

Helpful Conversations

(Part 3)

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CHAPTER 6:

Psychological Approaches to Helping Conversations

We saw in the previous chapter that people have different preferences with regard to exploring their feelings, their thoughts, their behavior, the past (the unconscious) or the future (the spiritual or transpersonal). These are the basic dimensions of life and living, and perhaps not surprisingly, major psychological schools of thought have evolved around each of them. Indeed, each of these preferences represents a mainstream of psychological and counseling theory.

Psychological theories

The purpose of a psychological theory is to both explain human distress and suggest ways of overcoming it. At present within psychology and counseling there are many competing theories of human existence. This means that there is no one 'right' answer to a psychological or counseling issue. Depending on one's personal persuasion and the school of thought one favors, the explanation and resultant approach will be different.


This may sound confusing and scary. Does that mean counselors and psychologists don't know what they are doing? - Not quite! We each hold a preferred view of what makes people tick, and there is evidence to support more than one view. What it comes down to is matching the psychological approach to the client, and to the kind of problem. We will see below that some kinds of approaches are particularly appropriate to or successful with certain kinds of client issues.

I give a brief overview, and we consider the thorny problem of how to put it altogether after that.

Psychodynamic - the Past

Historically, the psychodynamic approach as developed by Sigmund Freud around the turn of the last century comes first. 'Psyche' means 'breath' or 'soul' and 'dynamic' refers to the fact that the various component parts of the psyche are thought to be in conflict with one another. We have all probably at one time or another heard of the 'Id,' the 'Ego' and the 'Superego.' The Id is the instinctual part of us that demands instant gratification. As I am so fond of quipping, the Id says: "I want sex, I want chocolate, and I want it now!"

We can think of the Superego as 'the internalized parent,' in other words all the many times that our parents admonished us to not/do something are



stored somewhere inside, and when it comes to making ethical or moral decisions we 'hear the voice' of that internalized parent. So Superego says, "You can't have sex, you can't have chocolate." The Superego denies gratification.

Piggy in the middle is the Ego, the adult part of us that develops with increasing maturity. The Ego tries to balance these opposing dynamic forces. It comes up with a compromise: "You can have some sex and some chocolate after you've done your chores." It makes adult, rational decisions based on 'delayed gratification.'

I hope that gives you a sense of the kind of approach a psychodynamic counselor would take. It's very much looking at the past, the unconscious, and what internal dynamic forces are at work behind the scenes. The task of the counselor is to understand these dynamics and interpret them to the client.


Behavioral Approach / Actions, Behavior

Freud's more research-oriented psychologist colleagues viewed the psychodynamic approach as unscientific. From the 1920's onwards, a school of thought called Behaviorism came into prominence. It was characterized by the strictly experimental method and evidence. You may have heard of 'Pavlov's dogs'? This experiment showed that dogs could be 'conditioned' to respond in ways that were not natural. They could be trained to salivate (in anticipation of food) when they heard a bell or saw a light, even if there was no food in sight. The theory developed from this was that human distress was the result of learned behavior.

The good news was that as it had been learned, it could be un-learned! It was a time of great optimism, but the promise has not held good overall. Human beings are more complex than their external observable and measurable behavior alone suggests. However, behaviorism has made valuable contributions that are still part of the mainstream counseling repertoire today, particularly in the areas of skills training, behavior management (e.g. anger management, assertiveness) and overcoming phobias.

Client-centered / Feelings

We are probably most familiar with the 'client-centered' approach to counseling as developed by Carl Rogers in the 1950's. I said a little bit about



this earlier in connection with the core conditions. Client-centered work focuses very much on the client's feelings and inner experiencing.

Optimistic and positive in outlook, it holds that providing and maintaining the core conditions for a client is both necessary and sufficient for effective therapy to take place.

Client-centered practitioners typically use many reflections (of feeling and meaning), thus enabling the client to feel seen and heard, and explore their inner world in a safe and supportive setting.

Cognitive / Thinking

'Cognitive' is the word psychologists use to refer to thinking processes. 'Cognitive psychology,' and from there 'cognitive approaches to counseling,' developed as a result of the advances in Information Technology from the 1940's onwards. Essentially, their model is that of 'Man the Computer.'

Human distress, for example depression, is understood to be primarily the result of faulty thinking. People who are depressed or anxious are found to have unhelpful, negative thoughts or thought patterns such as "My life is a waste," "Things will never get better," "Nobody likes me," "I might as well give up."

Cognitive therapists hold that it is these negative automatic thoughts that trigger the depressed or anxious feelings - not the other way around. Therefore, they focus on helping the client identify and challenge such thoughts.

Transpersonal approaches /the Superconscious

Until more recently, the spiritual dimension of counseling was virtually excluded from consideration, although transpersonal approaches to psychology and counseling emerged from the late 1960's onwards. Counseling was essentially considered as quite separate from spiritual or religious concerns, and it is only of late that there has been a sea change. Some clients will be very aware of transpersonal issues; for others, they will be implicit or underlying.

The two most well known transpersonal approaches in the UK are probably those of Jung's psychology (he was a pupil of Freud, but went his own way) and 'Psychosynthesis,' originally developed by Roberto Assagioli.



Contemporary approaches to counseling

As counseling has burgeoned, so have the approaches to it. At present, there are some 400+. At this level, we aim to give you a taster of the basic four, plus an introduction to 'solution-focused' focused therapy, which is and work with groups and systems. You will doubtless encounter other approaches such as 'Gestalt,' 'Transactional Analysis,' 'Cognitive-Analytic Therapy' and more, perhaps when searching for a referral to a counselor.

