

Phil Shea and Pam Anderson describe how, as learning mentors using the human givens approach, they are helping to turn around a seriously failing school.

No special measures – just human givens

KEN is a gawky, gentle, friendly 16-year-old, who suddenly stopped coming to school. He had already come to the attention of the learning mentors, because his achievement grades did not match his potential, and had had an initial meeting with one of us. But now he was down to just 10 per cent attendance in three weeks.



We knew that Ken's mum had mental health concerns, and we wondered if, perhaps, he was at home looking after her. So we rang Ken. It turned out that Ken was so far behind in his work that he had pretty much given up and no longer wanted to come to school. At this point, we made what we think was a typical human givens response: we engineered a way that would enable him to do something different. We arranged with all senior staff for him to come into school without attending classes for one whole week, just to catch up on all his work with a learning mentor. He did just that and, at the end of the week, declared that he was happy to return to school normally.

He told Phil, however, that he couldn't sleep properly, so he was always tired and that didn't help. It turned out that he was playing computer games for about seven straight hours after getting home from school. Phil explained that playing computer games for hours on end was getting him wound up and keeping him that way, which was stopping him from sleeping ("Yeah, I do get wound up, playing them," agreed Ken). When Phil asked Ken what he thought he should do about that, Ken himself suggested stopping earlier. "How much earlier, do you think? A lot earlier? Or quite a lot earlier?" asked Phil. "By seven o'clock?" suggested Ken. "Let's try it, shall we?" said Phil. Ken left with a set of strategies that had been talked through and rehearsed: not the end of our intervention but very representative of the solution-focused approach that we work by.

The school in which we work as learning mentors is a large comprehensive in Cumbria, which has, for some time, been in 'special measures' (after an Ofsted inspection team deemed it to be seriously failing). A strong acting head was brought in and a team of learning mentors was appointed for one year, as part of a range of strategies to turn the school round. Phil was appointed to lead the team. His background is as a teacher and psychotherapist, both in comp-

rehensive schools and at theSPACE in Kendal (a therapy centre which uses the human givens approach).¹ Pam, who was appointed at the same time, has worked as a pastoral leader and learning mentor and has used solution-focused approaches, but had not, till that time, come across the human givens. A third mentor, Natalie, has since joined us and there is the possibility of a fourth.

Our work, essentially, is to pick up problems and solve them. We work largely with 15–16-year-olds, with a range of concerns from poor attendance to not coping with schoolwork, from serious disaffection to anxiety and anger. Our current caseload is about 60 students and is growing all the time. The overall focus is academic attainment but, of course, this is very difficult to achieve without emotional stability, which is why our strategies have human givens at their heart. We have been in post for just three months, so this is a story of an idea in evolution, a real warts-and-all 'work in progress', taking place in an organisation determined to improve.

Personalised learning

We feel that the human givens approach should be comfortable for anyone and in any place that genuinely has human needs and human interests at its heart. So often, we read of human givens practitioners battling heroically against the stream of contemporary practice. Yet, in our own one-to-one practice, we find that we can work totally from the human givens approach and still be in the flow of modern trends in the educational world, driving the approach forward in a way that we never otherwise could. This is not to say that the data-driven, target-driven world is ideal – far from it. But the human givens approach provides a fantastic toolbox that contains the wherewithal to move any situation forward. It gives us a way of humanising 'the system' and, in modern educational parlance, enables us to 'personalise learning'. If that is not a central human givens' tenet, then we do not know what is. We are small bricks in a big building; not all change needs to be ground shaking.

The role of learning mentor is relatively new in schools and has developed from inner-city initiatives but, because of the relative poverty of the Furness Peninsula and the Cumbrian west coast, learning mentors have also been used here.

The central aim of any learning mentor is to play a strong part in implementing the government's Every Child Matters agenda. We effectively try to do what it says on the tin and ensure that, indeed, every child does matter. Our line manager has some strong ideas on how learning mentors should work, having managed a team of mentors before. He wants us to "seize control of a situation and sort it out". Well, that fits in pretty well with the human givens approach – the beauty of it is that the human givens approach fits anything, simply because it is effective in and of itself. Pam responded very positively to being introduced to key human givens ideas. Natalie also has found it a highly useful framework to work within.

Which needs?

