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TRANSACTIONAL ANALYSIS FOR TRAINERS

Second Edition

Julie Hay

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Transactional Analysis for Trainers
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CHAPTER 2: CONTRACTING FOR LEARNING

I am going to concentrate now on how some TA frameworks can be related specifically to the way we set up the situation to do our jobs as trainers. During 2009 I expect to complete the other books on TA that I am writing specifically for coaches and mentors and for consultants, plus the update of *Working it Out at Work* which is of course the book for your participants to read.

In this chapter I will include models that have been devised with a one-to-one helper/client focus in mind, as well as showing how these can be developed to take account of the additional complexity that occurs when we provide training to meet organisational as well as individual needs. I will also explain how some of the more general TA concepts can be applied to ways we help participants gain most from the teaching situation.

TA is a contractual approach; this means that there must be a clear agreement, or contract, between a practitioner and the one who is to be 'practised' upon. I will describe first the elements of a contract that might apply between two parties; this is a useful model for considering how we should conduct ourselves when providing training. I will then extend this into the situation that so often prevails in the organisational setting – when we have three or more parties involved as we make contact separately with managers, participants and others.

Having described the nature of three-way contracting, I give examples of what may happen if the psychological distance between the parties is not evenly balanced. There are some clear effects if the trainer becomes too close to either the organisation's management, or to the participants. It is even worse when the participants and the organisation appear to reject the trainer.

I will then go on to look at the additional complications that arise when we have more than three parties and when some of the links are implicit only – such as when the trainer does not meet the line managers of the participants but must still take into account that said line managers will have a major impact on how the ongoing performance of the participants will be evaluated.

Contracting leads us into the notion of participants contracting with themselves about the changes they want to make. A section on action planning is therefore included, in which I show how TA models can help to flush out those potential sabotage mechanisms to which human beings are apt to fall victim.

This chapter includes some activities, related to the text, that you can use with participants. I strongly recommend that you work through them yourself first; as well as knowing them better you will also gain in self-awareness.

Finally, I end with a very short section on sources and references for the TA concepts covered in this chapter.

CONTRACTING

Contracting is one of the major principles of TA. In normal use of the word, a contract is an agreement between the parties about what they expect to happen. Although the term is generally used to imply some form of legal document, it is recognised that verbal contracts can also exist.

TA uses the term in a similar way and places great emphasis on the advisability of having clearly defined verbal contracts before working with someone. Indeed, without a contract it is incorrect to claim that true TA is being practised. Berne proposed that there are three aspects that need consideration: administrative, professional and psychological. These might also be regarded as three different levels at which our contracts must operate. Some of these aspects will be set down in writing but much may depend on what is said, and the really significant elements of the contract will be the unspoken ones.

I have renamed administrative as procedural in order to create a donkey bridge of PPP.

Procedural

The procedural level of the contract should spell out the arrangements agreed concerning matters such as timings, venue, payment and task responsibilities. It includes items such as where the course is to be run, dates and session times, how many participants can attend, are there follow-up sessions, and payment to the trainer. This last point might of course be taken for granted if the trainer is an employee within the organisation, although compensation for overtime could need clarifying. Independent trainers may need to include cancellation arrangements as well as fees in their contract details.

Some typical oversights occur in this area, such as lack of clear allocation of responsibility for joining instructions, so that students receive a brief note from a manager instead of detailed advance notification from the trainer. Less expected was the occasion when I arrived to run a one day time management course to find that the room had been booked for a late afternoon session so please would I finish 45 minutes earlier - a significant - and ironic shortfall. Another example I recall was of a training manager notifying participants of dates and venue for a course on presentation skills, but omitting to advise them to bring the prepared talk or the supporting materials that I had specified. If you find that administrative matters are interfering with the effectiveness of your training, it is a good idea to draw up your own checklist.

Claude Steiner suggests also that we need ‘consideration’ to have a contract. This term is borrowed from the legal world, where there must be some consideration that passes between the parties to make it a valid contract. This is why we sometimes hear of agreements in which a peppercorn rent is paid; this token payment keeps the contract legal. In organisational work, the issue here is ensuring that a realistic fee is charged for the level of service provided. Cancellations must also be considered as training is a perishable product in the sense that days not used cannot be put back on the shelf to sell again later.

In this age of cost centres, the question of consideration becomes just as relevant for those of us employed within an organisation. Clarification of the financial arrangements has become essential for demonstrating the productivity of the training department. We are expected nowadays to calculate our overheads accurately and be able to cross-charge, even for non-attendance. Good administrative control is essential.

Professional

The professional level of the contract relates to the aim of the work to be done together. As professional trainers, we should have clearly defined objectives, stated in terms of what the students will be able to do after receiving the training. These objectives will be worded in a way that participants and their managers can understand, and ideally will be in measurable terms so that the outcomes can be checked. At the very least, there will be a description, albeit subjective, of what they can be expected to have gained from the course.

The professional part of the contract is also about how the trainer and the student will contribute to the learning. For the trainer, this refers to the special knowledge, skills and experience we bring to the training. This includes any technical expertise we may have as well as our abilities as professional teachers. For the participants, it relates to their willingness to undertake the range of learning activities proposed by the trainer, as well as the prior knowledge, skills and experiences that they too will bring to the training.