There is more material on the various schools and their approaches in the Workbook. Our task here is more modest. It is simply that of appreciating the correspondence between the five basic dimensions of life and living and the five basic directions approaches to counseling have taken. Once you have a sense of the basic possibilities, you can then slot in other schools of thought. You can get a sense where they belong, and which line of thought they are related to.

The Need for Eclecticism

Any one client is likely to prefer one of the dimensions of feelings, thoughts, behavior etc. over the other. This is the one they will most readily talk about and that makes most sense to them. As practitioner, it's useful to be sensitized to this and adapt one's approach accordingly. It has the best chance of success.

Given the wide range and large number of conversations held in employee & organization support, we recommend that practitioners learn to work 'eclectically' ('ec' meaning literally 'out,' and 'lect' = 'to choose' as in 'e-lect'). So an 'eclectic' approach is one that 'mixes and matches' to suit the client. It requires the practitioner to be aware of the basic approaches and then adopt that which best fits the client.

The training ensures you acquire a working knowledge of the four main approaches: client-centered, psychodynamic, cognitive, and behavioral.

As humans, we do of course operate on all dimensions, and ultimately we need all of them to be in balance.

Remember also, what we said about the nature of counseling as offering 'intra personal integration.' If indeed, counseling conversations are being held, then somewhere along the line this will involve work on other, missing or neglected dimensions. This results in greater wholeness. That's why practitioners need a good working knowledge of all approaches.



The relationship of approaches to communication 'microskills'

On a practical level, this also means becoming an expert on the individual communication 'microskills,' that is the individual components that conversations consist of. Only by being aware of one's communication tools can practitioners shape the conversation in the direction they would like it to take. The different skills address different dimensions of living and the different approaches use a 'skills mix' that is typical for them. For example, it makes intuitive sense that a client-centered approach would focus on skills that encourage the expression and exploration of feelings and less so the gathering and giving of information.

I'm aware that we have yet to talk about the individual skills in detail, but it may be interesting just to have a look at the table below which compares and contrasts the skills usage and mix across the different approaches to counseling.

At this stage, it's not important to understand each of the individual skills. That is explained in Chapter 7. All I'd like to convey is that:

- There are a number of basic communication skills = your key 'tools.'
- Just like individual tools, they each have different functions.
- They take the conversation into different directions.
- The different approaches to counseling typically use a characteristic mix of these skills.
- In order to shape the conversation the way you would like, it's important to be familiar with the individual skills.





So, if you'd like to view the table below with this in mind - not to worry about the detail, just to get a graphic sense of the different patterns. The table is intended to illustrate the differences in skills usage across the four main psychological approaches. It's clear that the emphasis in each varies considerably.



Main Psychological Approaches and Their Typical Skills Mix

Microskill	Client-Centered	Psycho-Dynamic	Cognitive	Behavioral
Attending	Much	Much	Much	Much
Active listening	Much	Much	Much	Much
Minimal Prompts	Much	Much	Slight	Some
Open invitation to talk	Much	Much	Slight	Slight
Reflection of Thought	Slight	Slight	Much	Some
Reflection of Feeling	Much	Much	Slight	Some
Reflection of Point of View	Much	Much	Much	Some
Reflection of Content	Some	Some	Much	Much
Reflection of Meaning	Much	Much	Much	Some
The Simple Probe	Some	Some	Slight	Much
Using Silence	Much	Much	Some	Some
Summarizing	Some	Slight	Some	Slight
Giving Information	Some	Unusual	Much	Much
Advanced Reflection of Thought	Slight	Much	Some	Some
Advanced Reflection of Feeling	Much	Much	Some	Some
Advanced Reflection of Point of View	Much	Much	Some	Some
Advanced Reflection of Meaning	Much	Much	Some	Some
Focusing	Slight	Some	Much	Much
Deepening	Much	Much	Slight	Some
Self Disclosure	Slight	Unusual	Some	Some
Immediacy	Slight	Slight	Some	Slight
Challenging.	Slight	Slight	Slight	Slight

Legend:

-  = Much
-  = Some
-  = Slight
-  = Unusual

CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter focused on the theoretical underpinning of helping conversations. We familiarized ourselves with some of the main approaches to psychology and counseling: the psychodynamic, client-centered, behavioral, the cognitive and the transpersonal. We identified that some had particular merit for certain client issues, but that in any event it was useful to be able to match the kind of approach to what seemed most appropriate to the client. Working in this way is called 'eclectic.' This requires the practitioner to know their microskills tools well so they can mix and match to suit.



Task No 6

How would you briefly describe each of the main approaches to counseling conversations?



CHAPTER 7: *Your Communication Skills Toolkit*

Introduction

So far, we've been thinking about the different kinds of conversation one might hold to support employees and the organization. We've considered how to decide what kind of conversation to hold and what theoretical approach to take. That then led us into the need of looking more closely at our communication skills toolkit and becoming more familiar with each individual skill.

'Intentions,' 'Macroskills,' and 'Microskills'

We want to learn how to hold helpful conversations, but how do we assess whether a communication was successful or appropriate? Well, success or otherwise is usually decided by the outcome of the conversation. That's fairly easy as in: was the client happy or not?, did things move on?, and so forth.

It feels more difficult to identify what specifically in the conversation was successful or not, what worked, where something might have improved, or where things went wrong...

In order to do that, we need a wider framework of conceptualizing helpful conversations. We have begun to think about those issues in the previous chapters. Additionally, we also need to be able to put practitioner-client dialogues under the microscope, so to speak, and be able to think about what is happening moment-by-moment in the conversation and evaluate each practitioner intervention.