The team focuses first and foremost on emotional need. In any situation that we are dealing with, the first question we ask ourselves is "Which emotional needs aren't being met right, here?" It is not rocket science that, for a large number of youngsters who are failing or struggling in school, the difficulties are around autonomy, control, appropriate challenge, competence, status, attention, and so on. But acknowledging this gives us a whole new perspective. Just the act of meeting with a youngster and finding out their point of view and their 'take' on their situation begins to address emotional needs immediately. After that, progress can often be remarkably simple.

Natalie had had a good chat with Briony about doing some extra work at home. She rang Briony's mum to tell her what had been agreed. Result – Briony, a very tall and powerfully built girl, physically attacked her mum: not exactly what we were looking for. At our weekly training session, we chewed this one over in terms of emotional need. Natalie, still very new to human givens thinking, was instantly able to recognise that she had unintentionally deprived Briony of her autonomy and control. We looked within the human givens APET model ('activating agent', leading to 'pattern matching', leading to 'emotion' and then, usually, to 'thought') for an explanation for what had happened and for a solution. Clearly, Natalie's phone call was the activating agent that had triggered a pattern match with an earlier occasion in Briony's life when she had felt frighteningly out of control. She had reacted in the same way this time as she had done then – lashed out in anger to regain control of the situation.

We suggested to Natalie that she meet again with Briony, to put her back in the driving seat. An appointment was made but, unsurprisingly, Briony didn't turn up. So Natalie sought Briony out and said, "You don't have to talk about what happened, if you don't want to. Let's just meet up." So they did and gradually, as emotional arousal dropped, Natalie got back to mentoring Briony about school. Natalie wanted to encourage Briony's mum to be more positive about Briony's progress, so she suggested to Briony that they send her a series of 'good news' letters, which

put them both in control and avoided an unhelpful focus on the problem, where very entrenched attitudes and patterns lay.

So often, we find, it is the very simple things that make the difference. Brian was referred to us because he felt unable to cope. He is epileptic and takes drugs that affect his concentration levels and ability to process information. A new drug at an increased dosage was having a negative impact on him. Brian also has the organisational skills of many teenage boys – that is, very few. Phil quickly found out that Brian's prime concern was not, as his parents thought, the drug ("It's sorting out now. My body is getting used to it") but getting on top of his coursework. "What's stopping you?" Phil asked. Brian was initially taken aback by the direct question but then thought hard. "Well, I haven't got a printer at home," he said. "Okay," said Phil. "Then can you use a memory stick to bring the work in to school to print?" Brian: "I haven't got one." Phil: "When can you buy one?" Brian: "We can't afford one." "I'll make sure you have a memory stick by this afternoon," said Phil. "So, how much work will you do this evening to show me tomorrow? One hour? Or two?" Brian said he would do an hour of history. "Okay," said Phil. "I'll meet with you tomorrow and we will finish it off, give it in, and then work on another piece. So tomorrow, at 2.30 pm, you will have given in your history. That will feel great, won't it?" And it did – through the power of taking small steps to make big differences.

Fitting in perfectly

What is particularly interesting to us about our project is just how 'mainstream' it is. We support the whole ethos of the school and work largely on what is deemed to matter most: academic attainment. There is no sense that we are 'different' or 'other'. We dress sharp and act sharp. The result is that we are at the centre of a lot of very powerful practice. Many of our referrals are 'data generated': children identified as failing to meet targets. At one level this is dry, dead stuff that drives teachers insane. At another level, however, we can use these figures as a source of information, giving us an opportunity to make psychological interventions before things get more serious. We also take traditional referrals through year heads and senior pastoral leaders.

Once a student is identified, Phil immediately allocates a mentor and sends a letter home to the parent or carer telling them a bit about us and about their child's mentor. The mentor will then immediately interview the youngster. One of our strengths is the speed with which we respond to a situation (we keep spare capacity deliberately, to make this possible) and we do it partly because it is the polar opposite of what everyone is used to and partly because what we aim for is immediate difference. Once the initial interview is completed, we set up an action plan with clear targets and then implement it. As a team, we have daily briefs and debriefs on any cases where needed, in addition to a full weekly review. Notes from meet-

ings are emailed to everyone who needs to be in the know. We talk with everyone we think needs talking with and, in all cases, remain in 'negotiating mode', so that everyone feels ownership of what is happening.