Related to this is the question of competence. We owe it to our students, our organisations, and ourselves, to provide only that training which we are competent to undertake. I can recall being expected by my employer to run interpersonal skills courses of a type which generate considerable discomfort in some participants.

The organisation concerned had neglected to check whether I was competent to handle the inevitable counselling sessions which used to be requested. Until I was able to organise counselling training for myself, the training was compromised in two ways; I sought to avoid giving challenging feedback in case participants were upset, and those who did solicit counselling got little benefit from my unskilled attempts to do my best.

Psychological

The psychological contract is potentially the more difficult element to handle satisfactorily. Psychological refers to the underlying dynamics between trainer and participant. Generally, this aspect of the contract is unspoken and may well be outside the conscious awareness of the parties. It will form the most significant strand of the overall contract; if the psychological level is not ‘clean’ then the objectives may not be achieved.

A healthy psychological contract will be based on mutual respect and trust. The trainer will respect the ability of the participant, will recognise the validity of their previous experience, and will trust them to make their own decisions about how they apply the training. The participant will respect the competence of the trainer and will trust the trainer to structure the training activities effectively. Trainer and participant will therefore be putting their psychological energies into a collaborative effort.

An unhealthy psychological contract will contain unresolved issues between the parties. There may be an imbalance, as when trainer or participant believes they are more capable than the other person. Equally, they may be convinced that they are less capable. Alternatively, either may suspect that both of them are incapable, of learning and teaching respectively.

Or the issue may be around trust, as when participants assume the trainer is out to set them up in some way, or trainers believe that participants cannot be trusted to work unless there is a trainer actually in the room at all times. In any of these instances, although they will not say so directly, their behaviour will contain indications of their attitude and this will sabotage the learning process.

An important element of the psychological contract will be mutual consent. At the macro level, does the student want to be on the course? There can be few trainers who have not been presented with a participant who has been ‘sent’. Even worse is the situation where they have also been ‘told’ that they have a problem and that the trainer will sort them out.

At the micro level, trainers can inadvertently misuse the power of their role to coerce participants into training activities which they resent. Whenever students are not given a free choice about their participation, there will be psychological repercussions.

Trainers too need to have control over their own input to the training. Being expected to use a course design developed by another trainer is only reasonable insofar as we have the same values and preferences as the course designer. If we have serious reservations about the training methods we are required to use, our lack of conviction will dilute the effect of our training. A simple lack of training experience would figure under the issue of competence; I am thinking of more significant matters here. Mutual consent means that we have freely chosen our training style and are allowed to operate within our own ethical framework.

THE THREE CORNERED CONTRACT

The ideas above refer to contracts as if they are made between two parties. Fanita English pointed out that trainers in organisations are actually involved in contracts between three parties – and she coined the term ‘three cornered contract’ to describe the situation shown in Figure 2.1.

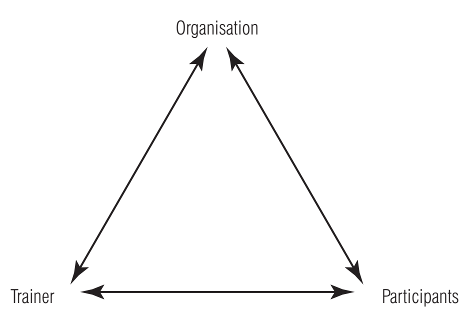
Her original suggestion referred to the situation where a trainer from outside is brought in by organisers to work with a group. The model works equally well if we apply it to an internal trainer. The first contract is set up between the trainer and the organiser; this may be external trainer with training manager, or internal trainer with line manager. Sometimes the organisers are a group of people, which tends to make the process yet more complex as each may understand the contract differently.

You may already be thinking about training situations with more than three parties involved – for example, the line manager, as well as the trainer, the organiser and the participants. For ease of understanding, however, I will continue to concentrate on the simple model of three and will explore the other possibilities later in this chapter. The three-way model is also the most useful in the classroom when you want to explain and agree the contract with your participants.

The trainer/organiser contract will have procedural, professional and psychological elements. With your own thorough checklist such as the one mentioned earlier, the procedural part can be straightforward.

We begin to enter more troubled waters when we work out the professional aspect. The organiser will probably have taken care of this by checking the credentials or prior experiences of the trainer, to ensure an appropriate track record for the topic in question. At the same time, the trainer needs to check what the organiser expects the training to cover. Often, the parties will agree on the training objectives and the course design.

Figure 2.1: The Three Cornered Contract



Herein lies a potential problem; at this stage there may well have been no involvement by the participants.

Subsequently, the trainer and the participants arrive in the classroom. Unless the joining instructions have been atypically informative, the participants and the trainer will have somewhat different ideas on what is going to take place. At worst, the participants may be there for the wrong reasons.

Over the years, my personal experience has included:

- being asked to run letter-writing courses where none of the participants ever wrote letters (they filled in numbers onto standard letters);
- having a non-supervisory participant arrive on a supervisory skills course. When I suggested that perhaps the skills would be useful if he were promoted, he pointed out that he was due to retire within months;
- being assured that participants had received no previous training in leadership, and then listening as they described their face-to-face discussions with Herzberg, Maslow and other famous names.

