

# **EFFECTIVENESS OF BRIEF COUNSELING SESSIONS FOR EMPLOYEE DEVELOPMENT: A QUALITATIVE STUDY**

Zainab F Zadeh PhD

Samia Ahmad

Halima Ghani

Institute of Professional Psychology, Bahria University,  
Karachi

## **Abstract**

The purpose of the study was to provide a qualitative analysis of the brief counseling sessions and to investigate the effectiveness of the same in employee development. Further it identified issues leading to spill over at work and creating work-life imbalance.

The study was launched with a group orientation sessions comprising of a briefing related to purpose, procedure and regulatory requirements of the process followed by an ice breaking activity. Drawing was chosen as an icebreaking activity as it is considered one of the useful tools for rapport building and providing free reign to thoughts. Each employee was asked to submit a drawing depicting their current feelings.

A total of 20 employees participated in the study for which follow up sessions began with brief counseling. A minimum of eight to ten sessions including the intake interview were conducted, of which the duration of each session was between 30 to 60 minutes. Each session was problem focused, providing rapport and expectation clarification in the initial phase, leading to re-educative and supportive counseling for presenting complaints in later sessions. Towards the end feedback was obtained regarding the effectiveness of the sessions.

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### **Results**

The results indicate that among the 20 employees, two reported all four complaints of emotional disturbance (i.e. anger, stress, frustration and anxiety), seven reported three complaints of emotional disturbance and the combination varied accordingly (two out of seven complained of anger, frustration and stress, three complained of frustration, stress and anxiety, there was a single case of stress, anger, and anxiety, and a single case of anger frustration and anxiety). Nine employees reported two complaints of emotional disturbance (and the combination varied accordingly, two of anger and frustration, two of frustration and anxiety, one of stress and anxiety, two of frustration and stress and two of anger and stress). Two employees reported a single complaint of emotional disturbance (i.e. anxiety).

To assess the efficacy of brief counseling sessions the following question was asked in the terminal phase from each participant "Did you benefit from the counseling sessions?" The feedback received in the form of a verbatim was further divided into three categories i.e. Yes, No, and Indifferent. The results showed in Table 2 clearly indicates that 18 out of 20 employees reported that they benefited from the counseling process and it helped them gain relative control over emotional disturbances caused by personal and workplace issues whereas the response of two employees suggested indifference related to the outcome of the counseling process, which shows that 90% of the employee feedback was in the favor of the counseling process.

### **Conclusion**

The study limitations were that employees' verbal feedback was the only form of data collected during brief counseling and no other formal pre or post counseling assessments were conducted.

**Key Words:** Development, Employee Development, Brief Counseling, Change: Organizational Restructuring, Emotional Disturbance, Work-life balance.

JEL Classification: O15, I29, M15

### **Introduction**

The purpose of the study was to provide a qualitative analysis of brief counseling sessions and to investigate the efficacy of the same in employee development. Further, it identified issues leading to spill over at work and creating work-life imbalances.

Employee development initiatives have a significant impact during organizational restructuring. As defined by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development CIPD, 2001 *development* is the growth or realization of a person's ability and potential through the provision of learning and educational experiences (Armstrong, 2006). For the purpose of this study *Employee development* is defined as the process of re-education in order to reduce emotional disturbance and achieve a desirable state.

At an organizational level a variety of employee development strategies are utilized for instance, training and Quality of Work Life (QWL) programs which is an organizational development technique designed to improve organizational functioning by humanizing the work place. An approach to improve QWL is Quality Circles (QCs) in which small groups of volunteers meet regularly to identify and to solve problems related to the work they perform and the conditions under which they work. Another example is of team building exercises which enhance employee development by discussing problems related to their work group's performance. On the basis of these discussions specific problems are identified and plans for solving them are devised and implemented. Survey and feedback techniques are also used as employee development techniques. The survey feedback technique follows three steps 1. Collecting data: employees complete surveys to provide information about

problems in their organizations; 2. Give feedback: feelings about the organization are summarized and shared with all employees; 3. Develop action plans: through group discussions specific plans for overcoming problems are identified and developed. Employee Assistance Programs are also an effective strategy for employee development. An EAP provides employees and their family members with opportunities to address their workplace concerns as well as those in their personal life through counseling (Robbins, 1998).

