

BUMPY RIDE FOR PERSONAL ADVISERS

Learner centred... impartial... and neutral help? That's what we want to offer. But are we in any position to deliver it?

No guidance system is perfect: at best systems help - but most are imperfect, some are damaging. And all systems need people who know how to work with them. At times they need people who know how to work around them.

a cautionary tale

I want to tell you about my friend. He used to work with 16-19 year-olds, helping them plan their education and career. But, as so often happens, talk turned to personal and family life - friendships and hostilities. At times it touched on love life..., or drugs... and crime....

It was troublesome – he was working with troubled people. But his managers were laced straighter; and they wanted no sensibilities ruffled. Life should be so convenient!

Take the day a couple of drugs-squad cops dropped in, saying he was needed as a witness for the prosecution. They knew he knew something, and they were right. In a fraught interview, he argued that just one betrayal of confidence by him would be the end of his work there. They were hesitant; but they were also sane - and backed off.

People talk; and a head teacher in a feeder school got to hear of it. The head thought he saw a threat to the good name of his school. He wanted the names of users and dealers. He demanded access to my friend's notes. But my friend is not a pushover. So, a within a week, he was carpeted for an hour by the Deputy Director for Education, the Principal Education Welfare Officer and the Head Teacher. They were all too worried to hear any appeal to trust. It seemed that, although some police could see the sense in backing off, these bosses could only think of one way of dealing with their fears.

My friend knew he couldn't go on in that atmosphere. Before leaving, he destroyed his notes. 'A confidence', he said, 'is a confidence'.

that was then, this is now

And now, I need to know if he did the right thing? It doesn't take much to work up a situation like this. There are all kinds of ways of getting pinioned by a learner's needs and other people's safety. Social workers and clinicians get caught. Lawyers and journalists can be. Personal advisers are not going to escape. So, suppose another crisis like that came up; what do you think an adviser should do?

The thing is this: 'Connexions' is a good name for what we do, because it faces up to all the links - between learning for work and for life, between all of that and doing drugs and crime, and about how all of that links to love and allegiance. It means we are working with what people learn among their friends, through the media, at home, in the neighbourhood - not just at school. There can be a lot of disentangling to do. Learners tell you things that you don't necessarily want to hear. And other people, when they realise this, get worried and feel threatened – people in families, among colleagues and who are your managers.

But our learners need us to be steady; and it's not easy. The easiest way to stay steady is to find the straightest routes to Connexions' targets. If we bump into serious complications – drugs, pregnancy, crime – a nervous manager might want us to distance ourselves. Others might expect us to report the crime. Some might want to see our notes. That's what happened to my friend.

My friend says, 'There are always more than two players in the helping game – and a helper can be under more pressure than her learners!'. He's right: whether we are in McDonald's, a walk-in centre, or our own office, freedom from pressure is not an option.

We can duck out by sticking to the rules – and Connexions has plenty of those. Where learner needs don't fit Connexions targets, it's needn't be too hard to persuade them to give way. We can stick to plans for 'ok' forms of education and employment. We can keep our eyes and ears open to the system's expectations. If somebody wants to see confidential notes, why is that such a big a deal? The fact is a person can stay out of trouble by not risking company time on work that will not realise company targets. That's our seat belt, and this is a bumpy ride.

Otherwise an adviser could be getting to where she can only help her learners' careers by risking her own. That's what happened to my friend. I don't think he should do that again.

So, thanks for listening. The only question left in my aching head is, 'If I do as you've so kindly advised me, how do I justify my professional claims for learner-centred impartiality?' But I don't want to think about that now. I'll think about it tomorrow.

Oh!, and, before I go, I said this all started with my friend. It wasn't really my friend. But you knew that.

Didn't you?