These ‘quirks’ occurred in spite of careful checking with the organisers. Sometimes the organiser was at fault; sometimes the nominating manager had put forward the wrong individual. In each case, the course still ran successfully but it required some careful readjustment to the programme. (For those of you who are wondering: in the first case we worked on personal letters; in the second he decided he might as well enjoy the few days break from work; and in the third the programme was quickly amended into an advanced course in which they shared previous knowledge.)

The psychological level of the contract may need even more careful attention, especially as it is so often outside our conscious awareness. We need to explore the underlying expectations of the organiser, and the organisation’s management. Are we seen as surrogate persecutors who will make participants aware of their shortcomings? Are we expected to report back to management about individual participants? If managers will be attending the course, what will be their role? How successful can we be – does the organisation really want us to empower participants so that they come back to work full of challenges to the status quo?

In addition to the ideas described in the rest of this chapter, many other TA frameworks will provide useful models to help us understand this aspect of contracting. *Symbiosis*, as described in Chapter 6, Thinking Styles, will help you analyse your contracts; analysis of your own games, as suggested in Chapter 7, Working with Others, will enable you to sidestep potential pitfalls; knowing your characteristic approach, as explained in Chapter 5, Working Styles, will help you control pressures you might otherwise transfer to participants through your programme designs. And of course Chapter 12, Professional Super-Vision will prompt you to review your contracting and get the benefit of another’s perspective.

Multi-party Contracting

There are often training situations in which more than three parties are involved. I have on occasion produced a series of interlocking triangles that looked rather like a deformed umbrella, to show the ways in which the same party may be involved in more than one contract. Adding the line manager into the equation can do this: we then have one triangle consisting of trainer, organisation and participant, associated with another that contains manager, organisation and trainer, associated with another that contains manager, organisation and participant as subordinate. Other options bring in clients (e.g. for social workers), the Health and Safety Executive or similar bodies, the customer or consumer associations, the parents (for schools and training schemes) and many more.

CONTRACTING IN THE CLASSROOM

English suggests that we use the three cornered contract in the classroom, by drawing a triangle on the board, (see Figure 2.1) talking about the contracts between the parties in each corner, and entering the details on the board as a summary.

What we take care of with this process is the psychological level of the contract. We bring the secret agendas and covert concerns into the open, where they can be discussed and dealt with. Participants hear from us the details of what the organisation has asked for, and what we are prepared to do.

I use this approach by describing first, in some detail, the agreement I have with the organisation. I explain that my discussions were with a representative of the organisation (training, personnel or line manager) but that essentially I have a contract with the organisation that employs them (or of which they are part, in the case of volunteer or religious organisations). To fulfil this contract, I have agreed to be in a certain location, on a certain date, to teach a certain subject – and here I am. In return, the organisation has agreed to pay me (or reward in some other way if for pro bono work).

The organisation has a similar contract with them. They have agreed to come to work in certain locations, on certain days, and to undertake certain tasks. As a part of this, they have implicitly agreed to attend training courses if the organisation requires it – so here they are. In return, the organisation pays them, and usually continues to pay them during their training as they are learning how to do their job even better.

That is the most straightforward part of our contracts with the organisation. I also point out that some of this will be in writing: I usually have at least a purchase order or letter of confirmation and they have a contract of employment. There may be other paperwork too: I may have produced training proposals and course outlines, while they may be expected to operate at work according to procedures manuals.

In addition, much of both contracts is likely to be verbal. I will have talked to my contacts about how I will do the training and what my training style is like. Participants will have talked with their managers about how they do their jobs and what level of discretion they have. In preparing for the course, I may also have talked with potential participants and with nominating managers to find out more about the work and the training needs. The participants may have discussed their individual needs with their managers. They may have talked to previous participants to find out what to expect of the course. We bring all of this verbal information with us as part of our understanding of our contracts with the organisation.

Now we need to establish a contract between us – between this trainer and these participants who are here today.

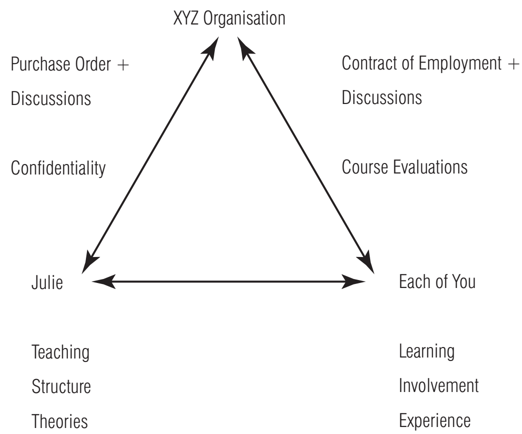
We can begin from the perspective of the trainer or the participants. From the trainer's corner, I describe those areas of the training/learning process that I take responsibility for. First, I point out that I cannot learn them anything; I can teach but only they can learn. Teaching therefore belongs at my corner, learning at theirs.

Next, structure goes into my corner and involvement in theirs. In order to teach well and enable them to learn, I take responsibility for the design and structure of the programme. As a professional trainer, I will select appropriate activities to help them learn. They have to make the decisions about whether to undertake the activities I propose. I will not (and cannot) force them to do so but if they opt out then any loss of learning opportunity is their responsibility. Conversely, the more effort they expend the more they are going to gain from the training.