In 2001 the British Association for Counseling and Psychotherapy commissioned and published a report, *Counseling in the Workplace*. The results showed that “after counseling, work-related symptoms returned to normal in more than half of all clients and sickness absence was reduced by over 25%” McLeod (2003).

The objectives of counseling reported by Eisenberg and Delaney are:

1. Understanding self
2. Making impersonal decisions
3. Setting achievable goals which enhance growth
4. Planning in the present to bring about desired future objectives
5. Effective solutions to personal and interpersonal problems
6. Coping with difficult situations
7. Controlling self defeating emotions
8. Acquiring effective transaction skills
9. Acquiring ‘positive self-regard’ and a sense of optimism about one’s own ability to satisfy one’s basic needs.

Many professionals working in mental health agencies, private practice and schools are increasingly asked to shorten their time with clients and provide clear evidence of counseling effectiveness (Ivey, 1997). Brief counseling provides prompt and early interventions as it allows limited but attainable goals to improve coping abilities. It is a time limited intervention designed to attain specified goals, the principle focus being on the here and now rather than on early life events. It also provides rapid initial assessment of the nature of the problem to develop a work formulation and maintain a flexible approach (Bloom, 1997). In the present study Brief counseling was introduced as an intervention during organizational restructuring.

According to Holmes and Rahe (1967) any life changes, including work related life events requiring readjustments can be perceived as stressful. Moreover, changes that are introduced in organizational restructuring affect the socio-psychological well-being of the organization members given the potential for uncertainty that may accompany such changes (Ahmed & Zadeh, 2008). Employees in a post-restructuring context are understandably wary about the future direction of the organization and their roles within it (Lee & Teo, 2005). Organizational restructuring is a global phenomenon. 12000 managers in 25 countries (Kanter, 1991) were asked to identify changes they have experienced in the past two years. Major restructuring was the highest organizational change reported along with others like mergers, acquisitions reduction in employment, international expansion etc. (Robbins, 1998).

For the purpose of this study *Change: organizational restructuring* is defined as the rearrangement of the existing division of labor, as well as the pattern of coordination, communication, workflow and authority.

The concerns raised during the brief counseling sessions were mainly around *emotional disturbance* in the form of *stress*: perceived pressure in fulfilling responsibilities, *anger outbursts*: disagreements and misunderstandings, *anxiety*: apprehension of failure and *frustration*: inability to find solutions. These disturbances were reported to effect both domains of work and life.

These disturbances were resolved through 6 – 8 brief counseling sessions per employee in order to bring about work-life balance. Each employee was counseled using cognitive interventions. Cognitive intervention uses scientific and rational methods to explore thought assumptions and beliefs people have. These methods focus on functioning that has been found to play both a causative and maintenance role in solving psychological problems. Cognitive interventions are time limited and obtain fast results because they are problem focused. Moreover, the techniques are structured and directive in which they provide an agenda for each session. Agenda setting was imperative because each employee had a schedule and the organization's goal was to achieve results within a limited time frame. The participants met the "inclusion criteria" for Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), as they could understand the CBT rationale, access their thoughts and feelings, take responsibility and demonstrate optimism for change.