Levels of Describing an Intervention

This can be done at various levels of detail. Let's take an example. Colleague Andy is talking to colleague Bert about a problem at work. Bert is listening and at one points responds with: "That really got to you."

Bert's response can be described at (5) different levels. Starting from the most specific and literal to the most general.

1. Bert said: "That really got to you." -verbatim quote.
2. Bert made a statement - analysis of grammar.
3. Bert reflected Andy's feelings - *'micro skill' - see below.
4. Bert was 'supportive' - intention - see below.
5. Bert was building rapport - *'macroskill' - see below.

The (5) Levels of Describing an Intervention

Name of Level	This Example	Explanation
(1) Literal	"That really got to you."	A verbatim quote of what the practitioner said.
(2) Grammatical	Statement.	Analyzing the grammar, e.g. is it a statement, a question, an exclamation and so forth.
(3) Microskills	Reflection of Andy's feelings.	The smallest level of analysis; 'micro'-skill = literally 'tiny' skill. Looking at an individual sentence, or part of a sentence that directs conversation in some way. Here Bert has chosen to contribute to the conversation by picking up on how Andy felt and making that explicit. By so doing, he conveys that he is paying attention to the feeling component of the conversation. This is likely to affect the future course of the conversation. For example, Andy would certainly feel encouraged that any further disclosure of feeling on his part is likely to be understood by Bert.
(4) Intentional	Being supportive.	At an even more general level, we can say that Bert's intervention was 'supportive.' That is, quite apart from any specific macro-skills such as wanting to build rapport or enabling the client to open up, Bert had a broader underlying intention - here that of being 'supportive' towards Andy. There are six fundamental intentions as set out later on in the chapter. Being 'supportive' is one of them.
(5) Macroskills	Building rapport.	By picking up on feelings the client expresses, acknowledging them and feeding them back to the client, the practitioner contributes to a wider skill / competence essential in helping conversations, namely that of building rapport. This is not generated from a single practitioner intervention, so it's not a 'micro-skill' (= literally 'tiny' skill) but rather a 'macro-skill' (= literally 'big' skill), i.e. it comprises many microskills).

Which Level to Use?

Communication skills can be assessed and analyzed at each level. All levels have their uses, depending on one's purpose in analysis - see the table following:

Levels of Analysis of Communication

LEVEL	EXAMPLE	VALUE FOR ASSESSMENT
Verbatim Quote	"That really got to you."	Useful to look at in detail when thinking about individual practitioner interventions and how they might have been worded otherwise. Sometimes a turn of phrase can be important. Andy might have chosen a low key, more neutral response such as: "You didn't expect that." Bert might have been more comfortable with that.
Grammar	Statement	Not particularly useful for assessing the appropriateness of individual interventions. For an entire conversation, an analysis by grammar can give some pointers. Just imagine a conversation that consisted entirely of questions!
'Microskill'	Reflecting Feeling	'Microskills' are recognized kinds of individual interventions, and they apply to a sentence, or part of a sentence. More in later Chapter. 'Reflecting Feeling' is such a microskill. One understands intuitively that is what Andy was doing. Microskills are useful to analyze a conversation in detail, however, as there are some 20+ basic microskills, they may not be quite so useful in thinking about a conversation as a whole.
Intention /Category	Supportive	The 'Category' approach identifies the Intention underlying the individual intervention, for example that of being 'supportive,' 'informative' and so forth. There are only (6) 'Categories'; we discuss them later in this chapter. In assessing a conversation as a whole, it is easier to think in 6 categories rather than about 20+ microskills! A useful way to begin to think about communication.
'Macroskill'	Establishing Rapport	Useful when thinking about the practitioner's competences as in: how well is the practitioner managing to 'establish rapport,' 'enable the client to open up' etc.

We work at all levels: looking at the verbatim quote sensitizes practitioners to wording, the microskills analysis helps to think about shaping the conversation, the category approach to help clarify the practitioner's intention, and the macroskills approach to think about larger chunks of practitioner work. Macroskills would include what we term 'procedural elements' that is the individual steps the practitioner takes for example contracting. Very rarely to do we consider grammar, but it has its occasional place.

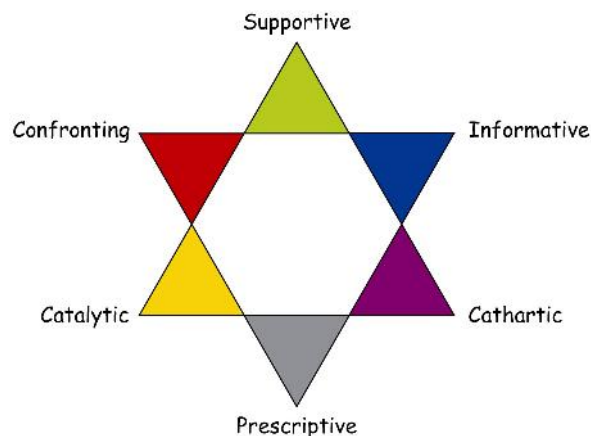
Lets now look at the simplest level, namely that of intention.

The Intentions (Categories)

The simplest level of description and analysis is the most general, the level of 'intention.' In our example that Andy was 'supportive.' Being 'supportive' is (1) of the total of (6) 'categories' of intention as set out by John Heron.