Much of the training I do is centred on people skills. For this type of training, I add theories to my corner, experience to theirs. I expect participants to bring their experiences and problems to the course so we can work on real examples. I can provide them with models and frameworks for understanding human behaviour, and can give general examples. However, my aim is to equip them to apply the theories for themselves, so they can continue to increase their effectiveness after they have left the course. I invite them, therefore, to share their examples and to ask questions until they are satisfied they can use the concepts in the real world. This will apply also to technical training: the corners then might read theory for the trainer and practice for the participants. I show a typical completed three cornered contract in Figure 2.2.

When English first wrote of the three cornered contract, she referred to the organisation as the 'Great Powers'. This was because she found that the participants often arrived with fantasies about what the organisation had arranged; by introducing an element of fun she was able to defuse any bad feelings before they interfered with the training. She suggests we do this by listing the fantasies on the board, while identifying which are realistic expectations and which are not. This is usually enough to ensure that the more extreme fictions are laid to rest. English thus provides us with a neat process for clarifying, and if necessary retrieving those situations where there are significant differences in expectations.

Figure 2.2: A Typical Completed Three Cornered Contract



I find that her model makes a useful addition to any training session, even when I do not expect there to be any discrepancies. If there are no difficulties, the process is quick and sets the pattern for a partnership between trainer and participants. If there are unanticipated problems, describing English's model will bring them to the surface so they can be dealt with instead of emerging later when it will be more difficult to put them right.

Confidentiality

One other area I always mention is that of confidentiality and feedback to management. I can make my teaching more relevant if individuals let me know about the difficulties they encounter, whether these are at work or during the course. I think that people will be less likely to confide such details to the trainer if they believe the trainer makes a report to management after the course. My usual contract with an organisation therefore includes an agreement that I will keep confidential whatever I learn about the participants. (I will report it if someone fails to attend.) Confidentiality is therefore added to my corner of the triangle. On the other hand, I recognise that organisations need some way of checking the performance of a trainer. I therefore accept that the participants should complete a course evaluation. Feedback to management goes in their corner.

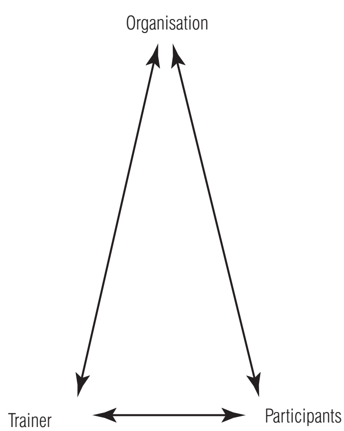
I do not normally ask for a blanket contract of confidentiality on courses I run. When this is done, particularly at the start of a course, participants are put under considerable pressure to agree to it. I do not believe this is a sound basis for a genuine contract. I prefer, therefore, to recommend rather than insist that they should refrain from talking about each other after they leave the course. I then point out that I have no way to guarantee that people will maintain silence, and no sanctions to apply if they do not. Because of this, I invite them all to consider carefully what they decide to share in the group and what they tell only to me. They are responsible for taking care of themselves in this way; I can only promise total confidentiality for things shared only with me.

PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTANCE

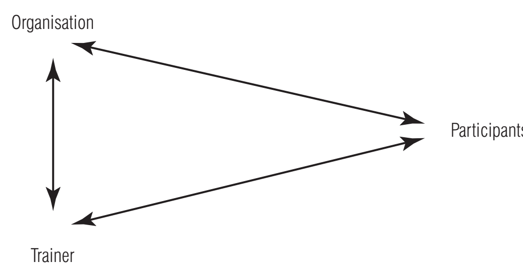
An important element in the psychological contract is what Nelly Micholt has called the psychological distance. This is the perceived distance in terms of relationship that exists between the parties. In a healthy training alliance, the sides of the contract triangle are all the same psychological length. Psychologically, the organisation, the trainer and the participants have matching degrees of closeness on each dimension.

Difficulties arise when any of the parties feels that the relationships are unevenly balanced. This can be represented by imagining that the triangle is drawn so that one side is shorter than the other two. Obviously, there are three variants of this, as shown in Figure 2.3 shown below.

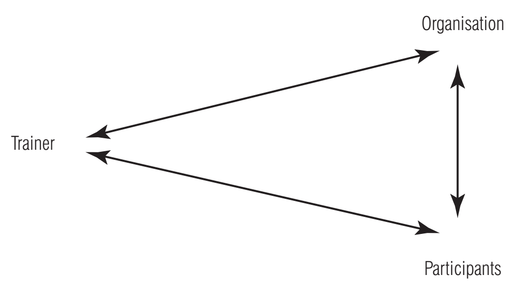
Figure 2.3: Psychological Distances



(A) Trainer allied with participants



(B) Trainer allied with organisation



(C) Participants allied with organisation

Trainer allied with Participants

There is a danger that the trainer identifies too closely with the participants. This may happen, for instance, with an in-company trainer who shares participants' disaffection with the organisation after a period of reorganisation. Sometimes independent trainers may see themselves as a crusading avenger, there to help participants throw off the unreasonable shackles of the organisation. Trainers who seek to meet their social needs through work may become too intimate with participants in an effort to make friends.