In an analysis by Schultheiss (2006) "an extensive literature base has been established on the interdependencies between the world of work and family life" (Barling & Sorensen 1997; Fassinger 2000; Greenhaus 1989; Greenhaus & Parasuraman 1999). A variety of models have surfaced to elaborate the relationship among the two prominent spheres of life, including spill over, work-family conflict, work-family enrichment, work-family integration, work-family balance. Work-family balance is

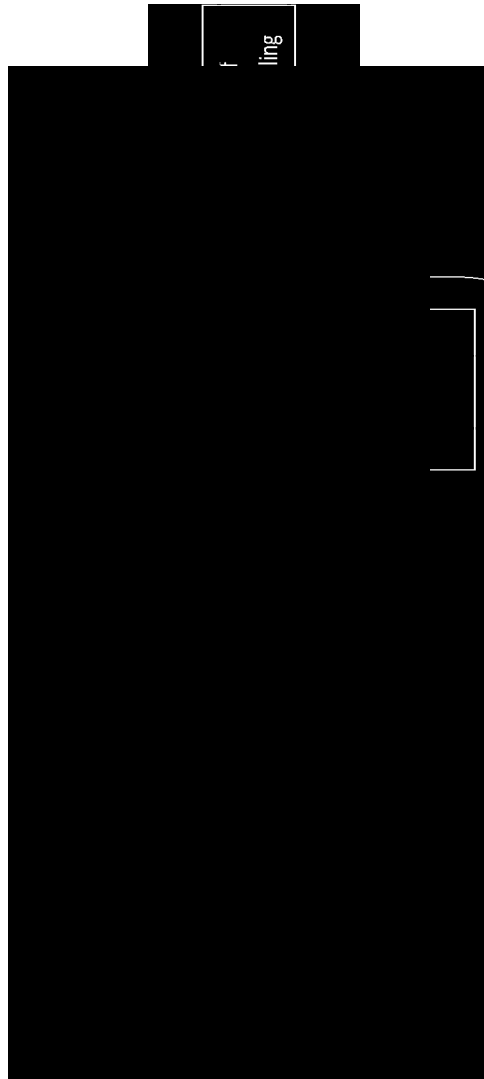
perhaps the most extensively cited term in the literature of job satisfaction. Grrenhaus et al. (2003) suggests that Work-family balance refers to the extent to which an individual is equally engaged in and equally satisfied with his or her work role and family role.

The theory of Work-Life Balance proposes three hypotheses about how job and life satisfaction are related. Weaver (1978) proposed that satisfaction (or dissatisfaction) in one area of life affects or spills over to another termed as the “spill over hypothesis”. Therefore, difficulties in home life can affect those in work causing the spillover. The second hypothesis that is “compensation hypothesis” suggests that an individual compensates for dissatisfaction in one area of life with another. Thus an employee facing dissatisfaction at work may look for satisfaction in other areas of life or vice versa. The final hypothesis which is “segmentation hypothesis” poses that people group aspects of their lives separately and thus satisfaction or dissatisfaction in one group does not affect another. (Rein et al. 1991) point out that because research has consistently found a positive correlation between job and life satisfaction, the spill over hypothesis is the only one supported by studies. Judge and Watanabe (1993) conducted a longitudinal study over a 5-year span which suggests that job satisfaction and life satisfaction affect one another in that satisfaction or dissatisfaction in either will affect the other (Spector, 1996).

In the present study it was found that Work-Life balance was being disturbed causing spill over, as a result of “change” which came about in the form of organizational restructuring. *Change: organizational restructuring* caused rearrangement of the existing division of labor, as well as the pattern of coordination, communication, workflow and authority. When organizational restructuring was taking place the employees were facing a transition in work location disturbing their original routines. This transition required additional time away from home

causing disruption in performing their jobs as well as daily chores at home. Furthermore, the employees were expected to look after existing responsibilities with the same fervor as earlier along with assimilation towards setting up the new location.

Figure 1: Stages of employee development



### **Methodology**

#### **Sample**

A total of 20 non teaching staff participated in the study. The group comprised of 19 males and one female, ages between 23 to 58 years, out of which 14 were married and six unmarried. Most of the staff was educated up till Bachelors' level and belonged to middle and lower-middle socio-economic backgrounds.

