

Unidad 3

Lecturas

The Consulting Process in Action

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PHASE I. CONTACT AND ENTRY

Work Focus 1. Making First Contact

The initial exploration of a potential consulting relationship may come from the following three sources.

The potential client. A sense of pain or a problem may be interpreted as a need to seek help, accompanied by an awareness that certain kinds of consultation may be an appropriate source of help. Or there may be no pain, but instead a desire to increase one's competitive advantage by improving productivity and effectiveness or to improve satisfaction with one's self-image. It may be the normal operating procedure of the organization to seek out and use consultants. Contacting a particular consultant or consulting group may be a result of previous experience, awareness of the con-

sultant's reputation, knowledge of the consultant's specialization in particular problems, or merely a shopping expedition to find out what is available.

The potential consultant. Contact may be motivated by a general search for new clients or the consultant's knowledge that he or she has been helpful to another similar client system. The consultant may perceive a pattern of functional ineffectiveness similar to that which he or she has coped with before. The consultant may have particular priorities, such as helping any group trying to improve the quality of the environment or developing student participation in decision making.

A third party. Someone who perceives a need for help in a client system may be aware of the skills and resources available through consultation. This third party undertakes to bring the client and the consultant together. The initiative may be no more than a referral suggestion or as much as a formal three-way meeting. The third party who is a

power figure in the client system may simply retain the consultant and assign him or her to help where it seems to be needed. Such an executive may perceive that "they need to be upgraded" or "they need a shot in the arm" and make the decision that a consultant will best serve such a purpose.

Whether the potential consultant is an insider or an outsider makes some differences in this contact initiation. Typically, the insider knows more about the existence of difficulties or pain. On the other hand, it is probably harder for the potential client to admit a need for help to a peer within the system. Referral by a third party is probably easier for the insider because it is more convenient, more legitimate, and less expensive.

The outsider generally has a more difficult time than the insider in taking the initiative because of the problem of credible entry from the outside. Conversely, the outsider probably has some advantage because a client system often finds it easier to share a problem with an outsider. The client system may also assume greater expertness on the part of the outsiders as compared to the more familiar faces inside the system. Referral by a third party establishes a link between an outsider and a system.

EXAMPLES FROM OUR EXPERIENCES

Ron: A frequent type of initiative by a potential client is a telephone call. Fairly typical is a recent call from a professional school, asking if I would be interested in doing some kind of a program in professional and personal development and growth with doctoral candidates in a field internship program. After probing a bit to find out what they wanted, I decided they needed to think it through a little more before I could clearly respond whether I would be an appropriate resource. I asked a number of questions and suggested that they write answers to the questions in a letter within the next day or two. I promised either to respond with a memo on what I might be

able to do to meet their needs (as I understood them) or to make a referral to some other, more appropriate, resource.

They wrote a good letter and my response was a four-page, rather carefully developed memorandum, offering two alternative ideas about desirable outcomes and types of designs for helping. I included information on different levels of budget for the two alternatives and some of the initial data collection I would be asking them to do.

Gordon: Yes, telephone calls are a very frequent first approach. I had a funny call the other day. A personnel director from a large pharmaceutical firm wanted me to meet with him and some others. When I asked the purpose of the meeting, he said, "Well, we need to have you talk with us about some OD work." When I asked about the kind of OD work, he said, "We'd just like to have you come and talk with us, and we'll pay a stipend for exploration." I discovered that the president of the firm was interested in assessing me, so we arranged to have lunch together.

Although the president of the firm was very affable and asked me some questions that weren't necessarily related to the project, the luncheon was definitely a testing of our mutual chemistry and my competency. The firm's OD director and the personnel director were there, ready to implement any further planning if the testing worked out. They called the next day with an O.K. to go ahead and do some exploratory planning.

Ron: Don't you think it is important when responding to these first contact initiatives to be very open in probing and sharing where you are?

Gordon: Yes, I think that's crucial. I recently received a letter from a community college that had issues concerning minority groups and, faculty decision making. The college people wanted a problem-solving session of two days. I answered that letter very honestly and critically, explaining the impossibility of their expectations. I presented an alternative pattern with the probable conditions of

contract and cost, but indicated that I didn't expect they would want to go ahead because this was going to be quite different from their objectives.