John Heron's Six Categories of Intention

In his book 'Helping the Client,' John Heron distinguishes between six different intentions of a communication. He calls each one a 'category.' Of the six categories, three are 'authoritative,' where the practitioner leads, and three are 'facilitative,' that is they are client-centered. He diagrammed them as a star.



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Authoritative Interventions

1. ***Prescriptive***
A prescriptive intervention seeks to direct the behavior of the client, usually behavior that is outside the practitioner-client relationship.
2. ***Informative***
An informative intervention seeks to impart knowledge, information, and meaning to the client.
3. ***Confronting***
A confronting intervention seeks to raise the client's consciousness about some limiting attitude or behavior of which they are relatively unaware.

Facilitative Interventions

4. ***Cathartic***
A cathartic intervention seeks to enable the client to discharge painful emotion, primarily grief, fear and anger.
5. ***Catalytic***
A catalytic intervention seeks to elicit self-discovery, self-directed living, learning and problem-solving in the client
6. ***Supportive***
A supportive intervention seeks to affirm the worth and value of the client's person, qualities, attitudes or actions.

Quoted verbatim from
Helping the Client, Sage, 2001, pp 5, 6

Mapping Conversations on the John Heron Star

One of the advantages of the John Heron star is that it can be used to 'map' conversations. Each point of the star can be shaded accordingly.



Example:

As you read through this book, what kind of 'conversation' is taking place between you and me? For starters, it's pretty one-way. However, not entirely so. What I write, and as I write it, has been shaped by the responses of many, many students, so while it is true that we are not having a live conversation, I do at each step try to think back to the real conversations I have had. So, it's not all one-way traffic of being 'Informative,' although I'd have to say, probably around 75% so.

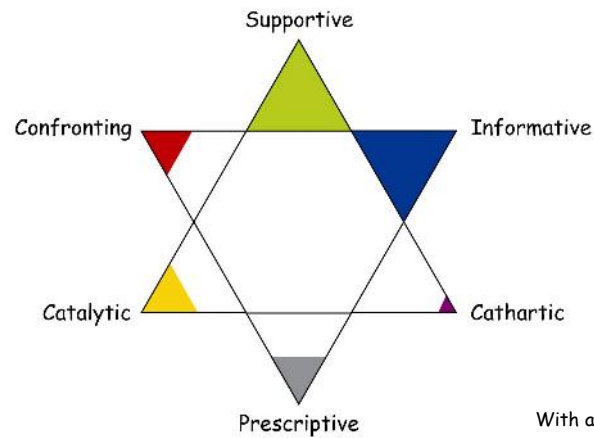
Let's think about the categories in sequence.

1. *Prescriptive:* Well, yes, probably, because this is a textbook, but its only power is that of persuasion.
2. *Informative:* Yes, in the main.
3. *Confronting:* Perhaps surprising, but I am aware of the confrontational element, where the material raises questions in the Reader's mind.
4. *Cathartic:* Yes, in a minor way. Perhaps something somewhere will strike a chord of relief or of recognition. "Ah, that's why that went wrong!"
5. *Catalytic:* Again, yes, in a small way. My hope would be that this book represents the beginnings of self-discovery, self-directed living, learning and problem-solving.
6. *Supportive:* Very much so. Probably second to Informative. Absolutely essential to me to acknowledge and affirm that anyone reading this book does so because they care about people and the kinds of conversations they have with them and is taking the trouble to improve their skills.

So, we can illustrate that as follows:



Star Map of My Conversation with You, the Reader



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Some Other Star Maps

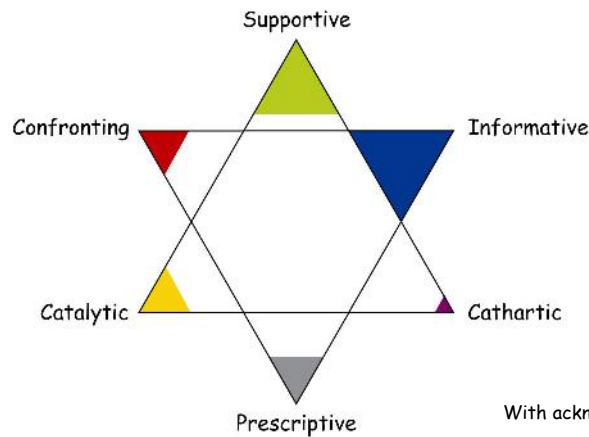
We can draw star maps for other kinds of conversations such as:

- Advice
- Guidance
- Presentations
- Interviewing and
- Counseling.

I will complete four and leave one (Interviewing) for you.

Advice

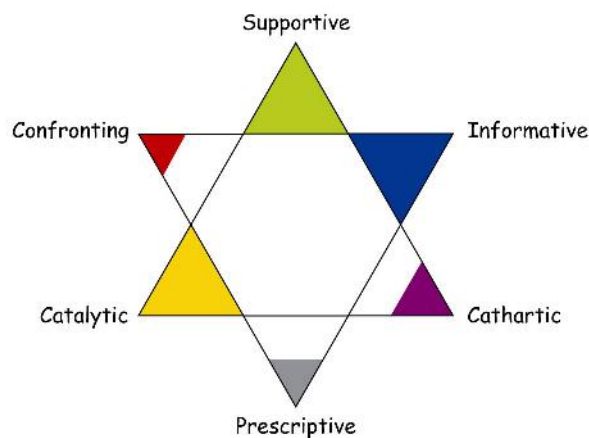
Advice is mainly informative, supportive, and prescriptive. By its nature, it may be unexpectedly confronting, but this is not usually intentional. There is an element of being catalytic as one needs to first ascertain the client's needs. There is no intention to be cathartic.