#### **Measures/Techniques**

A semi structured intake interview followed by brief counseling sessions per individual were conducted weekly.

#### **Procedure**

The study was launched with an orientation to define the purpose, procedure and regulatory requirements for the counseling sessions. Drawing was chosen as an icebreaking activity as it is considered one of the useful tools for rapport building and providing free reign to thoughts. Each employee was asked to submit a drawing depicting their current feelings.

The follow up sessions began with brief counseling which was between eight to ten sessions including the intake interview for each employee. The intake interview focused on questions related to work-life such as "Do you think you have a job of your choice?" and "Where do you see yourself after five years?" and home life such as "Among your friends and family who do you count on for support?" and "Marital status" along with the emotional involvement with ones spouse was inquired through "How long have both of you been together?" indicated also the level and depth of interaction. These areas of investigation indicated how married employees were experiencing relatively more emotional disturbances as compared to unmarried employees due to a more complicated family dynamics, indicated a spill over at work.

The duration of each session was between 30 to 60 minutes, which was problem focused, providing rapport and expectation clarification in the initial phase, leading to re-educative and supportive counseling for presenting complaints in the later sessions. Towards the end feedback was obtained regarding the effectiveness of the sessions. The consolidated brief counseling activity lasted approximately for a period of three months from start to end.

#### **Session Structure**

Session 1

Intake interview, establishing rapport, expectation clarification

Session 2

Problem identification, structuring a future plan

Session 3

Introduction of re-educative techniques, catharsis

Session 4

Working through, cognitive restructuring

Session 5

Practicing alternative strategies, dealing with reluctant behavior

Session 6

Modifications in client strategies

Session 7

Session review and feedback, preparation for closing session

Session 8

Closing, discussion on future plans

Through the method of content analysis the employee's emotional disturbances were identified which were manifested in the form of anger outbursts, frustration, stress and anxiety.

Anger is a fairly strong emotional reaction which accompanies a variety of situations such as physically restrained being interfered with, having one's possessions removed, attacked or threatened. It includes physical reactions such as facial grimaces and body positions characteristic of action.

**Anger Outbursts** are described as disagreements and misunderstandings at work. Anger outbursts were mainly manifested in two forms passive and active. Passive anger manifested itself as an inert struggle with feelings of unfair treatment, and stubbornness. Active anger was evident in the form of miscommunication, impulsivity and verbal arguments.

**Frustration** is an inability to find solutions resulting in a negative and puzzled state of mind. For example, difficulty in interpersonal communication, feelings of inferiority, decision making and adaptability issues.

**Stress** is perceived pressure in fulfilling responsibilities pertaining to work as well as home, manifested in the form of poor concentration, difficulty in prioritizing with multitasking, and modification in responsibilities.

**Anxiety** is an apprehension of failure. In the present study it was observed in the form of job insecurity, low initiative and lack of trust in one's self and others.

#### **Definition Of Key Terms:**

*Development* was the growth or realization of a person's ability and potential through the provision of learning and educational experiences.

*Employee development* was defined as the process of re-education in order to reduce emotional disturbance and achieve a desirable state.

*Change: organizational restructuring* was defined as the rearrangement of the existing division of labor, as well as the pattern of coordination, communication, workflow and authority.

*Emotional disturbance* was defined in following terms:

*Stress*: perceived pressure in fulfilling responsibilities,  
*Anger outbursts*: disagreements and misunderstandings,

*Anxiety*: apprehension of failure and *Frustration*: inability to find solutions. These disturbances were reported to reflect in both domains of Work and Life.

*Brief Counseling*: Brief Counseling where a minimum of eight to ten sessions including the intake interview were conducted. The duration of each session was between 30 to 60 minutes.

*Wok-life Balance:* Gaining relative control over emotional disturbances caused by personal and workplace issues.

