



# Healing in the boardroom

A trainer in Pessó Boyden System Psychomotor (PBSP) body-based psychotherapy, **Juliet Grayson** explains how it works and why accessing our hidden emotional processes can transform relationships at work

Pessó Boyden System Psychomotor (PBSP) is a body-based psychotherapy that has been quietly infiltrating the corporate world in the UK for some 15 years. Organisations from car manufacturers and pharmaceutical companies through to business schools and the public sector, have already benefitted from this powerful and effective method.

Originally created by Al Pessó and Diane Boyden, both dancers and choreographers, PBSP grew out of movement and expression. Some therapeutic methods start from an intellectual understanding, but Pessó and Boyden spent years observing people's bodies, seeking to understand what particular feelings and movements meant emotionally. You could say that PBSP has evolved from the 'bottom up' rather than the 'top down'. Perhaps surprisingly, organisations that traditionally have focused on a rational approach seem to quickly grasp the benefit of this integrated, mind *and* body, left *and* right-brained method and what it can bring to employee relationships.

What can take place is a profound and complete piece of therapeutic healing, which can be completed in one client session (called a structure), making it particularly appealing to the corporate world. As Bessel Van Der Kolk,<sup>1</sup> a Dutch psychiatrist, specialising in stress and trauma, writes: 'The healing tableaux of structures offer an experience that many participants have never believed was possible for them: to be welcomed into a world where people delight in them, protect them, meet their needs and make them feel at home.'

I offer PBSP training days in response to requests from organisations that are seeking new answers to old problems, such as interpersonal conflict and miscommunications at all levels. In this article, I'll explain why PBSP has such relevance to the corporate world before illustrating how it would work, with a fictitious client.

#### Unconscious at work

Many staff will have 'hot buttons' triggered when they don't feel acknowledged, or supported, or validated at work. They yearn for their boss to validate them, or back them up. According to Pessó, our basic developmental needs *have* to be satisfied at the 'right age with the right kinship relationship.'<sup>2</sup> When this didn't happen in childhood, these needs can be satisfied symbolically with *ideal figures* and it is this work that takes place when we work through a structure. Thus a childhood lack means that, however attentive a boss is, (s)he can *never* fill the 'gap', because (s)he is not the correct family member, *and* (s)he is speaking to the adult, when it is the child in us that needs the healing. What follows is an illustration of a typical structure at work, using a fictitious client, and including all the interventions of the therapist.

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## A structure at work

### Witnessing

The therapist is trained to notice minute changes in the facial expression. As clients unconsciously react, the therapist names the affect. This builds the working alliance quickly because the client feels 'seen'. However, the therapist offers these observations not from themselves, but as if *another* person – a witness – were talking.

'Peter' says: *'I get so frustrated by my boss; he wants to micromanage everything I do. He is always getting too involved, and won't let me follow my own initiative at all.'*

The therapist uses his hand, gesturing as if to someone sitting next to him, and says: *'If there was a witness here, then the witness would say,'* and here the therapist alters his voice to show that another is speaking, *'I see how exasperated and worn down you feel; you feel that your boss wants to micromanage everything you do.'*

Peter inadvertently nods. The words 'exasperated and worn down' register, and although he had known that he felt this on some level, he hadn't realised the strength of his emotions. When accurately witnessed, the glowing embers of his feelings begin to flame, bringing them into his conscious awareness. Thus Peter feels both seen, and, because the context is exactly repeated, 'that your boss wants to micromanage everything you do', he feels heard. But – and this shows the elegance of PBSP – because this has not come from the therapist – the majority of the transference passes to the witness, represented by the therapist's hand, and *not* to the therapist.

### Placeholders

In a structure we externalise the client's inner landscape. When they mention a person, they will make an internal image of them, so they are asked to choose a 'placeholder' to represent them.

*'Pick a placeholder to represent your boss, everything about him, both the good and the challenging aspects,'* the therapist invites. Peter chooses a jagged black rock from the bowl of stones, buttons and shells.

*'Now, place that somewhere in the room.'* Peter puts it two metres away.

*'That is a placeholder for your boss. That represents everything to do with your boss,'* the therapist confirms.

### Identifying voices

The therapist also listens for Peter's 'voices' – the conclusions he has made from his history – voices that suppress his feelings.