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➤ **Guidance**

Guidance is similar to Advice, but includes a pastoral function. There is greater emphasis on drawing the client out (catalytic), possibly discharging emotion (cathartic) and leading the client (being benignly prescriptive). We could diagram guidance thus:

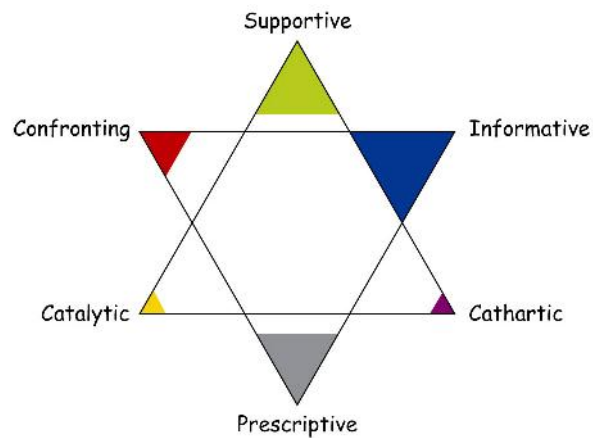


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➤ **Presentations**

Presentations inform and persuade (prescriptive). To succeed they must come across as essentially supportive, but they may intend to challenge (confronting).

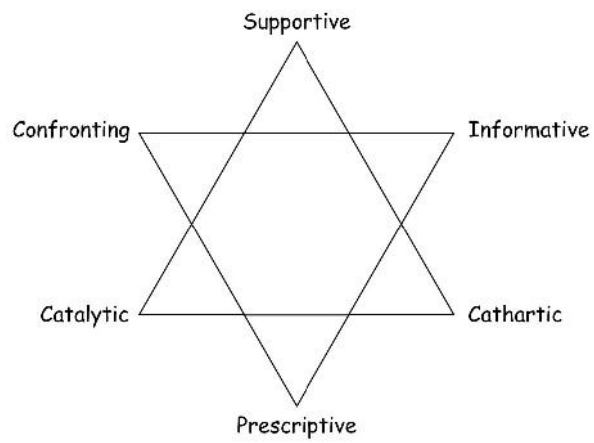


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Task No 7

Try your hand at completing a star for Interviewing.
Below you may wish to note your thoughts about it.



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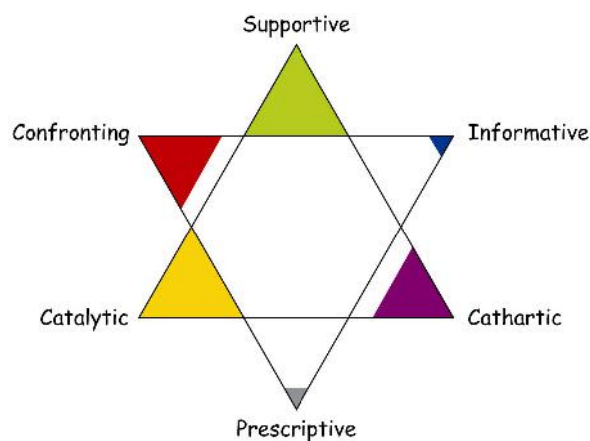


My Thoughts about Interviewing:

1. Prescriptive
2. Informative
3. Confronting
4. Cathartic
5. Catalytic
6. Supportive

➤ **Counseling**

When we think of a generic counseling conversation, it is characterized by being facilitative and client-centered. We expect a high level of supportive and catalytic interventions, possibly some catharsis and an element of challenge (confronting). Rarely is counseling informative and only exceptionally prescriptive when there is concern for well-being.



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The Benefits of Using Categories & Intentions

Thinking of your skills toolkit at the level of categories several advantages:

- It's manageable - there are only six of them!
- It applies to all kinds of conversations.
- It is useful in retrospect when you want to get a sense of the kind of conversation you have had.
- It can be used as preparation for a conversation, to sensitize the practitioner to the kind of 'mix' of categories and intentions that is appropriate to the task in hand.

Macroskills (Practitioner Competences) and Microskills

In training, we place much emphasis on the microskills of conversation. This is because they are the elementary building blocks of practitioner interventions. A microskill is a very small unit, usually a sentence, or even a part of a sentence. Several microskills can combine to make up a macroskill, such as 'building rapport, or 'contracting.' Let's look at the microskills first.

Microskills

If we take an example from Sally's conversation with Tom, in (12) Sally says:

Can I go back to you...You feel that the setting you have in the office is too formal and you want to change things, but you don't want to come across too authoritative to your accommodation people or Personnel to get these changes to happen - so that's inhibiting you from making these changes.

We can break this down into individual microskills. I'm aware that as yet we haven't defined each of them, but the discussion below may just give you a sense of how taking a microskills approach works.