Too close a relationship between trainer and participants leads to an unnatural euphoria in the classroom. The needs of the organisation are likely to be forgotten as the group concentrates instead on having a good time, or on topics that interest them rather than that arranged by the organiser. Coalitions may be formed to lead an attack on the corporate environment, or trainers may find themselves coaching participants in subversive techniques. This may sound far-fetched but it really does happen.

Think about your own response when a participant complains about a manager – it is a difficult boundary to maintain so that they feel understood and empowered without your teaching them ways to manipulate. It can be even harder not to agree with them when you have had difficulties with the same manager yourself.

Becoming too close to participants in this way will seriously dilute your impact as a trainer. If you see the situation in the same way that they do, you are unlikely to change their frame of reference. Such a change is essential if people are to solve problems effectively. Failure to do this will have longer term implications for them and you. They will return to continued problems, exacerbated now perhaps by their manager's disappointment at their lack of development. You will come to be regarded as a poor trainer because your participants learn little but rebellion from you.

Trainer allied with Organisation

Participants will be wary of a trainer who seems to identify too closely with the organisation. They want to feel that their own needs will be taken into account even though the organisation is looking for something specific too. If you are clearly an envoy of management, your training will be received with scepticism.

In-company trainers may give this impression when they have been involved in the development of organisational initiatives that are now being applied via training. Independent trainers may appear like this merely because their contact within the organisation has till now been limited to a select few. We may also fall into this trap because of strong opinions about the way things should be done; if our values match the organisational culture we may be intolerant of those who do not share such views.

In the classroom we are likely to experience an excess of artificial politeness. Participants will mistrust us so will not tell us what they really think. They may avoid challenging us in order to conceal their doubts. We may be faced with an unresponsive group who put minimal effort into the activities and discussions we have planned. If we push too hard, we may stimulate a mutiny. Course evaluations will contain comments about the irrelevance of the training to the real world.

Participants allied with Organisation

This is an extremely uncomfortable situation for a trainer. It happens on a large scale when organisations call in a trainer even though those responsible do not believe the training is needed – such as when legislation requires they 'do something' about equal opportunities or safety. The trainer then finds that participants are intuitively aware of the lack of management commitment, making it extremely difficult to achieve any real progress.

The same thing happens on a smaller scale when individual managers are expected to release staff for training under corporate programmes which they do not truly support – such as customer care for support staff. Although the organisation, in the person of the training manager or top team, is committed to the training, the individual participant's principal psychological contract is with their own manager. If that manager's views are out of line with corporate policy, the participant will carry this stance into the classroom.

I can recall an example of this in a publishing company. The organisation had an extremely 'macho' image, being led by someone who was noted for his hire-and-fire style. However, his second-in-command, in concert with the human resources director, decided it was time to introduce a more up-to-date managerial style into the firm. A training initiative was duly designed and implemented, using several well-established consultancies. At progress meetings, the trainers soon began to complain of difficulties. Participants were aggressive and cynical. They could see no point in changing their own behaviour towards their subordinates when the managing director was clearly continuing to treat them as he always had. Regardless of the expertise of the trainers, the programme did not have a major impact within the company.

ACTION PLANNING

I regard action planning sessions as a trainer's secret weapon: get participants to spend some time at the end of the course thinking through how they will use the learning and your strike rate will increase considerably.

Most of us have attended courses, left full of good intentions, put the file away temporarily while we caught up with work, and then forgotten all about our plans until we come across the course folder many months later. In therapy groups, clients are often asked to state out loud their commitment to take or avoid specific actions. This is done because it has been demonstrated that making such a statement adds considerably to the likelihood that those actions will follow. The organisational equivalent is careful action planning – getting participants to draw up an explicit plan of what they intend to achieve as a result of attending the course.

I include action planning in this chapter because it is the process whereby participants make contracts with themselves. They may also contract with you, and/or their managers, but the significant dimension is the commitment they make to themselves. Therapists know also that the commitment is increased if clients share their plans with a group. Again, the organisational equivalent is to invite participants to review their objectives in plenary, or at least to share them in small groups.

Objective Setting

One of the ways that we sabotage ourselves is to have action plans that are vague. Then we never know whether we have achieved our aims or not. To overcome this, we need to meet the criteria for ‘proper’ objectives: that they are specific and measurable; that they are realistic and achievable; that they are worthwhile and challenging. We also need to pay careful attention to the way we frame our objectives, so that they are worded in formats that lead to successful change.

I convert the three criteria into a donkey bridge that also matches the three main internal ego states - and often joke with participants that M & M’s make a change from SMARTIES:

- *Measurable* – as in will my Internal Parent (e.g. grandmother in my head) be able to check I have “done my homework”?
- *Manageable* – does my Internal Adult think my objective is something I can realistically achieve?
- *Motivational* – is it something my Internal Child ego state really wants to do?

I have included more ideas about the internal ego state aspects of objective setting later in this chapter.

To ensure our action plans contain objectives that are measurable, we need to answer such questions as:

- What exactly am I planning to do?
- How will I behave?
- In what situation(s)?
- With which people?
- When will I do this?
- How will I know I have achieved my objective?

“Get on better with Harry”, is not specific enough. We need something like “Spend 5 minutes at least 3 times a week chatting casually with Harry about his hobbies”. This tells us what, how, when, with whom. It is measurable – we can check during the week that we are on target so we don’t have to chat to Harry three times on Friday afternoon.

