Pesso 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 benefited from this powerful and effective method.

Originally created by Al Pesso and Diane Boyden, both dancers and choreographers, PBSP grew out of movement and expression. Some therapeutic methods start from an intellectual understanding, but Pesso 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, a Dutch psychiatrist, specialising in stress and trauma, writes: ‘The healing tableaus 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.
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 effect. This builds the working alliance quickly because the client feels seen. However, the therapist offers these observations not to shame them, but as another person — a witness — was 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 allows a voice to emerge, ‘I feel frustrated by my boss, too involved, and won’t let me follow my own initiative at all.’

‘I see how exasperated and worn down 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 flare, bringing them into his conscious awareness. Thus Peter feels both seen, and, because the context is exactly repeated, that his 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 psychotherapy in itself, witness here, then the witness would say, ‘I feel frustrated by my boss, too involved, and won’t let me follow my own initiative at all.’

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 voice (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 received 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 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 intervened?’ Peter looks surprised, and then nods.

The therapists says: ‘The way we work with this 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 piece 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 felt loved as a child? A father who loved you just as you are? That is good!’ 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 antipode

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. ‘I will take the role of your ideal father.’

Peter enrolls, and Peter co-creates 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 absent, 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 her. Peter slowly exhales, almost purring with pleasure.

The longitudinal experience

Peter has a new experience of how he would have felt if that critical time in childhood had been different. Unknowingly, he has longed for this, and that has resulted in his current style of 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 next step is back to the placeholders, and with ceremony and care (so Peter assists this at the deepest level), move the principle (piece of tissue) representing Peter’s ideal father to the placeholder for his ideal 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 and caring 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 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 anymore. 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.

‘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’

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References

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