Verbatim Quote	Microskill
Can I go back to you...	Practitioner flags she is about to 'Summarize'
You feel that the setting you have in the office is too formal and	Practitioner reflects the client's point of view, i.e. his overall perspective is that the setting is too formal. Microskill 'RPV' = Reflection of Point of View.
You want to change things, but	Practitioner has heard what client said and reflects the facts of the situation, namely that he wants to change things. She reflects the factual 'content' of what he has said = 'RC.'
You don't want to come across too authoritative to your accommodation people or Personnel to get these changes to happen	Practitioner has heard client's concerns about managing this situation and feeds back to client that she has. Her 'reflection' stays at pretty much a 'content' / 'surface' level, that is it doesn't pick up on what the client might be thinking ('RT') e.g. "it's easier this way"), what he might be feeling ('RF')

Verbatim Quote	Microskill
	(anxious? embarrassed?), or what the personal meaning ('RM') for him might be (e.g. loss of rapport?). So overall, this is a Reflection, and probably a Reflection of Content ('RC') - although we could say that there is an implied or underlying reflection of feeling ('RF') or meaning ('RM').
- So that's inhibiting you from making these changes.	Again, the Practitioner picks up on what the client has explained, but remains at the factual level. It is largely a reflection of content ('RC') that forms a part of her overall summary of what the client has said. Interestingly, when we look at the intervention in detail, there is yet again an implied reflection of feeling in the word 'inhibited,' which suggests 'worry' or 'anxiety.' She might have said more factually and emotionally: "So, as a result you've not been able to progress this." The practitioner's response makes clear that she is sensitive to the underlying emotional issues, however she chooses not to make them explicit.

The Microskills - Knowing Your Tool Kit

Communication skills can be compared to an artisan's tools: each skill has different potentials and limitations and thus may be employed for a different reason. It's essential to get to know each individual 'tool' in detail, as much of the responsibility for how an interview progresses lies with the practitioner. To a certain extent, the conversation is controlled by the practitioner. When a client says something, the practitioner has choices of how to respond. Different practitioner choices will lead to different outcomes for the client. Where the practitioner's work comprises a range of conversations as in employee & organization support, it's essential to know what skills are available, what they accomplish, and how they fit in to the different types of conversation in order to make best choices. As they say: if you only have a hammer... Fortunately, we have much more; we have an array of sophisticated skills, each of which can be put to work to achieve a specific outcome.



What are Microskills

Most skills training takes place at the level of 'microskills' (means literally 'small skill'). Usually verbal, the microskills include the use of silence, non-verbal communication, single words, phrases, and parts of sentences, sentences, and groups of sentences. They are the smallest unit in conversations we would analyze. John Heron's six Categories give us the flavor of a conversation, but they do not provide enough detail for training purposes. For this, we need to look at the microskills.

Just as the Categories recognize facilitative and authoritative skills, the microskills can be divided into 'following' and 'leading' skills, depending on who is taking the initiative, the client or the practitioner.

Following Skills **include:**

Attending, Active listening, Minimal Prompts, Open invitation to talk, Reflection of Thought / Feeling / Point of View / Content / Meaning, The Simple Probe, Summarizing, and Using Silence.

The main Leading Skills **are:**

Summarizing (which is borderline following/leading), Giving Information, Advanced Reflection of Thought / Feeling / Point of View / and Meaning, Focusing, Deepening, Self Disclosure, Immediacy, and Challenging.

However, it is not possible to allocate each microskill neatly to one of John Heron's categories. This is because the same microskill might be used with different intentions. For instance, 'Silence' could be 'Supportive' or 'Confronting.' Another example would be saying 'Uh Huh' -technically known as a 'Minimal Prompt'- which might be 'supportive,' 'catalytic,' or 'confronting. The table below illustrates this.

So, the correspondence of microskills to categories is not clear-cut. However, the categories approach does help when trying to identify microskills. Clearly, a supportive silence is quite a different animal to a confronting silence. In training, we tend to work at the microskills level, and we use the categories to clarify the intention as needed.



A Comparison of Intentions and Microskills

Six Categories of Intervention By Intention (John Heron)		Microskills
<i>Facilitative</i> Client-Focused	Supportive	Active Listening Attending Minimal Prompts Using Silence
	Catalytic	Open Invitation to Talk Reflection of Content, Thought, Point of View, Feeling, and Meaning Summarizing Probing Using Silence
	Cathartic	Reflecting Feeling Deepening Using Silence
<i>Authoritative</i> Practitioner-Led	Informative	Giving Information Interpretation
	Confronting	Summarizing Self Disclosure Immediacy Challenging Using Silence
	Prescriptive	Giving options Suggesting Choosing issues Goal setting



Following Skills

Microskills fall into two main categories: following and leading skills. When, as practitioner, you are following the client, you are helping them tell their story, whereas when you are leading, you are taking the initiative and essentially 'doing something' with what the client is saying. Following skills come first because the client needs to tell their story and one's concern as practitioner is to understand the client.

Usually, the client is looking for some sort of change to their existing situation, so at a later stage the practitioner tends to become more active, for instance by questioning the client's perspective on their situation and introducing new perspectives.

The main *following skills* are:

- Attending
- Active listening
- Minimal Prompts
- Open invitation to talk
- Reflection of Thought
- Reflection of Feeling
- Reflection of Point of View
- Reflection of Content
- Reflection of Meaning
- The Simple Probe
- Summarizing and
- Using Silence.

These skills are defined briefly below.

I also explain how to use the skills in context.



➤ **Attending**

Showing physically that one is paying attention to the client. Gerard Egan recommends 'SOLER,' that is:

S = Sit Squarely

O = Openly

L = Lean forward

E = Make Eye-contact

R = Relax

This is not always appropriate in a work context; where more relaxed forms of Attending are employed. More likely people will sit at an angle; 120° is comfortable.

➤ **Active listening**

This is a silent skill. The practitioner has emptied their mind of personal concerns and is doing mental work, listening actively and with a particular professional slant. The practitioner may be listening for underlying emotions, recurring behavior patterns, contradictions, themes etc. What in particular to listen out for and 'think about' is determined by the purpose of the conversation: a therapist listens for different things than does a personnel manager. Active listening is an internal skill; it is a fundamental in so far as all else depends on the client having been heard in the first place.

