



FESTIVE CHEER

Carol Wilson ran communication workshops with ‘guests’ at homeless charity Crisis last Christmas. The responses would not have been out of place in an executive boardroom

“When a street stabbing happens it doesn’t start with knives; there are words that lead up to the knives. With the coaching skills I have learned here, I can make a difference when the words start, and stop it getting to the point where the knives are drawn.”

These words were spoken by a 26-year-old youth who had been funded to attend one of my recent public sector coach training courses. It made a change from sales directors telling me how their new skills would save time and make money. And it got me thinking about how I could get

coaching skills out to where they are most needed.

So I approached Crisis, the extraordinary organisation that has provided refuge for the homeless for the past 40 years. At Christmas it now offers six days of 24-hour mental and physical care, with counselling, clothing, teachers, dentists, doctors, entertainers and Samaritans provided by volunteers. The operation covers nine centres, employing 6,500 volunteers and accommodating ‘guests’, as the visitors are called.

I arranged with Crisis to run communication skills workshops on 28 and 29 December. This seemed the optimum time for



guests to be focusing on their next steps. The four workshops consisted of simple coaching exercises around emotional intelligence and communication. I started by asking each participant to think of someone they had met and liked being with during their stay with Crisis; someone who had motivated and inspired them, made them feel good. We discussed as a group what qualities that person had; what he or she had done that the participant liked so much. I have done a similar exercise, based on coaching pioneer Sir John Whitmore's work, with business leaders from middle America to the Middle and Far East. The answers are always the same: the 'special' person listened, supported, challenged and believed in them.

There is a conventional perception that to be liked and

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respected, you need an exceptional personality: articulate, clever or entertaining. Yet these are rarely mentioned. What the exercise demonstrates is that getting on with people can be a matter of choice; it is about what you give, not how much you impress.

Street life

There was one difference in the responses from Crisis guests. As well as the qualities mentioned above, the expression “non-judgmental” came up at every workshop. It seems that the acceptance the guests received from the volunteers at Crisis outweighed the value of being

offered food, warmth and health. It was a quality they did not see much of on the streets and it seemed to be a key feature in inspiring them to change their lives. Crisis is not only non-judgmental, but non-religious and non-political too.

The workshop then moved on to an interactive game called ‘The Five Levels of Listening’, which covers the listening and questioning techniques of basic coaching skills. Again, this is an exercise I use with senior executives all over the world. The purpose is to examine the ‘how’, after listening has been identified as a key quality in being liked and respected.

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the floor of another addict, for fear of relapse. What kind of commitment does that take?

There is a perception that people on the streets choose to be there. But if you are over 25, male and not an addict, there are very few beds available. Even worse, without an address, you cannot get state benefit.

My most touching 'client' was a gentle, neat, elderly man who could talk only of his longing to have a room of his own, where he could lay out his things and arrange his life. He sat alone and sad in the room all day long.

I think the most useful conversation I had was with a man whose weathered face laughed a lot. He told me he had a room but that his life was ruined by a gambling addiction. Unlike most of those I coached, he was cheerful when not talking to me and sad when he did. He said, "It's too late for me now." But over informal sessions he gained a new insight – that gambling took the place of people: he was lonely. He resolved to call a helpline. I hope he did.

Crisis says that many of us are only three payslips away from homelessness. Once there, the obstacles to rejoining society can seem insurmountable. Where coaching can help is in breaking down those obstacles, and the accompanying fear, into manageable stages. People can then see the way forward – and find the confidence to take it. ■

● Carol Wilson is managing director of Performance Coach Training.

● Crisis always need volunteers. The mentor scheme introduced last year is particularly relevant to coaches. Download an application form at: www.crisis.org.uk

Guests enjoyed the interaction with others. Most useful of all, I think, was the value of self-examination in a supportive environment. It applies equally to the corporate sector.

How are you doing?

However, my key contribution was time spent out on the floor. I would pick someone sitting alone and use the opener: "How are you doing?" Coaching works extremely well here because we talk in the present and future, not in the past, an area that is painful for most guests.

The tough part was balancing the questions that would make people think, against the danger of underlining the potential hopelessness of their situations. I met no small number of reformed crack addicts who were choosing to live rough in sub-zero temperatures rather than accept

