployed is the range of needs which they present. For example, some persons are just beginning their career and are coming to grips with how to break into the job market. Others have a long work history, but may have developed few, if any, job maintenance or job change skills. A third group of people, typically women, face re-entry to a job market after a prolonged absence. Beyond these groups of people, there are others who present special needs in preparing for entry to the job market such as immigrant groups, native Indians, the handicapped, and ex-prisoners. It is obvious by the scope of needs presented by these diverse groups that employment counsellors are called upon to provide a wide range of counselling and information services on an individual and group basis. It is also becoming increasingly obvious that a group employment counselling approach presents many advantages in addressing some of these job readiness, job search and job maintenance needs (Employment and Immigration Canada, 1979). More specifically, a group approach seems most appropriate in assisting clients to understand other people's points of view, develop social interaction skills, learn to share concerns and ideas with others who face similar problems, obtain several reactions to problems expressed, and receive support from others (Mahler, 1979).

In addition, group approaches represent an efficient use of a counsellor's time. They also allow a counsellor to perceive a client in a more active social setting than individual counselling sessions allow.

Given the assumption that group approaches are viable in employment counselling settings, it becomes important to consider the nature and ob-

jectives of group offerings which may be developed. It is the purpose of this article to present a problem solving model which has a wide range of application in addressing the needs of unemployed clients.<sup>1</sup>

### *The Problem Solving Model*

In developing a group employment counselling model we have recognized the importance of the interaction between a person's perception and his/her environment. Humanistic theories such as client-centered (Rogers, 1951, 1959; Carkhuff, 1972, Wexler & Rice, 1974), Adlerian (Dreikurs, 1958; Adler, 1927, 1964), and transactional analysis (Berne, 1961, 1964; Steiner, 1974) tend to put the focus on perception change which leads to behavioural change, while more behavioural theories such as reality therapy (Glasser, 1965; Glasser & Zunin, 1973) and behaviourism (Skinner, 1953, Wolpe, 1958; Bandura, 1969, 1971) tend to focus more on behavioural change which leads to perception change. The group problem solving model we are proposing falls somewhere between these two camps. On the one hand, it recognizes the importance of understanding the frame of reference of the client coming for counselling, and, on the other hand, it provides the client with the concrete skills necessary in searching for employment. Figure 1 illustrates how this problem solving model relates to several other theoretical approaches.

In order to effectively use a group problem solving model in an employment counselling

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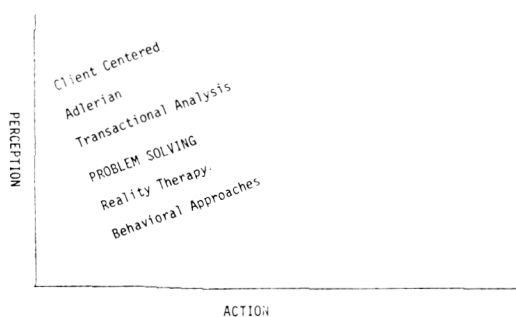


Figure 1.  
Context for the Problem Solving Model.

setting, it is important for the leader to be aware of the needs of the unemployed. For most people, work is a major source of self-validation (Herzberg, 1966). When people are not employed, or feel isolated within their employment setting, it is difficult for them to get the kind of feedback necessary to maintain a positive self-concept. From an Adlerian perspective, these people lack a sense of belonging to a meaningful work group. From Glasser's point of view, these people lack a major source of involvement necessary to maintain a success identity.

One of the consequences of lowering self-concept is the sense of immobility which accompanies it. This can lead to a vicious circle where the lack of meaningful work involvement leads to withdrawal which in turn decreases the likelihood of effective job search. From a behavioural point of view this can be explained in two ways: first, the person does not have a group which offers positive reinforcement, and second, the person does not meet with any success when trying to alter his/her circumstances.

With these needs and perspectives in mind we propose a group problem solving approach designed to enhance self-concept and facilitate effective action strategies. This model involves a series of seven stages and is consistent with generally recognized phases of group development (Fisher, 1974; Tuckman, 1965). The nature of the integration of the two approaches is outlined in the following way:

Phases of Group Development

- Stages in the problem solving model

Orientation

- Identifying and sharing problems

Response

- Accepting responsibilities for the problem

Emergence

- Accepting responsibility to do something about the problem
- Stating the problem concretely

- Exploring alternatives for resolving problems

Action

- Practising new behaviors
- Group feedback and support

A further explanation of each of the stages of the Problem Solving Model is provided in the descriptions that follow.