➤ **Minimal prompts**

These are noises or words which encourage the person to continue talking, for example: 'Uh huh, Mmh, Yes.' Therapists may use fewer of these and rely more on the use of Silence. It is considered social and supportive to use these noises. Often, they are used out of our own anxiety and need to say something rather than being necessary for the client.

➤ **Open Invitation to Talk**

A bland open-ended question or statement, which encourages the person to talk about their concern in a general way, for example 'How have things been going?' At this stage, you don't know what the issue is. This differs from other more specific types of counseling questions, which ask the client to

explore something in greater depth, e.g. 'How is your relationship with him now?' This is a leading skill, namely that of *Focusing*.

An Open Invitation to Talk can be formulated as a question or a statement, or simply be non-verbal, for example looking at the client expectantly. The practitioner might say 'You wanted to come and see me.' When asked with a questioning inflection, this constitutes an Open Invitation to Talk. This kind of intervention is useful at the beginning of a conversation, but if used liberally can open up too many topics at once, and, as a result, the client may become overwhelmed. In therapeutic settings, it is presumed that the client will talk and thus the therapist may only need to look expectantly at the client. The skill thus becomes non-verbal. In work settings, the skill is more 'social.'

➤ **Reflection of Content, Thought, Point of View, Feeling, Meaning**

In telling their story, clients tend to talk in 'paragraphs' - their story has recognizable chunks. As practitioner, it helps you build rapport when you reflect the client's key issues. In reflecting, there is a wide choice, from reflecting something fairly bland and safe: e.g. content or thought, to something more personal, such as *Point of View, Feeling, or Meaning*.

- Content refers to the events that happened.
- Thought to what the client was thinking
- Point of view to the overarching opinion they have
- Feeling to a response which makes them "hot and wet" (or cold and dry), and
- Meaning to the significance the event had for them.

The skill consists of picking up on a point and giving it back to the client, e.g. "So you thought your boss was in a bad mood" or "So you were upset." Your choice of what and how to reflect will be governed by your assessment of what is appropriate at that time for that client, in that situation, and at that course of the interaction etc. Generally, therapists' reflections will be more intense and personal, whereas those of counseling practitioners are likely to be more bland and impersonal (safe).

➤ **Choosing reflections**

When reflecting feelings, realize that this will tend to get the client more into their feelings and consider whether this is appropriate. To get the feeling word

right, first find the appropriate 'family' of feelings, then get its intensity and duration; for example there are various high & low intensity, and short & long duration forms of anger, from 'miffed' to 'livid.'

The value of reflections

Reflections show that you are able to adopt an 'internal frame of reference' and are able to see things from the client's point of view. However, that does not imply that you hold the same perspective. Reflections are used extensively when the client is telling their story.


➤ **The Simple Probe**

The simple probe is a question, which ascertains easily available factual information. It does not require the client to engage in mental/emotional work. An example of a simple probe is: "How far do you live from the College?" In answering such a question, the client has not need to soul-search. The answer is available analytically and the client can simply say "ten miles," or "twenty," or whatever the answer is.

Practitioner use of the simple probe should be non-intrusive. Sometimes even when only following the client, it is necessary to interject a simple probe to obtain essential information without which the client's story will not make sense. Simple probes should be made elegantly and deftly. Simple probes are less used by therapists and more frequently by applied counseling practitioners, because they are more concerned with practical reality. It is important to avoid making too many simple probes, especially early on, because that may turn the conversation into an interrogation.

➤ **Using Silence**

Silence is appropriate when it is apparent that the client is doing mental/emotional work. However, the practitioner should intervene when the silence is unproductive, e.g. because the client does not know what to say or where to take the conversation. This is particularly true at work, as the intensity and anxiety inherent in a silence may be entirely inappropriate. While a therapist may let an uncomfortable silence continue and then work with the fact of its uncomfortableness, using the skill of immediacy, this applies less outside the therapy room. In work settings, practitioners are more likely to interrupt a silence. It's all about judging the quality of the silence -e.g. as



comfortable, hostile, or embarrassed- and maintaining or interrupting it accordingly.

Leading Skills

With leading skills, the initiative lies with the practitioner to a greater or lesser degree. The extent to which they influence the conversation may be subtle, but the practitioner steers the course of the interaction. The main leading skills are:

- Summarizing (which is borderline following/leading)
- Giving Information
- Advanced Reflection of Thought
- Advanced Reflection of Feeling
- Advanced Reflection of Point of View
- Advanced Reflection of Meaning
- Focusing
- Deepening
- Self Disclosure
- Immediacy, and
- Challenging.

➤ **Summarizing**

A borderline following or leading skill, depending to how neutrally the practitioner summarizes. It becomes a leading skill when the practitioner 'edits' the client's material. Editing moves the client on directly: the practitioner decides what is and is not important, and simplifies the details of the client's account. Summarizing checks mutual understanding, draws together the threads, or helps to orient the client and the practitioner, e.g. after a break. To some extent, summarizing is always evaluative, as the practitioner decides what you choose to include and what to omit. The practitioner is 'doing something' with the client's story.

➤ **Giving Information**

You may give the client information. If so, be aware of the messages this may convey, namely that you may come across as 'the expert' (Do you want to?) and that it implies that the client is unable to acquire the information themselves. Consider whether the information you are giving is appropriate: is it too much, too little, too difficult, too simple? Are you giving information in order to 'pacify' the client or ward of emotional demands? How would you feel being given it? Is it patronizing? The aforementioned notwithstanding, information appropriately given can be liberating.