Measuring progress is very important. It provides reinforcement when we can congratulate ourselves on doing what we planned. Without adequate measures, we miss the satisfaction of knowing we have achieved our objectives. We also need the measure so that we can decide when we have incorporated the change into our usual behaviour; then we can move on to the next challenge.

The manageable element has a different set of considerations; how realistic and achievable is what we plan to do? Do you currently find Harry very difficult to talk to? If so, is it realistic to plan to spend most of the week with him? 3 five minute chats is probably realistic. Set the target higher and you might well find it too hard to achieve.

Objectives need to be selected so that we have a good likelihood of attaining them. Picking the biggest problem to tackle first is not the best route to success. Instead, start with something that can be realistically accomplished – you can always up the stakes later if you find it's too easy.

Manageability also relates to power to act. We can only change our own behaviour, not anyone else's. Chatting to Harry is only acceptable as an objective if we are sure that Harry will agree to talk to us. If he is likely to walk away and ignore us, the objective is not achievable.

We need to balance achievability with how motivational our selected objectives are; how challenging and worthwhile are they? There is no point having an action plan about things which are not important or are simple to put into effect. If we could easily go and chat to Harry a few times a week, why not just do it now we realise it would improve our relationship. It hardly justifies being part of an action plan, which should be reserved for significant developments.

We get little feeling of satisfaction from making easy changes. We need to tackle something that we recognise as a real challenge, so that we will have an incentive to persevere. Otherwise, our reaction is likely to be "So what?" after we have implemented our plan.

Objectives also need to be motivational in the sense that they contribute to our overall effectiveness. It may be nice to get to know Harry but hardly worthwhile if he is leaving the organisation shortly (unless we want to continue the relationship, or see Harry as a useful test case on which to improve our ability to relate to others).

The way we frame our objectives is also significant. Compare the action planning process with eating an elephant – you can do it if you go for small pieces at a time. Changing our behaviour or attitudes can be equally indigestible if we tackle too much at once. Picking a few priority areas allows us to spread the elephant eating over a sensible timeframe.

"Whatever you do, do not think about rabbits!" When someone says that to you, what do you think about? It is virtually impossible not to think about rabbits, even if it is only fleetingly. To avoid someone thinking about rabbits, we need to tell them to think about something else, such as elephants perhaps.

The think-rabbit syndrome applies to action planning. If we concentrate on our weaknesses, we are likely to reinforce them. We should instead identify alternative objectives that would have the effect of cancelling out our weaknesses. For example, to stop interrupting other people, focus instead on listening to the end of their sentences. To improve a relationship, look for things you may have in common; don't approach them thinking 'I must not lose my temper' or you will very likely do just that.

TA Analyses of Action Plans

The idea of action planning is not new; neither are the criteria I have mentioned. However, there are some useful dimensions that TA enables us to add to the planning process. In particular, the concepts of ego states (see Chapter 4, Interpersonal Styles and Chapter 6, Thinking Styles), strokes (see Chapter 7, Working with Others) and drivers (see Chapter 5, Working Styles) are valuable frameworks for checking the way objectives have been selected and structured.

The concept of internal ego states allows us to consider in more detail the decision making process involved in our action planning. Thus, our Internal Parent holds opinions and is a store of previous experience, including recollections of how we and others have behaved in similar situations to those covered by our action plan. Our Internal Child contains our anticipated feelings about being in the circumstances specified in the action plan, often mixed up with emotional memories of previous incidents. Our Internal Adult thinks logically about our plans, considering options and implications and weighing up the probabilities of success. If we are to succeed in our stated objectives, all three internal ego states need to be in broad agreement.

Our Internal Parent will want to check that the plan is based on reliable precedents, even if we cannot identify an exactly similar set of circumstances. This ego state will also be in action when we consider our value systems and beliefs about the right ways to act. A logical course of action selected by Internal Adult will not be implemented successfully if it is out of line with our principles.

Our Internal Child will put energy and enthusiasm into plans that we feel comfortable and excited about. This ego state will unconsciously undermine decisions which ignore our feelings of scare or anxiety. This does not mean we cannot do anything we feel nervous about; it means that we need to use the resources of our other ego states to reassure the Internal Child that the concerns will be taken care of. Perhaps we will plan some relaxation before we enact a stressful change in behaviour, or set up a reward for ourselves as an inventive to make the extra effort.

Our Internal Adult looks for evidence that the objective is well-founded. In this ego state there is a danger that we see the logical solution and take insufficient account of our true opinions and feelings. If we are used to doing this, we may have lost touch with our own underlying motivations. We then act like a computer, without the necessary attention to all aspects of the decision. We may also underestimate the responses of other people, expecting them to appreciate the logic of our actions in the same way that we do.

Strokes are units of recognition – all the ways that other people show us we exist for them. This recognition is essential and we all have familiar patterns within which it occurs. When we change our behaviour in line with our action plans, our stroking patterns will also shift. If we make significant modifications to our behaviour, we may want more recognition, or strokes, to reinforce our sense of well-being as we put extra effort into the change.

We can add the concept of strokes to our action planning by considering:

- how do we get stroked now? what for?
- what strokes might no longer be available if we change?
- how can we make up the deficit?
- how can we get extra strokes/recognition for the changes?
- how will we reinforce our success?