Surprisingly, they called back saying they were so impressed by my openness in confronting the unreality of their expectations that they wanted to go ahead with us rather than take one of the other bids that had accepted their assumptions. How about an example in which you have taken the initiative to try to get a client involved?

Ron: In one example, which was successful, we wrote two invitation letters, about a week apart, to a sample of potential clients—in this case, small businesses in the area.

The first letter was a warm-up, explaining who we were and some of our experiences with businesses similar to their own—in terms of new organization development procedures that were proving helpful in economic survival.

The second letter was a specific invitation to attend a three-hour luncheon session. At the luncheon, we provided a sample micro-event with some input by us and some active participation by the guests, using models of goal setting and brainstorming, and identifying some of the major kinds of dilemmas that required their problem-solving efforts. The event ended with an opportunity for the guests to become involved in a consultative project, really a three-phase process of fact finding and consultation. We provided a handout on this process for them to take along and think about and we promised to make a follow-up telephone call to see whether they would like to explore the opportunity.

Typically, out of fifteen to twenty invitations we would get eight to ten participants at the luncheon and two to four follow-up relationships that developed into client contracts.

Gordon: Very frequently, one of our successful initiatives begins with participants we meet in a training activity who chat with us individually about their own situations. We

suggest a follow-up contact to become acquainted with their situation and to explore the possibilities for following through on ideas they have acquired in the training activity. What kind of third-party entry situations come to your mind?

Ron: One of the most frequent problems in my experience is how to turn a coercive situation into a voluntary participation and learning activity. For example, there was the school administrator who asked us to work with his staff on ways to implement new accountability legislation that required the adoption and development of annual personnel review and assessment procedures. The challenge was how to convert this relatively negative entry situation into a collaboration in which the participants could become actively involved, see the pay off value to themselves, and learn that the consultant is not a tool of the administrator.

Gordon: Yes, in a recent situation, I had to work out a relationship difference between a state director, who was employing me, and the planning committee of the state staff, which was representing the client system. I began by being a third party, bringing the other two parties together to clarify some joint goals. Sometimes an entry situation is even more difficult when the president of the company assigns an internal consultant to “fix up that unproductive department.”

Work Focus 2. Helping Identify and Clarify the Need for Change

After making contact, tentative entry into a working relationship includes some important processes of exploration. This second work focus involves the consultant in either helping the potential client to explain his understanding of the problem or obtaining information about activities within parts of the system that might help isolate and identify the problem.

Sometimes the potential consultant functions as a legitimated listener and asker of questions; sometimes he/she is an inquiry

expert with tools for conducting an assessment of needs. Sometimes a potential helper must cope with a lack of sensitivity to the need for change or with a lack of a sense of responsibility or with an inability to enter into or put energy into any kind of change effort. These problems may require the consultant to call the attention of the potential client to the ways in which other systems have identified and worked on similar problems. Often, there is a need for group interviewing in which persons occupying different positions in the system stimulate each other's articulation of perceptions of relevant issues and problems. Such openness can be legitimatised by the objectivity of the interview situation and by the questions asked by the consultant-interviewer.

If we consider consulting advantages and disadvantages, the insider usually is better prepared to probe, listen, and clarify, but probing is likely to create defensiveness because of his/her in-the-family status. The outsider has the disadvantage of lacking the context and history of the particular system and its operational problems.

EXAMPLES FROM OUR EXPERIENCES

Ron: The group interview is one of the most valuable ways to help potential clients identify and clarify their needs. For a recent community project, in which an interagency council wanted to explore problems of poor communication and cooperation, we conducted a series of five group interviews. There were six or seven people in each group, and each group was heterogeneous, with the members coming from different agencies. In these interviews, the participants stimulated each other, and their interactions gave us a great deal of data about the issues of communication and collaboration.

Gordon: I often use a quick, anonymous, written survey with key management people. Then I get them together for a feedback session in which we share my data,

probe their interpretations, and amplify what has been revealed in the survey statements.

Ron: Another helpful technique is asking a small representative group to simulate being an outside committee making an assessment of its organization. During the simulated visit, the observers describe what they see that pleases them as some of the strengths of the organization, and what they are sorry to see and wish could be changed in order for the organization to function more effectively. This kind of listing, based on brainstorming from a perspective of outside objectivity, is very helpful in getting out the data.

