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MASTERING COMPLEX SITUATIONS TOGETHER WITH PEER COUNSELLING A CORPORATE LEARNING FORMAT¹

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ОПАНУВАННЯ СКЛАДНИХ СИТУАЦІЙ ЗА ДОПОМОГОЮ

ПІР-КОНСУЛЬТУВАННЯ: ФОРМАТ КОРПОРАТИВНОГО НАВЧАННЯ

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Актуальність дослідження полягає у вивченні пір-консультування як усталеної, але недостатньо теоретизованої практики, що сприяє колективному навчанню та розв'язанню проблем у професійному середовищі, яке характеризується складною міжособистісною динамікою. **Метою дослідження** є розробка теоретичної бази пір-консультування на основі сучасних системних і наук про складність, що забезпечує фахівців структурованим підходом до орієнтації у змінах робочого середовища та зростаючих професійних вимогах. **Теоретичні та методологічні засади** ґрунтуються на синергетиці як теорії самоорганізації та системній теорії розв'язання проблем. Методологічно ці основи інтегруються в Гейдельберзьку інтегративну модель процесу (HiP). **Результати дослідження** презентують концепцію пір-консультування, засновану на моделі HiP, яка поєднує теоретичне підґрунтя наук про складність зі структурованою, прагматичною основою для вирішення проблем у робочому середовищі. Процес консультування, деталізований до мікроінтервенцій, дозволяє учасникам без професійної підготовки у сфері консультування аналізувати ситуації як складні соціальні системи та спільно розробляти відповідні стратегії.

Практичне застосування концепції демонструє, що орієнтований на складність підхід сприяє тонкому й гнучкому розв'язанню проблем, залишаючись водночас доступним для пір-груп. Фактори впливу HiP (HiP-Impact-Factors) підтримують організацію процесу, підвищують самоєфективність і здатність до управління стресом у тих, хто надає кейси, а також зміцнюють здатність учасників орієнтуватися в складних ситуаціях. Докладні настанови та інструменти сприяють фасилітації процесу та рефлексії, забезпечуючи перенесення знань як на індивідуальному, так і на організаційному рівнях. Водночас дослідження підкреслює необхідність врахування динаміки групи для збереження якості пір-консультування, включаючи управління конфліктами інтересів, виклики групового розвитку та організаційні структури. Крім того, пір-групи повинні усвідомлювати власні межі, зокрема розрізняючи консультування та терапію, щоб у складних випадках перенаправляти до професійної допомоги. Отримані результати свідчать, що пір-консультування є складним процесом, подібним до професійних форматів консультування, що потребує подальших досліджень.

Ключові слова: пір-консультування, синергетика, складність, системне розв'язання проблем, Гейдельберзька інтегративна модель процесу (HiP), HiP-Impact-Factors, пір-група, процесуальна стабільність, групова динаміка.

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The Relevance of the research lies in the exploration of peer counselling as established yet under-theorized practice that facilitates collective learning and problem-solving in professional environments characterized by complex interpersonal dynamics. **The purpose** of the research is to develop a theoretical framework for peer counselling based on contemporary systems and complexity sciences, providing practitioners with a structured approach to navigating workplace changes and increasing professional demands. **The**

theoretical and methodological foundations are grounded in synergetics as a theory of self-organization and systemic problem-solving theory. Methodologically, these foundations are integrated within the Heidelberg Integrative Process Model. **Research results** of the research presents a peer counselling concept based on the Heidelberg Integrative Process Model (HiP), offering both a theoretical foundation in complexity sciences and a structured, pragmatic framework for addressing workplace challenges. The counselling process, detailed down to micro-interventions, enables participants without professional counselling backgrounds to analyze case situations as complex social systems and collaboratively develop appropriate strategies. Practical application of the concept demonstrates that a complexity-oriented approach fosters nuanced problem-solving while remaining manageable for peer counselling groups. The HiP-Impact-Factors support the organization of the process, enhancing self-efficacy and stress management for case-givers while strengthening participants' capacity to navigate complex situations. Comprehensive guidelines and instruments facilitate process facilitation and reflection, enabling knowledge transfer at both individual and organizational levels. However, the research highlights the necessity of addressing group dynamics to maintain the quality of peer counselling, including managing conflicting interests, group development challenges, and organizational structures. Additionally, peer counselling groups must recognize their boundaries, particularly distinguishing between counselling and therapy, ensuring that severe cases receive appropriate professional support. These findings suggest that peer counselling processes exhibit complexities similar to professional counselling formats, warranting further research.

