

Module: Starting with a blank sheet

Module in Communication Skills for Supervisors

When we want to build a good working relationship, our own mindset and approach makes a difference to how that will go.

As humans we naturally develop opinions, beliefs and assumptions about others. Often these will be very positive and supportive. However, at other times we may find ourselves struggling with a particular individual in some way or developing a mindset which might be less productive.

This module is designed to encourage you as a trainer to start with a blank sheet with trainees. More than that, it is an encouragement to begin from a belief in every trainee's potential, possibility and ability – no matter how they are showing up.

This might be easy to do with some trainees and more challenging with others and it is important to recognise that our unconscious biases may contribute to this. However, the more we are able to let go of opinions, assumptions and judgements about trainees, the more space there is for them to ask questions, share concerns and ask for support or advice.

Here are some approaches which could shift perspective when working with trainees. They work for many people but they might not be for everyone. Choose what works for you.

The invitation here is to try something out and see what difference it makes. If they do not work for you, they might still work for your trainees.

A. Begin with the End in Mind

The second of Stephen Covey's *7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, is called Begin with the End in Mind. Covey suggests that everything is created twice – first in the mind and then in the physical world. He suggests that if we give some conscious attention to what we want as if it had happened, we clear a way forward for it to take place, we become clearer about where we are heading and it is far more likely to happen.

This approach is often used in coaching and is a way to invite someone to imagine how things might be if they were successful. It side-steps thinking about obstacles and takes someone to a place of what is possible.

This could be useful when thinking about trainees. It can also be a useful approach to use *with* trainees.

Trainer exercise 1 – Begin with the End in Mind

Think of an area where you are experiencing challenge or where you are beginning a project or piece of work.

Begin well and carry on!

Now imagine a future time – it could be a year, six months, or a time which is meaningful for you, where you have achieved the ideal outcome for you. Do not worry about how that happens. Allow yourself to experience what that is like for you.

What will you be saying?
What will you be doing?
How will you feel?

Write down a sentence for each of these questions as if it had already happened.

Notice how you feel now and note down any actions you might want to take as a result.

Trainer exercise 2: Begin with the End in Mind – about trainees

This time think of one or more trainees who perhaps need support or are struggling in some way.

Imagine that you do your best work with these trainees over the coming year and that they have progressed significantly.

What will you be saying?
What will you be doing?
How will you feel?

Note down a sentence for each of these as if it had happened.

Notice how you feel and how you might now see these trainees.

Has anything changed?

B. Give them an A

Psychotherapist Rosamund Stone Zander and her husband, Benjamin Zander, founder and conductor of the Boston Philharmonic Orchestra, wrote a book called *The Art of Possibility*² in which they set out ways to shift mindset for the benefit of self and others, and to step into a space of possibility.

One technique that Benjamin Zander shares is to 'give an A'. At the beginning of a teaching year, he tells his students he is going to give them an A and invites them to write a letter from their future self where they describe what it was like to get an A, what was involved, who they had to become in order to get an A and why they deserved it.

This then informs how students approach the following year and creates a context coming from their future success rather than looking forward to what can sometimes feel like an enormous challenge. It supports the students to step into a space where that A feels possible in a way that is energising and motivating.

Again, this approach might be valuable to use with trainees, however the focus here is to clear a way forward for how you want to work with your trainees.

Trainer exercise 3 – Give yourself an A!

Think of a project or a piece of work you are involved with.

Now imagine a year from now and see it as being as successful as it possibly could be – the equivalent of giving yourself an A.

Imagine yourself in that future place and write a letter where you describe:

- *What it's like to get an A (or equivalent)*
- *What was involved*
- *Who you had to become*
- *Why you deserved it*

What is it like to write and then read that letter?

As a bonus exercise – put the letter away and open it again in a year's time.

Trainer exercise 4 – Give them an A

Think of a trainee or a number of trainees.

Imagine it is the end of the year or other relevant timescale and you have given them the equivalent of an A.

- *What is it like to see them achieve that result?*
- *What was involved?*
- *Who did they become?*
- *Who did you have to be to support them to make that happen?*

If you knew that every trainee you work with could achieve what they want to achieve, what would be different for you?

C. Letting go of assumptions

When we want to build a good working relationship with another person it is really helpful to be able to identify and let go of assumptions we might be making about them.

We naturally make assumptions about other people. This can be based on our experience of them or what we hear from other people about them or based on their background. Or it could be based on their results or other factors.

When we are able to identify and let these go, it can open up a space in the conversation and the relationship.

Nancy Kline in her book *Time to Think*³ shares an approach using 'incisive questions' to do this. Incisive questions are one of ten components that she describes as making up her 'Thinking Environment'.

Begin well and carry on!

Once again, this is an approach which might be used to shift assumptions about trainees and could also be used to support trainees to shift assumptions they might be making themselves.

Kline describes three types of assumptions:

- Facts
- Possible facts
- Bedrock-assumptions about oneself and how life works

The challenge with assumptions is that they seem real at the time. It is easy to assume that we know what someone else is thinking or what they will think about us. We can assume that certain things are not possible for us or that others are better than us in some way.

We can also make assumptions about others and what they are capable of, or why they are behaving as they do.

Incisive questions have two parts; the first is to identify what assumptions are being made.

Q: 'What might you be assuming here that is holding you back?'

Once identified, the second part involves replacing the assumption with its opposite in a way that is liberating for the other person's thinking.

For example:

Q: 'What might you be assuming here that is holding you back?'

A: 'I'm assuming that if I speak up people will judge me.'

Q: 'What else could be true instead of that?'

A: 'That people would listen.'

Q: 'So if you knew that people would listen and be eager to hear what you have to say, what would be different for you?'

A: 'I'd feel more relaxed about it.'

Incisive questions generally begin with 'If...'

- *If you knew that you know enough already?*
- *If you could say anything and it would be ok, what would you say?*
- *If you knew that the opposite of that is true?*
- *If you could trust yourself what would be different?*

Trainer exercise 5: Letting go of assumptions

Think of a situation where you are experiencing challenge or feel you are holding yourself back in some way.

- *What are you assuming about that situation that is holding you back?*
- *If that wasn't true, what else could be the case that feels better to you?*
- *If you could move forward with confidence, what might be different?*
- *If you knew you could only succeed, what would you do next?*

Trainer exercise 6: Letting go of assumptions – about trainees

Think of a trainee who is struggling or who you are finding challenging in some way.

- *What assumptions are you making about this trainee that might be impacting how you see them?*
- *What else could be true that might allow you to see them differently?*
- *If you knew that this trainee wants to do their best, what difference could that make to you?*
- *If you knew that this trainee is capable of great things what might be different?*

Trainer Reflective Exercise:

Think of one trainee where it might be valuable for you to shift your perspective.

Try one of the approaches shared here for yourself and notice any differences in your way of working with this trainee and how they respond.

Further reading and resources:

1. Stephen R Covey, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, (Revised and updated May 2020) (First published by Simon & Schuster 1989)
2. Nancy Kline, *Time to Think: Listening to Ignite the Human Mind*, (Updated Sept 2002) (First published by Cassell Illustrated 1999)
3. Rosamund Stone Zander, Benjamin Zander, *The Art of Possibility, Transforming Personal and Professional Life* Penguin Books. (2000).
4. Benjamin Zander – How to give an A <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qTKEBygQic0>