### **Discussion of Results**

The purpose of the study helped identify the effectiveness of brief counseling at the workplace to reduce the employee's emotional disturbances and bring about work life balance. The study elaborates the emotional disturbances faced by employees during the time of organizational restructuring causing spill over of work on home responsibilities. In order to reduce the emotional disturbance and restore balance, brief counseling was used as an effective intervention.

In the Pakistani organizational context there is little evidence based work in counseling research. Expressive language has a therapeutic effect on one's mental state. Similarly, counseling provides an opportunity for catharsis in a non judgmental environment with the assistance of a professional. Through this qualitative assessment the effectiveness of brief counseling on employee development was evident as given an opportunity to talk in an environment providing conflict resolution is healthier than gossiping. This allowed employees to gain awareness and insight on how to balance their work and home issues, in a healthier and more constructive manner.

The manifested anger outbursts were identified as active and passive. Passive anger manifested itself as an inert struggle with feelings of unfair treatment, and stubbornness. Active anger was evident in the form of miscommunication, impulsivity and verbal arguments. During counseling active anger was addressed through debating, deep breathing exercises, and relaxation techniques. Employees with passive

anger were taught to cope with anger outbursts through assertive training.

Frustration was revealed through feelings of inferiority which were also reported like low self confidence and low self respect, where employees felt they were unable to express and resolve issues. Memory problems pertaining to retention and recall were brought during counseling. Techniques such as external memory aids and diary keeping were introduced for memory problems. Role play facilitated enhancement in interpersonal communication. Low self confidence and low self respect were restructured through debating negative and irrational thought patterns. For instance one of the senior employees felt inferior in terms of position/rank when compared to fellow colleagues. With debating a realistic picture was drawn to bring about healthy acceptance of existing circumstances which minimized the unfair comparison.

Stress was observed in the form of poor concentration and difficulty in prioritizing with multitasking. Modification of responsibilities during organizational restructuring was perceived as an added pressure. Married employees with dependent family members perceived relatively more stress than others. Socio economic background was another determinant in creating stress leading to work-life imbalance; this was also more evident in employees with dependants. Time management, structuring and planning with distribution of responsibilities were the main techniques utilized during counseling. For example, in case of one of the administration employees, the pre-counseling behavior indicated mounting stress due to difficulty in delegation of responsibilities and consequently finding oneself responsible for every task given. During counseling this stress was addressed by analyzing the tasks in steps and teaching delegation at various stages.

Anxiety was observed as apprehension of failure, a few of the employees reported reluctance in taking initiative and responsibilities during organizational restructuring due to increased fear of disapproval and losing one's job. Techniques used during counseling for anxiety reduction were relaxation with deep breathing and imagination, thought stopping, mirroring, motivational debriefing and reassurance. For instance, one of the employee's negative automatic thoughts were addressed during increased anxiety through the method with thought stopping.

**Table 1 Complaints of Emotional Disturbance**

Case No	Gender	Marital status	Types of Emotional Disturbance			
			Anger Outburst	Frustration	Stress	Anxiety
1.	Male	Married	X	X	X	X
2.	Male	Unmarried	X	X		
3.	Male	Unmarried	X	X		X
4.	Male	Married	X	X	X	X
5.	Female	Unmarried	X	X	X	
6.	Male	Married	X	X	X	
7.	Male	Married	X		X	X
8.	Male	Married			X	X
9.	Male	Married		X		X
10.	Male	Married		X	X	
11.	Male	Married	X		X	
12.	Male	Married				X
13.	Male	Married		X	X	
14.	Male	Unmarried				X
15.	Male	Unmarried		X	X	X
16.	Male	Married	X	X		
17.	Male	Unmarried	X		X	
18.	Male	Married		X		X
19.	Male	Married		X	X	X
20.	Male	Married		X	X	X

