

# People at the Centre

by Keith Tudor

## **"What we need in this organisation is more honesty, love and understanding."**

As you might imagine, people's reactions to this statement vary enormously. To some it may sound almost religious or 'new age' and, in any case, it does not appear very practical in management or organization development. And yet being genuine, having positive regard for others and displaying empathy are the three core conditions for successful personal and organisational change.

The person-centred approach (PCA) of Carl Rogers is one of the most popular in the field of psychology and yet, despite being the underlying concept of the learning organisation, is still relatively unfamiliar to managers, trainers and organisational consultants.

From his observations Rogers came to the conclusion that what works in effecting change is that the helping person is genuine (or congruent) and that the client perceives the helper as regarding them positively and as understanding them. These conditions of change apply personally in relationships, in education and training, in politics and in organisations and specifically in reducing and even resolving conflict. Rogers himself worked with groups in some of the world's 'hot spots' such as Russia, South Africa and in dealing with racial tension in the USA and, topically, in the six counties of Northern Ireland.

These 'core conditions' of genuineness, positive regard and empathic understanding are not only skills which can be developed but, more importantly, are attitudes which reflect a way of being. This is not an image or mask you put on; rather it reflects and indeed requires us to promote personal integrity in business and in our business transactions. Michael Hesseltine's advocacy of delaying payments to suppliers in order to gain interest may be business-centred in the short-term but it is not person-centred or business-centred in paying attention to the wider ecology of business. Being business-centred and person-centred is a practical way of being productive and ethical in our work as managers, trainers and consultants as the following examples show.

### **Honesty is the best policy**

Genuineness requires us to know ourselves. We can develop this through increasing awareness of ourselves and how we come across (see Box 1). Being genuine comes across to others and, in this context, openness and directness of communication is often appreciated - the northern saying 'There's no side on him' reflects this. This is also a prerequisite for giving and receiving feedback. In some important wage negotiations with trades unions (TU) representatives, a manager suggested a figure he regarded to be the halfway position between the two sides. The TU negotiators initially responded by naming another figure, expecting to negotiate until the two sides agreed to split the difference. Instead the manager 'opened the books' and presented the detailed background to what was a genuine and affordable figure. After a while (for the TU side had to overcome their suspicions) they agreed to what the management had offered. The point of this is that negotiations can be conducted differently but only if people are genuine. False 'genuineness' and incongruence are easily spotted.

### **Regarding others**

Positive regard is essentially about being accepting of other people and conveying, that acceptance by:

- Being caring and attentive, for instance, in meeting and greeting clients.
- Showing emotional warmth by using a warm tone of voice, by smiling appropriately, maintaining eye contact and generally showing interest.

- Being encouraging.
- Being unconditional and non evaluative.

This does not mean that you do not have values or opinions; it does mean that you are prepared and willing to put them to one side in order to show that you hold the client in positive regard. Some people find it helpful to make a distinction between a person and their behaviour and thus may confront or criticise a person about behaviour or actions while still holding the person in positive regard.

At a basic level unconditional positive regard is about liking people and seeing the good in them. Some may dismiss this as being naive but this misses the point. It is based on a profound belief in positive human motivation - to strive to achieve what is best for the individual and the social group, whether that is family, an association or an organisation. Of course people act against such motivation at times and this may be understood as representing some unfulfilled need (such as a lack of appreciation). A common problem in business is that staff at all levels often do not feel valued. This is reflected, for instance, in research on stress in organisations in response to which work has been developed to promote mental health at work both in individuals and in the organisational culture. Having unconditional positive regard for others also requires you to have the same for yourself - including knowing the limits of your regard for yourself and others.

### **'The customer's always right' - even when they're wrong**

At a basic level empathy is about listening, actively, using reflective listening skills and, generally, about understanding the client (see Box 2). Again, at a more profound level it is about being alongside someone such that it is 'as if' you are them. Empathy is distinct from sympathy precisely in this respect: it is as if you inhabit their world, not that you are in it. If someone is in a hole, sympathy is like getting in there with them; empathy is understanding their predicament while staying separate. This is crucial in fostering independent, self-motivating and creative staff.

One block to empathy is in judging the client, for instance, in what they are saying. In any business it is easy to become complacent and think that we have got it right. One business, having tested the market and done a lot of research, had invested money in a glossy brochure advertising its services. Some customers found some of the literature confusing and contradictory and fed this back to the administration department, the staff of which became, on the whole, quite defensive and argumentative about the criticisms. It took an external consultant to point out that, even although the customers concerned may have misread some of the literature, the fact that the brochure was perceived to be confusing was important.

Even when the client or customer is technically 'wrong', their experience of perceptions, by virtue of being true for them, are 'right'. The American Indian saying 'Don't criticise a man until you have walked in his moccasins for fourteen days' reflects a sense of empathy, together with a warning about the ease with which we can jump to a critical conclusion about someone.

The person-centred approach has, over the last 50 years, developed a rich tradition. It has a philosophy of education which underpins the theory and much of the practice of training, supervision and mentoring in organisations. It has a theory of communication which has been used to resolve major conflicts. It has a theory of personality which may be used to understand organisational and team dynamics. Finally, it identifies necessary and sufficient conditions under which change takes place, at the core of which are honesty, love and understanding.

#### **Box 1**

- The skills of congruence
- Being aware of yourself and how you come across.
- Being prepared to act on and live up to your awareness.
- Developing communication skills.
- Developing a good sense of timing i.e. when it is appropriate to intervene and when it is not.

#### **Box 2**

- The skills of empathy
- 'Being with' the client.
- Focusing the client on their understanding - of themselves, others, their business and the environment.
- Active listening (verbal and non verbal), including reflective listening skills (summarising, paraphrasing, etc.).
- Understanding client's experiences, behaviour, feelings and context, including checking this understanding.