Peter continues. *'But my boss is only trying to make sure that everything is done properly.'* The therapist responds, *'That is 'a voice of reasonableness' that says...'* as he gestures to a new place. He then alters his voice

indicating a new figure in the room (albeit in everyone's imagination), saying, *'Your boss is only trying to make sure that everything is done properly.'*

Peter reconnects to his indignation that his boss doesn't trust him. *'But everything is done properly. I do everything properly!'*

### Validating figure

The therapist sponsors this aspect of the client. *'How would it be to imagine a figure that would validate that?'*

Peter looks curious. The therapist gestures to another imaginary figure, standing near the client. *'The validating figure would say, "Yes, I can see that everything is done properly. I'd let you know that I see that."'*

Peter's face relaxes and, relieved, he breathes out. The group realises that he's been partially holding his breath all this time.

The therapist gestures, *'The witness sees how comforting and relaxing it feels to have the validating figure there, who would see that everything has been done properly.'*

This following and acknowledging of the client's reality slows him down and enables the work to take place at a deeper level. Profound changes, that can last for a lifetime (as reported by clients who I meet again, sometimes more than 10 years after their structure), can be made in less than an hour.

### True scene

This coming together of a witness, a squashing voice (of 'reasonableness'), and a positive figure (of validation), completes the opening phase of a PBSP structure, known as the 'true scene'. This represents the emotional truth of the current situation. The therapist's next step is to discover why *this* boss poses a problem. Is there some aspect of Peter's history that has created a 'hot button', making him vulnerable to this particular type of wounding?

### Eliciting a history

The therapist asks, *'When in your history would you have needed this validating figure?'*

Peter looks down, thinking, and then suddenly lifts his head and looks directly at the therapist. *'Well, my father was always telling me what to do.'*

*'Let's have a placeholder for your father.'*

Peter picks a four-centimetre, red, wooden brick and places it over a metre away.

*'Say more about your father,'* the therapist invites.

Peter looks at the red brick that represents his father as he talks about how his father would interfere.

He gives several examples: making a kit boat aged seven, which his father finished; being given a guinea pig but not being trusted to care for it; and his father reading and amending almost every essay Peter wrote at school. He talks about his father's constant controlling interventions.

### Principles and projections

The therapist says, *'It sounds like there are aspects of your boss that are mirroring your father. Both interfered?'* Peter looks surprised, and then nods.

The therapists says: *'The way we work with that in PBSP is that we use what we call 'principles'. Principles are the associations that we are making between someone now and a person with similar behaviours from our past. It seems like the principle-of-your-father is sitting on your boss?'*

*'Yes, yes. I guess so,'* Peter agrees. *'I hadn't made that connection before.'*

*'We could represent that by placing a piece of tissue on the placeholder for your boss.'*

Peter tears a piece of tissue and puts it on the stone. *'That represents the principle-of-your-father that you see in your boss. Before the end of the session, we will tidy that up, and move the principle back to where it belongs, which is with your father.'*

Peter nods, saying, *'I wish my boss could just accept me as I am, and enjoy my skills, rather than always undermining them. I wish he'd be impressed by me!'*

The therapist says, *'I think you are longing for your boss to be the father that you would have liked as a child? A father who loved you just as you are? Is that right?'*

When Peter agrees, another piece of tissue is placed on the placeholder for the boss, this one representing the principle of the ideal father.

### Reversals and the antidote

The therapist starts to reverse some of Peter's history. *'Would you like to experience how you would have felt as a child with an ideal father? Not your real father, no part of your real father, but the father that you needed when you were a child?'*

Peter nods, agreeing.

The therapist points to where this ideal father might be standing, and lowers the tone of his voice to indicate that the ideal father is speaking to his son. He says, *'If I had been your ideal father when you were a child, I wouldn't have disempowered you. I would have let you build the boat. I wouldn't have finished it.'*

Peter smiles.

The therapist, using the ideal father's voice, continues, *'And as your ideal father, when you were a child, I would have trusted you to feed the guinea pig, and clean him out.'*

Peter exhales deeply and his face visibly softens.

*'That's so good!'*

The therapist gestures, *'The witness would say, "I see how peaceful and calmed you feel, imagining that possibility."'*

*'Yes I do; that would have been so lovely.'*

### Role play

*'Maybe you could have someone from the group to play the role of the ideal father?'*

Peter responds, *'OK, John, would you do that?'*

The therapist looks at John. Can you say to Peter, *'I will take the role of your ideal father.'* John enrolls, and Peter asks his ideal father to stand behind him.