Key words: peer counselling, synergetics, complexity, systemic problem-solving, Heidelberg Integrative Process Model (HiP), HiP-Impact-Factors, peer counselling group, process-related stability, group dynamics.

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Introduction

Peer counselling is a counselling format in which employees advise each other as equals without professional support. The counselling focuses on specific situations from everyday working life, e.g. conflict situations with colleagues or superiors, dealing with change or questions of individual professional development. Through peer counselling, the people who bring in a case gain new perspectives and ideas for solutions are developed by the group. Group members who are not affected by the case also strengthen their problem-solving skills and benefit from the experiences of their colleagues, as they often have to deal with similar issues. Finally, peer counselling also proves to be fruitful for the organizational context because newly developed action strategies can be quickly and easily transferred to everyday operations. Peer counselling thus supports collective learning processes and can be considered a pragmatic and cost-effective development strategy compared to traditional forms of further training.

Other names for this format can be found in the literature, e.g. collegial coaching, collegial supervision, collegial practical counselling or intervention, whereby the differences in the design of the format can be classified as rather minor. For this reason, "peer counselling" is used as a generic term in this article. The first concepts in German-speaking countries were developed at the end of the 1960s – around a decade after the establishment of supervision training programs at academies and training institutes. The format initially became widespread in the training and further education of counsellors and professionals working in therapy, as a format for reflecting on one's own practice, as well as in social work, in the further training of teachers, in school practice and in the healthcare sector. Peer counselling has thus traditionally established itself primarily in

professional fields whose work is characterised by demanding, non-standardised interaction with clients and colleagues. Complex communication processes require systematic reflection on the individual case. This is provided by peer counselling. Recently, peer counselling has become more attractive in the corporate world, because of increased complexity, uncertainty and the tendency to reduce hierarchies in organisations. New, post-hierarchical work concepts such as new work, agile transformation and sociocracy, which aim to respond to complex challenges, rely on organisational principles such as autonomy and self-organisation. However, such principles entail complex communication processes and require more systematic reflection.

Although peer counselling has consequently become widespread in many professional fields, a theoretical foundation is not explicitly found in all publications and the empirical state of research can be described as rather rudimentary [6, p. VII]. With regard to empirical findings, there are a few dissertations in German-speaking countries, most of which use qualitative methods [e.g. 3; 5; 9]. A number of evaluation studies have also been carried out [e.g. 4; 7; 12].

Against the background of the unsatisfactory scientific foundation of peer counselling, this article presents a theoretical concept based on the more recent systems and complexity sciences that offers practitioners an approach for dealing appropriately with changes in the world of work and the growing demands of everyday work and professional life.

Peer counselling based on the Heidelberg integrative Processmodel (HiP)

The model for peer counselling presented here is based on two meta-theories, synergetics as a theory of self-organisation [2] and systemic problem-solving

theory [1]. They are linked within the framework of the Heidelberg integrative Processmodel (HiP) because they address different aspects. Synergetics convincingly describes the dynamics of self-organization and therefore unpredictability of change processes. *System-dynamic support impulses* for collegial counselling can be derived from this. The systemic theory of complex problem solving helps to gain orientation for the process to be designed, despite all the uncertainties of change processes in complex systems, and thus provides *system-logical support impulses* for peer counselling. In addition, HiP highlights a systematic process of reflection and process capturing which creates *system-hermeneutic support impulses*.

The complexity-orientated approach understands the intentional shaping of change as an interplay between the instability and stability of social systems. Its focus is set on bio-psycho-social systems and the spelled-out concerns of the case-giver, either individuals seeking advice for themselves, for the teams, organizations or respective the *context* they're operating in. Furthermore, it is about identification and describing 'wicked problems' in terms of unfavourable cognitive, emotional or behavioural patterns (ceb-patterns) of these systems. The aim of the counselling process is to change the latter in favour of desired patterns in terms of self-congruent goals.