RIGAAR

The RIGAAR pattern (rapport, information gathering, goal setting, accessing resources, agreeing strategies and rehearsing success), as taught to human givens practitioners, is at the heart of everything we do. In our initial interview, we concentrate on building rapport rather than launching into a critique of a youngster's situation. We spend a good length of time gathering information, particularly on successes and strengths, which will give us some of the metaphors we need to move things forward. John has always found school very difficult and has a history of disruption but is just a nice 16-year-old boy, at heart. He is also a really expert motocross rider and regularly finishes in the top three at events. We often use this with John when he comes across problems.

John: I can't do algebra.

Phil: Yes, you are still learning to tackle this, aren't you?

John: I just can't do it.

Phil: I know you are brilliant on your motorbike. What do you do if you can't do something in motocross?

John: I keep practising.

Phil: And does that feel frustrating?

John: At first.

Phil: Well, maybe then you need to use the same skills.

John: How do you mean?

Phil: Well, do you tackle a hard bit of motocross a bit at a time?

John: Yeah.

Phil: Well, let's do that here.

John: But I get it wrong.

Phil: So you never fall off your bike, then?

John: Wh-a-at? I get back on and carry on.

Phil: And if you never fell off?

John: Then I wouldn't be pushing myself.

Phil: Exactly.

Our goal setting is crucial to us, as we feel that it is these small immediate steps towards doing something different, straight away, that help make us successful. The act of agreeing strategies gives a sense of control and purpose. We have not worked with a youngster yet who does not respond completely positively to this way of working through even the most complex situation. Accessing the resources needed to move things forward allows us to harness what the client has and also inject ideas and solutions that we feel will help. And we rehearse success with a lot of imagination and dialogue.

Not everything goes according to plan, of course. One of our most difficult clients is Hannah, whom we first met when she was readmitted to the school after a fixed-term exclusion. She insisted she was good at absolutely nothing and

Pam worked hard with her before she opened up and admitted that she was interested in hairdressing. "I knew a girl just like you," said Pam. "She was off the rails. Learned hairdressing while at school and never looked back. She was a great person. You remind me of her. She ended up earning money by doing hair privately. I still chat to her and we laugh about how she was, now she has become the person she wants to be." "I'd love to do that," said Hannah. "So, if we fix you to do a work placement for two days a week in a hairdressing salon, that would be good?" asked Pam. "Yeah, that would be great!" said Hannah, smiling.

Alas, despite our best efforts, the wheels of bureaucracy involved in setting up a work placement lost us our momentum. Hannah was excluded again for a fixed term just before her placement was due to start. But we work for a great head teacher, who is insisting that Hannah can go to her work placement despite being excluded and we are still trying to fix this situation as best we can. We fail every day in little ways, just like John on his motorbike. Otherwise we wouldn't be pushing ourselves enough either.

Making choices

One of our early jobs was to home in on some 16-year-olds in their GCSE year, who had gaps in their timetable. (They had been allowed to drop a subject they were struggling with or else a teacher had refused to teach them.) Officially, they worked in the library; in reality, many just disappeared. So we applied key human givens principles to get this under control. First, we went with them to the library (some had barely been in one before) and stayed and worked with them there. Our library is a sixth-form study area as well, so being surrounded by industrious sixth formers enabled our youngsters to pick up some good cues. We also established a strong sense of student autonomy and choice. Martin was surprised to be asked what he wanted to study and expressed indifference. It had never occurred to him to care. Pam explained to Martin that we learn best when we choose to do something, talked to him about needing to learn more and really listened to Martin as he explained how he didn't 'get' things. Then she started teaching Martin at his own pace, and in the ways he said he preferred. Now Martin is used to choice. Recently, he chose to sit and read a novel for two hours. (We also offer 'closed' choices, such as work on this or study that – again, not rocket science, just the application of sound psychological principles.)

Another interesting strand of our work is with a group of very able youngsters who are trying to achieve A or A* grades at GCSE. We did an afternoon's workshop for them on learning styles, time management and meeting emotional needs. (Our message to them, ultimately, was look after your emotional needs first and foremost.) Afterwards, in a private exercise, each youngster scaled how well his or her needs were being met. This was



Phil Shea is an experienced human givens psychotherapist and, until his current role, had also worked as a teacher for 25 years.