➤ **Focusing**

Inviting the client to be more concrete and specific about issues in the external world, thus enabling the practitioner to understand the specifics and realities of what the client is talking about, for instance: "Can you give me an example of that?"

➤ **Advanced Reflection of Thought/Feeling/Meaning/Point of View**

Reflecting back to the client something they thought, felt etc, but did not express fully, something on the edge or just beyond the edge of client awareness. Based on practitioner hunches and worded tentatively, advanced reflections nudge the client on and beyond what they were aware of having conveyed. The practitioner 'does the work,' i.e. they identify the issue and formulate it for the client's consideration. Example: "You say you're angry, and I wonder if you're also hurt."

➤ **Deepening**

In contradistinction to the *Advanced Reflections*, here the client does the work. The practitioner senses mileage in an issue and invites the client to explore it further with an appropriate question or statement. The general message to the client is: "Please explore this issue further!" I think this is the workhorse of counseling and continue to be amazed that standard texts do not designate this as a separate skill. Example: "How did that leave you feeling?"



Self-Disclosure

You say something about yourself relevant to the issue/client. Amount and timing of disclosure are critical. Helps to build rapport, but also turns you into a real human being with failings etc. Requires careful judgment as to whether this is in the client's best interest. Usage depends on one's school of thought, approach to counseling, context, setting etc.

➤ **Immediacy**

Making explicit the here-and-now relationship. At a simple level, used to clear tensions and promote deeper rapport. Also means of making explicit how the client relates to others, if one works on the assumption that the way the client relates to the practitioner mirrors important relationships in the past and resembles other relationships in the present. Example: "Pete, we've been meeting for a few months now and things seemed to be going well, but the last couple of times I've sensed a change. Shall we take some time out to talk about that?"

➤ **Challenging**

Not a happy term; much better to think of this as "Invitation to look at new perspectives." Practitioners listen actively for aspects of client's situations they are overlooking. In challenging, one is saying in effect: "What about this thing over here that you haven't mentioned/noticed?" Done well, challenging enriches clients. It needs to be done lovingly and firmly, because on the receiving end it's invariably scary. The most powerful and meaningful challenges, I would say, are those that address the opposite of the client's strengths / weaknesses. They say: "What about this bit which you view as completely opposite to your way of being?" and then help the client integrate it. This heals splits and is enriching.


➤ **Microskills, Macroskills, and 'Procedural Elements'**

We looked at individual microskills above. This was only intended to be an introduction, and to give you a sense of what is meant by 'microskills.' Obviously in the conversation with the client, as practitioner we don't (and can't!) only think about each individual microskill we're using, we're also aware of where we are in the process of the conversation with the client, such as establishing initial rapport, contracting for the purpose of the conversation and so forth.

These are 'stepping stones' in the process, which entail the use of a range of microskills; they are often referred to as 'macroskills.' Please review the table below for some of the key macroskills and to see how they in turn comprise the use of several microskills.

Some Common Macroskills and the Microskills that Comprise them

Macroskills / Competences	Microskills
Making and maintaining contact	Attending Active Listening Reflections
Contracting	Open Invitation to Talk Information Giving Simple Probes Focusing
Communicating Non-judgmental Warmth	Attending Active Listening, Reflections of Feeling Reflections of Meaning
Communicating Genuineness	Attending Active Listening Using Silence Self-Disclosure Immediacy Challenging
Communicating Empathy	Minimal Prompts The full range of Reflections
Communicating Understanding	Reflecting Content Reflecting Thought Reflecting Feelings Summarizing



Macroskills / Competences	Microskills
Seeing Patterns	Deepening Understanding Advanced Reflections Focusing
Challenging	Summarizing Deepening Understanding Identifying discrepancies Using Silence Information giving Challenging Self Disclosure Immediacy
Goal Setting	Full range of Microskills.

Introducing 'Procedural Elements'

In Chapter 6, we looked at the need to 'mix-and-match' one's approach to the individual client in view of the broad range of issues, clients, and possible ways of working. It is not feasible to have a set, 'one-size-fits-all' model of working, for example: to always apply the 'Egan Model' - popular and workable though it is. (See later Chapter or Glossary for further details of the Egan Model.)

We teach that practitioners need to be aware of the individual component steps ('elements') of client work, what each of them accomplishes and how to combine them to best suit individual need. We call these individual steps 'procedural elements.'

They are listed, described, and defined in Chapter 9. They are not, traditionally, thought of as macroskills. I would suggest they are — in so far as each element comprises several microskills. This will be clear from reviewing the list.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

The Practitioner's Communication Skills Toolkit can be approached at various levels, namely those of:

- The literal, verbatim intervention
- Grammar
- Microskills
- Intentionality
- Macroskills / Procedural Elements.

In this Chapter, we considered the relevance of each, and described and defined those most important. Key are those of intentionality and microskills. It is helpful when thinking about helpful conversations to consider the 'intention' underlying the practitioner's intervention. Practically, within training, we work very much at the microskills level.

This chapter set out and explained 'following' and 'leading' microskills. 'Following skills' facilitate the client in 'telling their story.' Leading skills move the client's story on, for instance to greater depths, new perspectives, or challenges.

In summary, the microskills can be compared to an artisan's tools, each of which is suitable for a particular task. It's important to know one's tools in order to do the best job possible across a broad range of conversations.

We also made the connection between individual microskills and their 'packaging' into larger practitioner competences ('macroskills') such as developing rapport and/or 'procedural elements,' such as 'contracting.'