It is important to remember that human beings settle for negative strokes if insufficient positive ones are available. We would rather be shouted at than ignored. The behaviours we now want to change may well have been providing a steady supply of negative strokes, as people expressed their dissatisfaction to us in a multitude of ways. Introducing a more skilful way of interacting may prevent the negative strokes being given before the replacement positive stroking pattern comes into effect. In that case, we will be wise to organise extra strokes temporarily from other sources, such as by spending more time with friends while we develop new ways of relating at work.

Drivers are characteristic ways of behaving that are usually strengths but can easily become weaknesses when we are under stress. Planning to change our behaviour is somewhat stressful for all of us, so the drivers tend to creep in to our action plans.

'Hurry Up' shows up when we want to tackle everything in a rush. We draw up an action plan with many items, all to be completed in a very short time. We then accomplish the changes only superficially, so that we fail to reap the full benefit of the changes. Or we select our priorities so quickly that we overlook significant areas that we should be working on.

'Be Perfect' is in effect when we aim to produce the perfect action plan, with just the right priorities and a great deal of detail on how we will implement the changes. This takes us so long that we never quite finish drawing up the plan anyway. Or we make each objective so complex that it would take hours to put any one of them into effect – so we never have a long enough period to get started.

'Please People' affects us by requiring that whatever we do has the approval of other people. We may ask the trainer to tell us what should be in our action plan. If the trainer wisely refuses, we may ask our colleagues on the course, or go back to check with our manager.

We want someone else to determine our priorities in case we get it wrong. Or we worry about upsetting other people if we make changes to our own behaviour.

'Try Hard' is about trying but not succeeding. We tackle lots of things enthusiastically but never quite finish them. Our action plan is therefore likely to be crammed with good ideas, which we will initiate and then get bored with. We will have several, so we can move between them whenever there is a danger that we might actually achieve one of them. We may even get bored with doing an action plan, and sidetrack ourselves by starting to experiment with alternative layouts for the plan – and maybe even alternative designs for the action planning session.

'Be Strong' driver means we keep a stiff upper lip. We stay calm and emotionless. We fail to see why we need an action plan anyway, as we are loathe to admit to having any weaknesses. Our speciality is coping in crises, without help from anyone else. We may grudgingly put down one or two loosely worded items to keep the trainer quiet but will do our best to avoid facing up to any shortcomings. We cannot imagine why we would want to change when we are in control of everything already.

Plans into Action

You can help participants produce much better action plans if you use one or more of the frameworks I have described here. By much better, I mean that they will be more likely to achieve whatever they have selected as their priorities. Checking ego states will ensure their choices are balanced, considering strokes will remind them to include encouragement and reinforcement into their plans, and looking out for drivers will identify the characteristic ways they might sabotage their own efforts. You can apply similar processes for yourself when you draw up your action plans for providing training.

Another important element to take into account is the choice of situations in which to implement the action plans. Learning new ways of behaving towards other people is like learning to ride a bicycle – we are acquiring skills we did not have before. We did not simply get on a bicycle for the first time and pedal off; we went through a process of practising separate actions and eventually being able to perform several functions at once.

First we learned to pedal strongly enough to keep our balance. We probably fell off a few times until we got this right. Hopefully, we had picked a quiet spot to learn this and not a busy road. Then, if we got it wrong we did not fall in front of a car. Learning new people skills also needs a quiet spot – in other words we need to select carefully the environment in which to make the change. We should defer using the new behaviour in front of people who could cause us harm, until we have practised enough to be confident we will not lose our metaphorical balance.

We may also find that our new approach lacks the impact we hoped for. Perhaps it seems false, even to us. It may certainly feel disjointed. On the bicycle, it took time before we could pedal, watch the traffic, give hand signals and stop efficiently without leaving the saddle. Similarly, with people skills we have to practise before we can readily pull together the sequence of judging the situation, determining our desired outcome, interacting in an appropriate style, matching body language, tone and content and responding to the other party.

This need to co-ordinate may make our behaviour seem stilted and artificial. Participants need to be reassured that this is a normal problem, that it signifies that they are well on the way to making a definite change in behaviour, and that practice will take care of the rough edges. They may also need to be forewarned about the negative stroking that often occurs when people return to work and their changed behaviours are greeted with "Oh, you've been on a course – now it's time to get back to normal!".

ACTIVITIES

Activity 2.1 Three Cornered Contract

Explain the concept of the three cornered contract by drawing it on the board and working through the content with the group.

Activity 2.2 Key Problems

This exercise provides detail required as part of the professional contract. It ensures that you can provide training in a way that relates it clearly to the real needs of the participants.

Brief syndicate groups of 4 or more to draw up a list of common problem areas (related to the programme topic) that they face at work.

For example:

- Identify and describe typical difficulties faced by supervisors in motivating staff.
- Give examples of customer contact situations that are difficult to handle.
- Identify the key problems in negotiating effectively with trade union representatives.

Ask them to be as specific as possible and to be prepared to describe real examples when the lists are reviewed in plenary.

In the review, check you understand what is meant by each item. Make it clear if any are outside the scope of the course (such as structural or resourcing issues rather than skills needs).

Keep the lists on display during the course so that you can jointly check that each item gets dealt with. Ask participants to tick off entries as they are completed. You might also want to invite participants to add items they think of as the course progresses.