1. Identifying and Sharing Problems

When a group begins in an employment counselling setting, the leader characteristically knows little or nothing about group members and they in turn have little information about the leader or one another. In addition, members often are unclear about the goals of the group and the process by which the goals are to be achieved. As a result of these factors there is a tendency for group members as well as the leader to have feelings of apprehension and uncertainty. Initial group interaction tends to be characterized by tentativeness, ambiguity, anxiety, suspicion, and discomfort (Trotzer, 1977).

These conditions, which may be intensified by the needs and perspectives that unemployed people often bring to the group, challenge the group leader to concretely clarify the role of the group and to create an atmosphere of warmth, support, and acceptance. The importance of such an atmosphere being created early in a group's development can be explained from several points of view: (a) From an Adlerian perspective it tends to minimize inferiority feelings and encourage constructive participation, (b) from a reality therapy perspective it invites an involvement which is a necessary prerequisite for later commitment and action strategies, and (c) from a behavioural point of view it reinforces client participation and, so doing, increases it.

In order to establish this foundation, it is crucial for the group leader to begin by listening to and clarifying the needs expressed by individual group members (Egan, 1975). This initial interaction sets the tone for client participation in the group, allows group members to become somewhat acquainted with one another, and allows group members to evaluate the credibility of the leader.

In addition it provides the leader with the data which can allow him/her to summarize the needs of group members within the general context of the particular group being established. The important implication here is that the agenda for the group generally is interpreted to each individual group which forms on the basis of the needs and goals outlined by members of that group.

2. Accepting Responsibility for the Problem

The problems that are expressed in the initial stage are often framed in language that minimizes

personal responsibility. An external orientation toward life is maintained and the group perceives few internal controls. This might result in statements such as the following:

"There aren't any jobs anyway, what's the point in applying?"

"Who would want me? Employers are only interested in people who have a university degree."

"Getting hired is just a matter of knowing the right people and I just don't know them."

"It's too late for me, I've worked here for twenty years and this is all I know."

In all of these statements there is a degree of bleak fatalism and a sense that there is little that can be done to alter the group member's circumstances.

The external view illustrated by these negative perceptions develop as a means of coping with negative situations. Because of feelings of insecurity (I'm not OK) and the pain associated with failure, people seek ways to avoid taking responsibility for the failure. One way to achieve this is to assign all responsibility to an external source. This provides some immediate relief, but in the long term it leads to continued stagnation. Continuing with the examples that were mentioned above, if these statements are accepted then there is little point in going further. Of course, the consequence of never exploring alternatives or following through with any job applications is that a negative self-fulfilling prophecy is established and ongoing dissatisfaction is ensured.

As group members and the group leader confront these perceptions there is a need to somehow break the negative patterns that have been established. This usually results in a certain amount of turmoil as new information is presented and ideas are constructively challenged. During this phase it is necessary to avoid what transactional analysts refer to as "Yes But" and "Ain't it Awful" games. It is also necessary to continue with a positive caring stance even though there are differences in outlook.

This period of tension can be understood using cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957). From this perspective, when people are faced with conflicting ideas, one of the ways they seek to resolve the ambiguity is by discounting one of the positions. For example, suppose that someone believes that being employed is an important part of being a man. His experience, however, is that he has been unable to find work. To reduce the resulting dissonance he may begin to believe that there are absolutely no jobs available. In order to maintain this belief he not only has to continue saying it to himself, but also has to convince others of its validity. In the group counselling context this may surface when alternate viewpoints are expressed

and result in a certain amount of tension. This tension is necessary for change and must be handled with a high degree of sensitivity. Before the client can begin to consider other options, he must feel support from the group and the leader. He must also feel that people are making an effort to understand him and his ideas. If this positive context can be attained the client will be more open to feedback and more willing to entertain ideas which were previously too threatening. Such a transition has been described in the literature as the "risky-shift phenomenon," that is, with group support and cohesiveness the individual is able to undertake additional risks (the consideration of alternative ideas and actions) (Hare, 1976).

### 3. *Accepting Responsibility to do Something About the Problem*

This stage could be characterized as "commitment to action". Stages 1 and 2 should have the effect of allowing group participants to gain an increased understanding of their situations (Stage 1) and challenging them with new perspectives regarding their ideas (Stage 2). Further, the cognitive dissonance engendered in stage 2 provides the basic impetus for later action steps designed to reduce the dissonance. Stage 3 represents a transition between recognizing another point of view and acting. It is the stage in which group participants begin to internalize the idea that they can change their situations; that they have the capability of doing so; that it is their *responsibility* to do so. Further, it is at this stage that members begin to relate to or own some of the search techniques and labour market information which may have come up during the course of discussion or which were presented by the leader.