As an operational mean the so-called *HiP-Impact-Factors* were derived from the underlying theories of the Heidelberg integrative Processmodel, especially the common factors of psychotherapeutic processes based on synergetics [2, p. 436-441].

Realizing the HiP Impact-Factors during a peer counselling session, conditions will emerge which foster processes of self-organization by utilizing system-dynamic and system-logical support impulses.

Table 1

Process-related HiP-Impact-Factors [8, p. 38]

1. create stability	Change processes in peer counselling need stable relational and contextual conditions. <i>Structural stability</i> creates transparency and orientation. <i>Psychological stability</i> is developed through shared values in the group. <i>Communicational stability</i> is created through appreciative and resonant communication.
2. identify system and patterns	First the bio-psycho-social system with its system boundaries and context of the given case is to be identified. The dynamics of the system with its cognitive, emotional and behavioural ceb-patterns are to be described and, if necessary, visualised.
3. formulate goals and success factors	Based on the 'wicked' ceb-patterns, goals reaching towards new attractive patterns (attractor) should be developed through dialogue. These new ceb-patterns emerge through active variation of success factors (internal/ external control parameters). Patterns show a circular causality between a pattern-creating microlevel through emergence and an 'enslaving' effect of the macrolevel toward the elements on the microlevel.
4. collect solutions	Gathering ideas and steps towards new goals and solutions stimulate the system in such a way that the probability of new patterns emerging increases. The collection of small- scale, iterative, experimental actions is intended to clarify the next possible steps in a solution space.

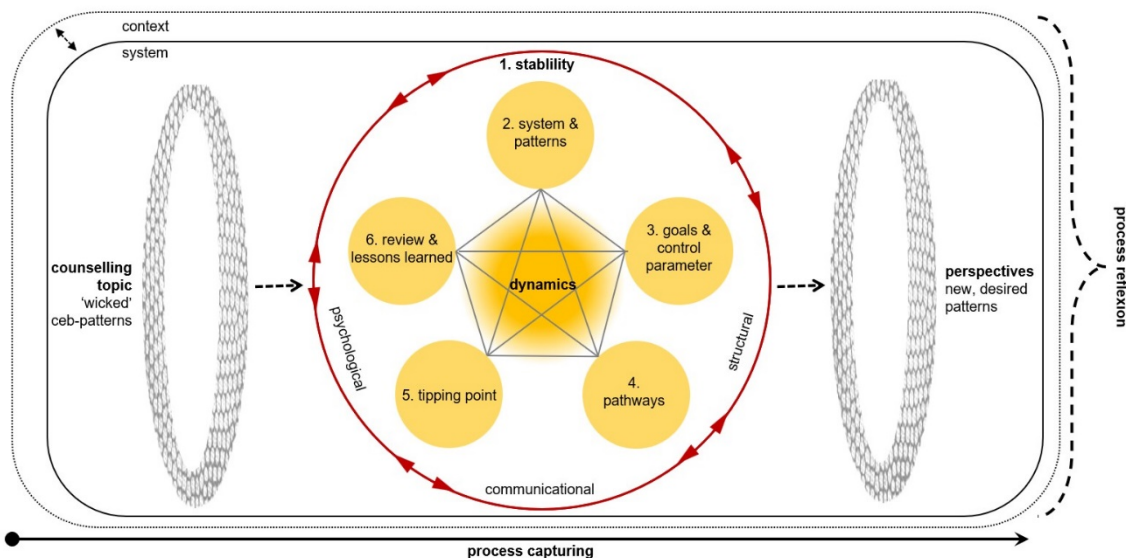


Fig. 1. Heidelberg integrative Processmodel [8, p. 66]

Continuation of table 1

5. promote implementation and pattern breaking	The system moves in critical instabilities and stages of symmetry during transitions from old to new patterns. This instability must be utilised and activities such as trial actions, implementing partial steps or changing attitudes contribute to the practical implementation of new patterns in the context of the case-giver.
6. enable evaluation and transfer	Based on the findings of the peer counselling process, it is about stabilizing new patterns that are experienced as significant and anchoring them in daily behaviour. It should be also reflected whether the learning effects and solutions can also be transferred to other systems and contexts.