Pam Anderson is an experienced learning mentor and pastoral leader.

followed by private, individual action planning on how some of those needs could be met better and was rounded off with a whole-group relaxation and visualisation of success. We have followed all this up individually with each youngster and found that having spare capacity and maintaining a balance in life are proving popular ideas. Afterwards, we ran a workshop for many of their parents, explaining emotional needs and stressing that we were after *less* pressure, not more. One parent described the expectation that her child should get A grades as a “ball and chain” and was impressed that we had put such a focus on emotional needs.

Brokering solutions

The school uses the metaphor of ‘brokers’ to express its superb vision of the work of its learning mentors. We are seen as autonomous and are allowed this autonomy. We ‘broker’ situations so that they move forward. We feel that one of our strengths is that we apply the human givens approach to everyone and everything, in any situation. It is not enough to apply it to clients but not colleagues or other adults. So, when we go to a colleague to broker a solution, we practise our RIGAAR – rapport, information gathering, goal setting, accessing resources, agreeing strategies and rehearsing success.



As a result, colleagues feel listened to. They share ownership of the goals being set rather than feel resentment that they are having actions imposed on them. They feel good, because they are part of a solution rather than part of a problem. In other words, they get their bit of empowerment as well, even if they don’t know it. One colleague we work with has been able to produce more detailed coursework plans, more detailed examples of work required, arrange to meet with youngsters privately and take a more active role in managing their study. She is the one who has done this, yet we know that the gentle process we work through has helped to lead her there.

This has not all been plain sailing, however, and there are live issues we continue to deal with. Secondary schools tend to be very tribal organisations, with teachers working within little boxes known as ‘subjects’ and ‘lessons’. The traditional model of success in secondary schools is that a child does well enough in enough subjects. There is often very little coordination outside these boxes, apart from a pastoral system that tries to manage the welfare of the ‘whole child’. Most ‘pastoral’ interventions take place outside of lessons – for example placing a youngster on report for challenging behaviour. Some teachers take the attitude of “she is fine in my lesson – therefore no problem”. This is, in fact, nonsense, as anyone who has been to school knows that the system relies on the sheer variety of teacher approaches. So we all knew we had to work for Mrs Jones but could slack off for Mrs

Smith. You had to do Mrs Green’s homework but Mr Brown’s could be disappeared. When we mentors seek to take a youngster out of one lesson to catch up on work in another, we can run into understandable problems. Some teachers and subject leaders have asked if we can ‘mentor’ some other time – that is, not in their lessons. Fortunately, we have strong senior management who continually back us up.

Our head teacher has said that he has never known any initiative have so much impact so quickly. He had no idea about the human givens and probably still doesn’t. However, many of our teacher colleagues, despite understandable initial suspicions towards us, have commented on the great influence we are having on the youngsters and are interested in how we are achieving so much success. The assistant head teacher in charge of pastoral care dropped by to see us recently: two difficult, alpha-male 16-year-old

‘lads’ had knocked on her door and asked if they, too, could have a learning mentor to help them get on top of their study. She wanted to know whether we could do some training with the teaching staff. Phil was recently approached by the special educational needs co-ordinator (SENCO) to work with a young boy with depression, because she thought the human givens approach would be good for

him – the school counsellor works largely from the person-centred approach. Lots of people have commented on the difference in many students (not all, of course). Some are better behaved. Steven has been observed smiling a lot more. Even Susie, despite her ups and downs, had been noticed focusing well in English and maths. John has not been in any trouble for a long while. Alex is attending school far more regularly than ever before. Even the word ‘on the street’ is that we are doing well. The growing picture is one of success breeding more success. We do not think this is only to do with us – we are often just a bit of oil in the cogs. But we do believe that the reason that anything works is because it is getting our human givens sorted.

So we are spreading the word on human givens and it is being picked up. We presented our work recently at a regional learning mentors’ conference and there was a lot of interest. What is very exciting is that even people who have no idea that we are working from a human givens perspective (we don’t use that term with students or class teachers often) recognise our success. We will continue to develop as a team over the next year and delve deeper into human givens principles in our weekly training sessions. We hope that we will continue to make an impact until our year is up, and that the ripples will carry on spreading after. This is another small drop in the swelling ocean of givens practice. ■

1. Grist, F and Beard, M (2006). *Evidence of learning*. Human Givens, 13, 1, 9–15.