Member's statements in this stage may include:

"So there are jobs related to my skill — but I may need some further training or I may need to move."

"It's tough to find a job now — but there are some — I guess I'll have to look harder."

"I guess there are jobs around, — but I'm sure not very good at finding them."

"There are more possibilities that I had thought."

"Maybe I can make a change, even at my age."

These types of statements represent a significant change from the "I can't help it," "What's the use" statements which may precede them.

From a reality therapy perspective this stage represents the "commitment phase". It is important that the group leader recognize it as a commitment and not as an action strategy. In other words this stage is necessary but not sufficient in achieving behaviour change on the part of group members. At this stage members are

aware that they can do something but they have not yet concretely defined what they can do, outlined specific procedures, mastered skills needed to carry out these procedures, or thought through consequences of these procedures.

It becomes the central task of the remaining stages of the problem solving model to address these issues specifically.

#### 4. Stating the Problem Concretely

Stage 4 represents the first step in translating a “commitment to action” into defineable and workable strategies. In this stage group members are faced with several challenges. These include recognition of their belief that change is possible, understanding that their vague statements of the need for change require clarification to make action possible, and the ability to break general statements into a series of component activities.

Example: “It’s tough to find a job right now, but there are some—I guess I’ll have to look harder.”

The part of this statement which implies action and which requires further clarification is the “I guess I’ll have to look harder” part. This part of the statement can be broken into several components:

- What are the different ways?
- Are there any that I haven’t tried?
- Which ways are most effective?
- What skills are needed to carry out the most effective methods?
- How can I practise these skills?

These questions suggest several activities for this stage of the model. The first may involve the leader along with the rest of the group helping individual members clarify what they mean by their general commitment to action statements. Later activities in the example cited could include sharing of information regarding effective job search strategies for the types of jobs under consideration, group discussion regarding step by step activities needed to carry out these strategies, and group involvement in setting up practise sessions involving skills which will be needed.

The activities of this stage are important in that they further facilitate group members in taking responsibility for their actions. They firm up the commitment to action by making the suggested general actions seem more possible to carry out. From a transactional analysis perspective these activities make it increasingly difficult for members to play the “yes but” games which tend to put down any action strategy which might be suggested as being useful or important. Within a reality therapy frame of reference this step represents the first attempt at actually formulating a plan of action. This will ultimately lead a

group member to contracting with the leader to implement the plan.

#### 5. Exploring Alternatives for Resolving Problems

In the preceding stage the group members concretely defined their goals and the problems they were facing. Once this has been accomplished they must further examine what factors are keeping them from their goals (restraining forces) and what factors are moving them toward their goals (facilitating forces) (Gelatt, Varenhorst & Carey, 1972). The consideration of these forces (force field analysis) requires a careful consideration of themselves and their environment. The analysis must be “reality” based with constructive feedback from group members and the leader. This is followed by a consideration of what is realistically possible given their situation and motivation level. Glasser (1965) suggests that people need to force on a few activities that they can successfully complete. There is little point in designing elaborate plans if there is a high probability of failure.

The purpose behind the force field analysis is to help group members take a “hard” look at their situation. Consider the following illustrations:

A woman with a grade 11 education is planning to return to the work force as a secretary after being a housewife for the past twenty years. She is understandably nervous about job interview, about meeting the public and about her ability to handle typing and other office related tasks. She has been looking in the classified section of the newspaper for the past three months for a job, but has not sent in any applications.

##### Restraining forces

- lack of self-confidence
- lack of awareness of skill level
- lack of knowledge about how to find a job

##### Facilitating forces

- desire to make some additional money
- desire to meet some new people
- some skills in the area

##### Potential activities

- a. getting an assessment of current skill level (this would likely involve some testing)
- b. if additional training is necessary, exploring with an employment counsellor the various options
- c. obtaining information on how to conduct a successful job search (where to look, how to prepare a resumé, how to handle an interview)
- d. arranging to practise some of the job search behaviours in the group

A married, 40 year old man who has been working as a truck driver is interested in changing jobs. Although he only has a Grade 10 education he loves to read and is interested in becoming a librarian.