The HiP Impact-Factors work on two different levels: The *process-encompassing stability* (factor need to be realized during the whole peer counselling process) with a structural, psychological and communicational dimension and process-related Impact factors (each one marks a certain stage in the counselling process), which are described briefly.

3. Process design of peer counselling based on the Heidelberg integrative process model (HiP)

3.1 Core elements of peer counselling

The peer format of counselling can be characterised by the following features, which are closely interrelated.

- *Work-related and case-related*: In the counselling process, personally experienced case situations in work life are dealt with.

- *Group-orientated*: A group of approximately five to eight people, who should preferably not be in a hierarchical relationship with each other, forms a 'resonating space' for the peer counselling process.

- *Role-based*: The work of a peer counselling group is structured by different, regularly changing roles. This represents a difference to professional counselling. Elementary roles are those of the person seeking advice as the case-giver, the moderator and the roles of the counsellors. In addition, the roles of time-keeper and process-observer and possibly that of an organizer are helpful for the successful design, facilitation and administration of the counselling process.

- *Following a fixed process structure*: The lack of professional counsellors is compensated by a systematic, detailed process structure, which shapes the counselling process to follow. This is intended to provide stability for the process.

- *Based on voluntariness*: Participation in peer counselling should be *voluntary* in terms of participation and self-disclosure, *serious and professional* in term of result orientation and *open* so that a trusting learning culture can be established.

- *Based on trust and confidentiality*: For productive work in the peer group, it is important that the members of the group build trust in each other and that confidentiality is agreed regarding personal information.

3.2 Implementation of the principles of effectiveness in the peer counselling process

In the following, the format of peer counselling is developed based on the Heidelberg Integrative Process Model (HiP). The implementation of the *HiP-Impact-Factors* (see Table 1) by the peer counselling group creates both stabilising and dynamizing conditions that are intended to promote self-organisation and change

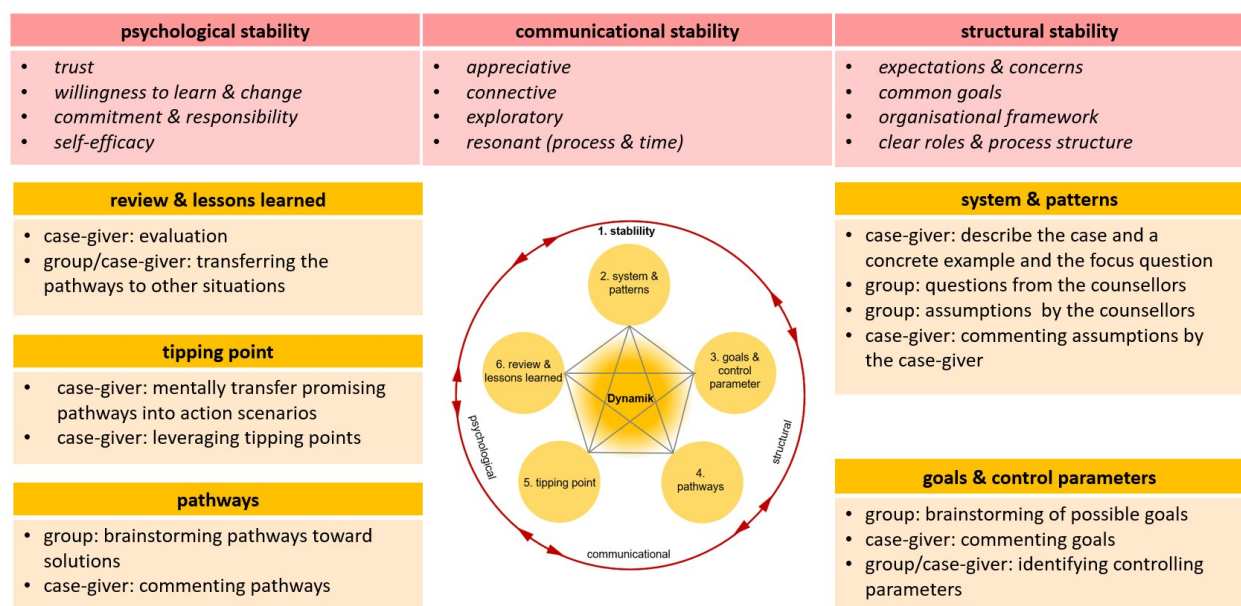


Fig. 2. Overview of the peer counselling process based on the Heidelberg integrative process model (R: Counsellor, B: Counsellor); [8, p. 36]