The next 10 minutes are spent with the therapist helping Peter to clarify what he longs to hear, and then the ideal father repeats those words. These include, *'If I had been your ideal father when you were seven years old, I would have let you build your own models. And I would have let you decide what you wanted to build next. I'd have supported you. I would never have taken over from you.'*

Now, at Peter's request, the ideal father is standing with his hands on Peter's shoulders, and his body close enough for Peter to lean back, resting his head against the ideal father's stomach. Peter's face continues to soften, and relax, as he releases, letting go, making little noises and sighs that indicate a deep sense of satisfaction.

The other group members are smiling, infected by the feeling of acceptance and loving warmth. The therapist and Peter co-create the perfectly fitting, wished-for interactions that provide an antidote to Peter's actual experience as a child. To bring balance, a tactile ideal mother is also enrolled, to counteract his distant, unavailable real mother.

Based on what Peter has said, the therapist instructs the ideal mother to say, *'If I had been your ideal mother when you were five, I would have been the kind of mother who hugged her son,'* and she puts a hand on his shoulder. There is a pause, and then Peter gently pulls her hand round, placing it on the middle of his upper chest, his hand on top of hers. He slowly exhales, almost purring with pleasure.

### The longed-for experience

Peter is having a new experience, of how he would have felt at that critical time in childhood. Unknowingly, he has longed for this, and that has been influencing his present life. As soon as the right words are spoken, and the correct touch is offered, he instinctively recognises it. *'This really fits me!'* he says, smiling broadly.

### Moving the principles

The final step is to go back to the placeholders, and with ceremony and care (so Peter absorbs this at the deepest level), move the principle (piece of tissue) representing Peter's real father off his boss and onto the placeholder for Peter's father. Then, the principle that represents Peter's ideal father is moved off his boss, and this is given to John, who is representing his ideal father. Peter sighs, clearly relieved and settled, as if a burden has shifted.

The ideal father says, *'I would have been your ideal father. I would have enjoyed you as you are, and given you all the love, warmth, and space that you needed as a child to learn from your own experiences. I would have been impressed by you. My love would have been unconditional.'*





By incorporating all the senses: touch (from the ideal parents), sound (their voices), smell (they stand close), and sight (as Peter gazes into the face of his ideal parents, they look back with approval and love), the client has a fully sensory, embodied, and believable experience of how it could have been when he was a child. This isn't a set of cognitive instructions, nor guidelines designed to help the client think differently. It is an embodied experience which is memorable. Research<sup>3</sup> shows that after a PBSP structure, the brain is literally firing in different places.

Usually in such cases, I will hear later on that Peter feels entirely different about his boss. He no longer feels so micromanaged. If his boss gets overinvolved it simply doesn't push Peter's buttons any more. He reports surprise at ever having thought that his boss was interfering!

#### **Closing thoughts**

We live in a world where fast change is wanted. PBSP can quickly help with a huge range of issues that have dogged participants for many years, with repercussions for workplace relationships. Because our history profoundly affects our attitudes and beliefs, creating an alternative history will affect our behaviours, both today and in the future. This change is often lifelong. Group members, watching their colleagues, find this work moving and it raises awareness of topics that they also need to work on. This can be profoundly team building.

My hope is that we'll see more chief executives and senior management taking advantage of PBSP as a helpful and profound method of personal development. As Maggie

Scarf, writer and lecturer, said when describing PBSP: 'It is like speed dialling the unconscious.'<sup>4</sup> Fast, creative, insightful and tailor-made, PBSP days can provide a cost-effective solution to many issues that can otherwise undermine success at work. When the client is motivated, PBSP can get to the root of an issue quickly and have positive consequences for how everyone relates.

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**Juliet Grayson** is a UKCP accredited psychosexual therapist and one of three PBSP trainers in the UK. She runs regular PBSP groups for the public, therapists and for the corporate world. A new one-and three-year training in PBSP is starting in Bristol in May 2016, for coaches and therapists.

[www.pessoboydentraininguk.com](http://www.pessoboydentraininguk.com)

[www.interactiontraining.co.uk](http://www.interactiontraining.co.uk)

[www.therapyandcounselling.co.uk](http://www.therapyandcounselling.co.uk)

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#### *Your feedback please*

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