**Restraining forces**

- family responsibilities
- lack of self-confidence
- lack of information regarding training possibilities
- lack of information regarding job prospects

**Facilitating forces**

- high interest level
- good reading skills
- persistence

**Potential activities**

- a. discuss with employment counsellor the various loan possibilities, training options and job prospects
- b. discuss with family the sacrifices that will be necessary if further training is pursued
- c. arrange to spend time with a number of librarians discussing their job
- d. continue discussing plans with group members (additional support and clarification)

Each of the situations just outlined focusses on group members' strengths and weaknesses in applying formulated action strategies. This forms the foundation for the activities of Stage 6.

**6. Practising New Behaviours**

At each stage in the problem solving model there is a component of member self-assessment. This assessment is focused during Stage 5 and continues in Stage 6. The members have accepted responsibility for their actions and looked at strategies necessary to become more effective. During Stage 5 they were faced with the task of judging themselves with respect to the skills needed to carry out an action plan. In Stage 6 it becomes the role of the group to provide an atmosphere in which skills which are weak can be practised and in which feedback regarding skill levels in different areas can be given.

The nature of the feedback and practice sessions is determined by the individual and situation presented.

Example:

**Action plan**

- to conduct a successful job interview

**Skills needs**

- suitable appearance
- knowledge of several companies
- effective communication skills (verbal and nonverbal)

- résumé of skills, experience and so on

**Group Activities**

- feedback to member regarding appearance and presentation style during the group sessions
- information to the member regarding ways of obtaining knowledge about companies
- behavioural rehearsal (practice) of a job interview perhaps in stages; beginning with a friendly co-operative employer and ending with an unfriendly one; discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of the member's handling of the interview
- discussion about the writing of a résumé, the form and content which are suitable to the type of jobs in questions

Benefits of these kinds of activities are many. Two of the most important are that the person participating in the role play, for example, gets the opportunity to experience the situation in a sheltered setting and, as well, the group members not participating have an opportunity to learn some new skills by example (Bandura, 1969).

Following these types of activities within the group, it becomes the task of the group members to translate these practice sessions into a verbal or written commitment to practise new behaviours outside the group. At this point it is important for the group leader to (a) continue helping members become specific about their plans (i.e., the number of employers to be contacted, time of the day for the contacts, the information needed prior to each contact), and (b) continue supporting and encouraging members to go out and attempt new behaviours, not with a guarantee of success, but with an increased likelihood of it.

**7. Group Feedback and Support**

This stage occurs after each member has (a) clearly stated a strategy to be implemented in finding a job, (b) evaluated the strategy in terms of skills possessed to carry it out, and (c) practised it in the group and made modifications on the basis of feedback received. Once all of this has been done and each group member has attempted to implement his/her action plan, the activities of Stage 7 come into focus. These activities centre on giving each group member the opportunity to relay to the group his/her feelings about the action plan. It becomes the task of the leader and other group members to listen to what happened, offer reinforcement and encouragement, and suggest modifications where appropriate. From a reality therapy perspective these activities represent an evaluation of the results of implementing a plan and should result in a confirmation of its ef-

fectiveness or suggestions for its revision and/or the development of new plans of action.

The consideration of the effectiveness of actions taken by group members can lead the group into discussions similar to those which have occurred in other stages. For example: (1) Members may formulate new goals on the basis of their action plan. The ensuing discussion would then be similar to interactions in Stage 1. (2) Members may disassociate themselves from any responsibility for the lack of success of a plan of action. The leader, with group members, may then be involved in Stage 2 and 3 activities which are designed to formulate new action plans. (3) Members may want to develop new, revised plans, and need to engage in the specifying and practice activities of the action phases of the model.

The activities of Stage 7 in the problem solving model are designed to support group members in further exploration and are important in determining to which stage in the model the leader must return in encouraging members to employ future action plans. Perhaps the most crucial contribution of Stage 7 is that it strengthens the bridge between talking and practising in the group and employing effective action plans outside the group.

#### Concluding Comments

The model just presented represents a composite of several group approaches. Its uniqueness lies, perhaps, in its application to an employment counselling setting. Much has been written about groups, ranging from using them as vehicles for classroom discussions to describing them in terms of long range therapy. In the continuum from guidance to counselling to psychotherapy, group employment counselling appears, in most instances, to fall on the bridge between guidance and counselling (Trotzer, 1977). As such, these groups are solidly grounded in an agenda with clearly specified objectives, but recognize the importance of taking into account the interpersonal or affective dimension. The effective application of the problem solving model to a group employment counselling setting presumes a certain level of self-awareness and skill development on the part of the group leader. This self-understanding and training should allow the leader to use the stages in the problem solving model flexibly, with adaptations based on the needs of clients in each particular group.

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