processes for the case-giver. The model distinguishes between process-encompassing and process-related factors, with the former referring to the "effectiveness" of the peer counselling group and the latter to the individual counselling case. Furthermore, the logical sequence of the HiP-Impact-Factors ensures that a case is 'processed' systematically and it provides orientation during the peer counselling process.

3.2.1 Process-encompassing impact factor

The process-encompassing impact factor of stability is the foundational prerequisite for successful counselling work. It is therefore particularly important in the early phase of a peer counselling group to agree on agreements and strategies for its implementation. Attention should also be paid to this impact factor in every subsequent session.

Process-related stability can be differentiated into three dimensions: structural, psychological and communicational stability. *Structural stability* includes, for example, the clarification of expectations and concerns as well as the formulation of common goals about the work within the peer counselling group. Clarifying organisational framework conditions such as the frequency, duration and location of meetings also has a stabilising effect. Particularly in the initial phase, it is also important to familiarise yourself with the process structure of peer counselling and to practise it together. *Psychological stability* is created in a group when it agrees on the principles of working together, such as the willingness to learn and change based on the cases brought in, or the mutual promise to work in a climate of trust and confidentiality. Trusting behaviour is not only important for the group, but also for communication with indirect participants, e.g. personnel development or the managers of an organisation, particularly in the case of company groups. Group stabilisation is also achieved through individual self-efficacy, the assumption of responsibility for the group and commitment to the outcome of the peer counselling and the well-being of the group. *Communicational stability* in the group is created through an appreciative, exploratory and connective design of the counselling interaction between the group members. The so-called 'temporal' and 'procedural resonance' also has a stabilising effect. A 'resonant' counselling group can shape the type, duration and speed of progress of the counselling process depending on the complexity of the case presented. Developing communicational stability requires a high level of commitment, time and a certain amount of practice of the members in opening up a containing space for dialogue, reflection and resonance.

3.2.2 Process-related impact factors Impact factor 1: Create stability

At the start of a peer counselling meeting, it is helpful to have a check-in phase for introduction and warm-up. If necessary, developments in cases that have already been dealt with could be shared. New and current *Cases* should then be *collected* and selected. The current cases are presented by the participants in a few sentences, the group should agree which cases in which order are considered in the meeting. Assigning *roles* that could change from case to case (counsellors,

moderator, timekeeper, process observer) ensures a smooth process.

Impact factor 2: Identify system and patterns

The case-giver begins by describing the *current situation on a cognitive, emotional and behavioural level* and – if necessary – the story behind. The counselling group listens, gets a picture of the addressed *bio-psycho-social system* and its boundaries, making notes, without interrupting. The case-giver closes her remarks by raising a summarizing *focus question* to the counselling group, which gets to the heart of her specific issue. The counselling group addresses *questions* about the situation, which strengthen the understanding of the case and the focus question. The counsellors then formulate *hypotheses* and connections to the current situation and make initial attempts to identify *patterns*. The counsellor's contributions are commented by the case-giver. When analysing existing patterns, but also in the other phases, it is important on the one hand to design these with the necessary depth, the necessary scope and an eye for decisive – pattern-changing – details. On the other hand, the process should not slip into a problem trance but remain action- and solution-oriented, without becoming simplistic and trivial. At the same time, it is important that critical or unpleasant issues for the case-giver are addressed during the counselling process. It should be challenging in terms of content without being personal. Hypotheses or other dialogue impulses should contain positive descriptions and refer to resources, be formulated with a view to the future and shed light on the overall context.