Table showing case wise frequency of complaints related to emotional disturbance

Through the method of content analysis counseling data was analyzed in units which were the participant's presenting complaints. The results showed in Table 1 indicate that out of 20 employees two reported all four complaints of emotional disturbance (anger, stress, frustration and anxiety), seven reported three complaints of emotional disturbance and the combination varied accordingly (two out of seven complained of anger, frustration and stress, three complained of frustration, stress and anxiety, there was a single case of stress, anger, and anxiety, and a single case of anger frustration and anxiety). Nine employees reported two complaints of emotional disturbance (and the combination varied accordingly two of anger and frustration, two of frustration and anxiety, one of stress and anxiety, two of frustration and stress and two of anger and stress). Two employees reported a single complaint of emotional disturbance (i.e. anxiety).

These units were further evaluated in terms of frequency, space and direction. Frequency refers to the number of participants with the recurrent unit presented, space referred to the amount of sessions covered for each unit and direction showed positive or negative impact in the unit. Some of the units identified in the study were emotional instability, need for enhancing education and marital issues. Based on the demographics of the sample including marital and socio economic status and educational level variations in terms of intensity in units were observed.

It was observed that married employees were experiencing relatively more emotional disturbances as compared to unmarried employees due to more complicated family dynamics. The lack of quality time spent with family and the contributing lower socio economic background

were the two other significant determinants that lead to the spill over hypothesis.

A majority of the employees who were undergraduates and have reached mid career levels with work experiences of eight to ten years were feeling job insecurities (threat was caused by less job opportunities outside the organization and the employee’s age group, with older employees feeling more insecure).

**Table 2 Feedback of efficacy for brief counseling sessions**

Case No	No	Yes	Indifferent
1.		X	
2.		X	
3.		X	
4.		X	
5.		X	
6.		X	
7.		X	
8.		X	
9.		X	
10.		X	
11.		X	
12.		X	
13.		X	
14.		X	
15.		X	
16.		X	
17.		X	
18.		X	
19.			X
20.			X
Total		18 (90%)	2 (10%)

To assess the efficacy of the brief counseling sessions the following question was asked in the terminal phase from each participant "Did you benefit from the counseling sessions?" The feedback received in the form of a verbatim was further divided into 3 categories i.e. Yes, No, and Indifferent. The results showed in Table 2 clearly indicates that 18 (90 percent) out of 20 employees reported that they benefited from the counseling process and it helped them gain relative control over emotional disturbances caused by personal and workplace issues. As against this the response of two (10 percent) employees suggested indifference related to the outcome of the counseling process.

The feedback obtained from the participants during the termination phase suggested that brief counseling sessions had a positive impact on employee development and helped them restore relative control over work-life balance.

The study provided support to the non teaching staff to manage stress level during the time of organizational restructuring. In Pakistan most of the research data shows little documentation and thus for this purpose it was decided to document the findings reported in the study, which can serve as grounds for establishing facts regarding the effectiveness of counseling for later research. This was the reason the study poses a limitation in terms of pre and post evaluation through a structured instrument.

Conclusively, the feedback obtained from the participants during the termination phase suggested that brief counseling sessions had positive impact on employee development and helped them restore relative control over work-life balance.

Qualitative analysis of sessions based on participant feedback revealed that the process of counseling provided an opportunity to non teaching staff to openly express in a non judgmental environment. Through cognitive behavioral techniques employees gained insight to restore relative control over work-life balance. Such practices can prove to be helpful in organizations at a one to one level as this process reveals an in-depth understanding of employee issues.

Study limitations indicate that employee's verbal feedback was the only form of data collected during brief counseling and no other formal pre or post counseling assessments were conducted. For future studies it is recommended that formal pre and post assessments tools can be used to analyze the actual utilization of the insight and skills acquired in the employee's everyday functioning. Moreover other demographic features like socio economic background, education etc. could be analyzed in detail in future researches. Consideration of detailed analysis of the drawings that were used in the ice breaking activity could also provide useful information in further studies.

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