Activity 2.3 Individual Contracts

This activity encourages individuals to think about how they can benefit most from the training. They draw up self-managed contracts with themselves so that they can take responsibility for their own learning.

Step 1 Tell participants they are going to make some notes for their own use during the course. They will have an opportunity to discuss these but they will have complete control over what they choose to share with others.

Step 2 Ask participants to write down their responses to the questions below:

Note: Do not explain the questions beforehand. Doing so may encourage participants to regurgitate your thinking instead of working it out for themselves.

1. What do you want to achieve as a result of being here?
2. How will you know when you have achieved it?
3. What are you prepared to do to achieve it?
4. How might you stop yourself achieving what you want?

Note: Be careful with the wording. In Question 1, "want" is stronger than "would like to". In Question 2, "when" implies success; "if" would denote some doubt on the trainer's part. In Question 4, be sure to say "might" and not "will" – otherwise they may well respond to your implicit invitation at the psychological level.

Step 3 When most participants have stopped writing, add the following question:

5. In what other ways might you sabotage yourself? Have you given all the answers you can to question 4?

Step 4 Explain briefly the rationale behind the questions.

Question. Having a clear objective will enable them to focus. They can then ask appropriate questions and generally make sure that the trainer provides them with relevant content.

Question 2. Thinking through how they will recognise success adds detail to their objective. It also operationalises it, turning it into a more specific description of what they want to be able to do.

Question 3. This makes them think about their role in the training/learning process. Are they willing to undertake activities proposed by the trainer or do they expect to acquire skills by some magical process of osmosis? Will they take notes to reinforce points or rely solely on handouts?

Question 4. We all have techniques, outside our awareness, for sabotaging ourselves. If we think about it, we can identify many of them. We can then take direct action to overcome them. For instance, many of us are reluctant to ask questions. Perhaps we are afraid of looking stupid. Yet our very failure to ask is what leaves us confused. Others of us jump to conclusions without listening to the full message from the trainer. We realise too late that we have misunderstood. Perhaps we are too embarrassed to practice new behaviour in front of a group, or scared of being video-taped. Our fear prevents us acquiring new skills.

Somehow, once we admit to ourselves that these obstacles are there, we find it much easier to deal with them. Even better, if we tell others about them they will help us to avoid slipping into bad habits. We will also find that our concerns feel so much less serious once we realise that everyone has some quirks like this.

Question 4 extras. Our subconscious will hold back one or two of our sabotage techniques if it can, in case we become too successful and get conceited. Checking again may flush out some more.

Step 5

Option A Invite participants to share their responses in pairs or threes. Deal with any questions, perhaps individually rather than in plenary.

Option B Invite participants to review their responses in plenary. Discuss how their individual objectives fit within the programme. If appropriate, agree what help they want from others should their sabotage techniques become apparent.

Option C Ask participants to keep the sheets and refer to them as the course progresses. Invite them to monitor their own progress and check for signs of self-sabotage. Remind them at intervals to read through the sheets, and perhaps update them.

Activity 2.4 Action Planning

Prepare a sheet headed 'Action Planning', containing reminders of the guidelines described in this chapter about objectives being measurable, manageable and motivational.

Allow plenty of time at the end of the course for participants to prepare individual action plans which will be their contracts for themselves. 30 minutes for a two day course is about right.

Brief participants to:

- Review their notes and handouts for the whole course.
- Select no more than x items as priorities to work on back at work (x = one item per day of training).
- State what they plan to achieve for each item, in terms that meet the guidelines for statements of objectives.
- Put any additional items onto a separate sheet for action later, after they have achieved the first list of items.
- Reassure them that the action plans are for their own use only and will not be collected in. They can be honest about any shortcomings.
- Keep the list of priority items separate from their course notes, in a place where they will see it regularly and be reminded of their plans.

Review their plans using any of the TA frameworks mentioned in this chapter, or indeed in later chapters. Ego states, strokes and drivers are all useful concepts to apply.

Optional extras:
Create syndicate groups to review learning throughout the course before they prepare individual action plans.

Pair them up when the plans are written and ask them to act as 'devil's advocate' for each other, checking that the objectives are written in ways that meet the guidelines.

Have participants share the content of their plans with each other, to reinforce their commitment and provide encouragement from the rest of the group.

To add some fun, have a supply of M & Ms sweets available, perhaps with one of the M & M figures that dispense them (often available in airport shops), so that participants receive either a small bag or a handful of sweets once their partner confirms that their action plan fits the Measurable, Manageable, Motivational guidelines.

If you need action plans that will be shown to participants' managers, suggest that they might like to prepare two versions if they want to plan for personal as well as professional objectives.

NOTES & SOURCES

Berne's ideas on contracts are contained in *Principles of Group Treatment* Eric Berne, Grove Press Inc., 1966.

Steiner's ideas on contracts are in *Scripts People Live* Claude M Steiner, Bantam Books, 1975.

For the original description of the three cornered contract, see '*The Three Cornered Contract*' by Fanita English in Transactional Analysis Journal 1975 Vol 5(4), pp 383-4.

The concept of psychological distance was introduced by Nelly Micholt; see *Psychological Distance and Group Intervention* in Transactional Analysis Journal 1992 Vol 22(4) pp 228-233.

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