Impact factor 3: Formulate goals and success factors

The members of the counselling group brainstorm possible *goals*. The facilitator encourages numerous contributions, as 'no strings attached'. Goals should be articulated as partial and intermediate goals, formulated as ideas and not facts about the desired state, knowing that there are possible side effects and consequences. After completing the collection of possible goals, the case-giver *comments* the suggestions and tries to connect the presented ideas to its own self-concept (e.g. professional convictions, life-work balance). The counselling group helps then in identifying possible *success factors* (control parameters) for the goals reassuring that the case-giver found them as positive, meaningful or congruent. There are internal success factors such as confidence, courage, self-efficacy, curiosity or even worries, anger or powerlessness and there are or external success factors, e.g. working conditions, people, work situation or the labour market situation. The case-giver comments on the suggestions and selects its favourites. When formulating goals (and solutions), it is important to realise that the goals defined in the current counselling situation should be regarded as provisional and adjustable.

Impact factor 4: Collect solutions

Once attractive goals and the success factors influencing them have been identified, the next step is to collect *possible solutions* for achieving them. The counselling group brainstorms possible solutions based on their own expert knowledge or personal assumptions.

The case-giver then *comments* on the proposed solutions and, if possible, selects one or two ideas.

Impact factor 5: Promote realisation and pattern breaking

The case-giver uses the thinking-aloud-technique to translate the proposed solutions into possible *action scenarios* for her own everyday professional life. The counsellors may comment on this execution in an appreciative or reinforcing manner.

Impact factor 6: Enable evaluation and transfer

In addition to the small-scale solutions, the person seeking advice now formulates new, attractive patterns that need to be stabilised in everyday working life. The counselling group comments on these thoughts in an appreciative and supportive manner. Finally, an activating question can be used to stimulate the transfer of the findings to other situations. The case-giver articulates perspectives to which other situations the solutions could possibly be transferred. These two steps can be worked on in a later session when real experiences are available. It is important to realise that the phases of softening existing patterns and breaking patterns can generally only be considered in anticipation. This also applies to many areas of professional counselling but is rarely discussed.

The sequence of the HiP-Impact-Principles describes an ideal-typical working process. Following this is strongly recommended in the initial phase of a group. As familiarity with the procedure increases, case work can concentrate on looking at individual phases, e.g. analysing the current situation or collecting ideas for solutions, without neglecting the analysis of the current situation.

Reflection on the counselling process

It is advisable to conclude by involving the group members in a 'sharing' of the case. This allows them to share what the case has triggered in them and whether they have had similar or contrasting experiences. Before the end of a group meeting, a joint reflection on the group process contributes to the stabilisation and development of the group. All participants – starting with the case-giver – summarise what the group has achieved during the case discussions and what could be improved. If one person has taken on the role of process observer, they present their assessments using a process observation sheet.

4 Initiation of peer counselling groups

4.1 Internal or cross-company composition of peer counselling groups

Basically, there are two different ways of constituting peer counselling groups: Either all members of a group come from one organisation, or the group is made up of members from different organisations. In both cases, the members of a group should generally fulfill comparable tasks and be at a comparable hierarchical level. If possible, they should not have direct working relationships with each other and should not have a hierarchical, evaluative relationship with each other. If this is the case, there could be a risk that other members of the group will be involved in a case that has been submitted and that an open and neutral handling of the case cannot be guaranteed.

If peer counselling groups are to be initiated within an organisation, it is very important that this format is

anchored in the organisation. This means, for example, that peer counselling in an organisation is not only supported by the HR department, but also by the top management level and is supported in the long term also by other key persons. The objectives, content and expected benefits of a peer counselling programme should be clearly communicated. Information meetings and/or personal discussions with interested parties can help to dispel any doubts employees may have about peer counselling. A company-specific concept should be developed and made transparent for everyone. Among other things, the framework conditions for the implementation must be clarified. This concerns, for example

- the transparency of the expectations that the organisation pursues by setting up peer counselling groups,
- the composition of the groups and the selection process,
- guaranteeing the principle of voluntariness and confidentiality,
- the provision of personnel, time and space resources,
- Clarifying the question of how and which results of the peer advisory group are fed back into the organisation.

It may be advisable to start with a pilot project to gain experience and (hopefully) be able to demonstrate positive results as motivation for the establishment of further groups.

One advantage of internal peer counselling groups is that the learning effect on organisational processes and structures can be greater than with cross-company groups. In this way, problem-solving strategies can be developed which, in the best case, can be smoothly integrated into organisational processes and structures. At the same time, a specific, collective learning culture can be initiated or strengthened. One disadvantage of internal groups is that it may be more difficult to establish a culture of trust within the group that allows problematic situations from the same organisation to be discussed openly. Furthermore, when setting up internal peer groups, it must be ensured that this strategy is not aimed at reducing or abolishing any existing professional supervision or coaching services.

Peer counselling groups can also be made up of people from different organisations who work in comparable functions or areas of responsibility. These are then *cross-company groups*. Such groups are often formed during or after a training programme to put what has been learned into practice and reflect on the experience gained. Networks or associations are also a good context for initiating peer counselling groups. Finally, individuals can take the initiative and look for others to join them.

4.2 Starting a peer counselling group

Before a peer counselling group works independently, an introduction to this counselling format lasting 1-2 days with professional guidance is strongly recommended. This is shown by the results of several evaluation studies [4; 5; 7; 9] and the contents of an introductory seminar include

- the discussion of objectives and benefits as well as requirements and limitations of peer counselling,

- understanding the core elements of the setting,
- the clarification of the specific concept and the process structure derived from it.

It is also helpful to carry out one or two practical counselling cases in an introductory seminar to familiarise yourself with the process, exchange experiences and reflect on them. It can also be helpful – depending on the skills of the members of a peer counselling group, particularly regarding interviewing and basic counselling skills – to systematically practise question formats, discussion impulses and hypothesis formation.

It is also advisable to organise a shorter workshop with external professional support after a certain period of joint work in the peer counselling group. Questions or uncertainties that have arisen in the meantime can be discussed there. Such a workshop can also be used to reflect on aspects of group dynamics. Finally, additional and more in-depth methods for case processing can be tested there.

Conclusion

The concept of peer counselling based on the Heidelberg Integrative Process Model (HiP) offers a solid theoretical foundation in recent complexity theories and a pragmatic framework for dealing with case situations from everyday working life in a company or cross-company group. The counselling process, which has been laid out down to micro-interventions, guides people without a professional counselling background to understand case situations as complex social systems and to jointly develop ideas and action strategies for dealing with them appropriately.

Based on practical experience with the application of the concept presented, it can be stated that a complexity-orientated approach to case situations enables a differentiated approach to everyday professional issues that is quite challenging yet manageable for a peer counselling group. The process-related HiP-Impact-Factors prove their worth for the organisation of the peer counselling process. The case-givers experience an increase of self-efficacy and relief in dealing with critical situations in everyday working life. Among other things, the counselling concept strengthens each group members' ability to deal with complex situations. There are detailed instruments guidelines for process facilitation and reflection which help in the peer counselling process and in transferring the findings on an individual as well as on an organizational level. The concept can therefore be seen as a promising approach that allows participants to benefit from the dynamics of collective learning processes and to explore and test complexity-appropriate behaviour using exemplary case situations.

Nevertheless, it should be noted that groups and therefore also peer counselling groups are subject to a variety of group dynamics, which should be discussed and reflected on to maintain the quality of counselling. E.g. the oscillating interests of the individual group

members about the group's goals or the means to be used, be it crisis phases in the group's development, fatigue decisions, the dominant formation of interests and cliques, the structuring of entry and exit to and from the group or the design of the organisational framework conditions of peer counselling.

Another requirement is the question of how the group deals with its own boundaries being a peer counselling group, a question that is also generally known in counselling. This includes, among other things, drawing an appropriate boundary between counselling and therapy. For example, it may become apparent during peer counselling casework that the severity or duration of the issue raised requires therapeutic support and that the group is reaching the limits of its capabilities. This must be timely communicated and new ways of handling the issues appointed. In this respect, Tietze [1, p. 440] agrees that the intentional and unintentional processes that take place in peer counselling are probably just as complex as in professional counselling formats, without this having been researched in detail.

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