Work Focus 3. Exploring the Readiness for Change

This is important, mutually shared work in which the consultant explores the readiness of the client system to devote time, energy, and the committed involvement of appropriate people to a problem-solving process. The client system, on the other hand, explores the capability, sensitivity, credibility, and trustworthiness of the potential consultant.

Usually, the outside consultant is able openly to test the readiness of the potential client. The inside consultant, whose qualifications are already known to the client system, should be sensitive to the potential impediments to involvement and collaboration for change that might occur during the working relationship.

Work Focus 4. Exploring the Potential for Working Together

Here, each of the parties explores and tests the potentialities for an effective working relationship. Familiarity can lead the client system to stereotyped preconceptions of the inside consultant's particular responses, which may be quite incorrect. The potential client may have conscious or unconscious fears about the difficulties of withdrawing from a

working relationship with the inside consultant, as contrasted to the greater ease of terminating a contract with an outsider. The outsider frequently is able more readily to clarify the nature of available resources. Many outside consultants consider it important to propose a period of testing for compatibility before making mutual commitments for a long-term working relationship.

EXAMPLES FROM OUR EXPERIENCES

Ron: To explore readiness for change, we have found it helpful with several clients to develop, with their help, a list of good reasons for not having time or motivation or inclination to get involved in a change effort, and a parallel list of reasons for becoming involved. We make this into a check sheet, asking clients to check the items on both sides that are true of themselves, to give some value weighting to the most important ones on each side, and then to use the list as a basis for discussing where they are. This kind of procedure legitimize any hidden agendas of resistance and gets things out in the open: for sharing and decision making.

Gordon: Frequently, I ask the person who is negotiating with me to identify all the key people who would be involved in collaborating with my consultation and to convene them in an ad hoc session. This allows me to have an open discussion with these people about whom I am and why I've been invited in, and it encourages them to ask any clarifying questions, make any statements of doubt or support, etc.

Ron: I had quite a time recently in a large hospital. I was exploring and probing to discover who the client system really would be. It was a chance to meet with the different clusters of personnel, giving them a chance to examine me, what kind of control they would have over the process of working, and what my expectations would be if we worked together. I had to meet with about six such clusters before going back to the administrator to

clarify and define potential working relationships.

Gordon: I frequently try a kind of microcosm of what working together would be like. Usually, I involve people in some activities, some brainstorming, and a little bit of process observation, and I offer some input about typical activities done in an organization development program such as they are considering. This helps to surface differences in orientation, readiness, and commitment.

PHASE II. FORMULATING A CONTRACT AND ESTABLISHING A HELPING RELATIONSHIP

The four work focuses of Phase I should produce at least a tentative decision on the part of both consultant and client either to discontinue the exploration or to move toward some kind of agreement about the nature, objectives, and conditions of a working relationship. We have identified three focuses of work in the second phase.

Work Focus 5. What Outcomes Are Desired?

It is not enough just to agree that there is a problem or that a change is desirable. In clarifying a potential working relationship, it is important to explore what kinds of outcomes might be achieved-or would be desirable-if the working relationship is successful. Would the goal be an increase in profits? A change in the public image of the system? A change in the motivation of the workers or in the working relationship between supervisors and their subordinates? This certainly will not be the final statement of objectives, but it should provide a basis for the mutual understanding needed to formulate a contract.

In this type of work, the inside consultant has a better grasp of feasibility and

need, but may have too much of a negative problem orientation. The outside consultant may be better able to invoke a wider perspective on possible goals and a more brainstorming approach toward desirable outcomes.

EXAMPLES FROM OUR EXPERIENCES

Gordon: With more and more clients, I'm finding it worthwhile to spend quite a bit of initial time trying to get concrete about what changes they would like in the way they are operating. Although goal setting typically comes later in a consulting relationship, it is important to probe clients for the concrete outcomes they want from any kind of developmental or change effort, which usually means stretching their thinking.

Ron: I certainly agree with you. Recently, I met with representatives of a large church to explore whether we might work together.

I asked them to play the roles that leaders of the church would have five years hence and to make a list of things that pleased them concerning the progress made in those five years. They became very involved in this listing and began to clarify and considerably change their ideas about what they were after.

Work Focus 6. Who Should Do What?

The client has a strong need to know how much time and energy and commitment the consultant is ready to put into a helping relationship. And the consultant has a strong need for clarification about who should be involved, what kinds of activity would be feasible, what kind of support could be expected from the top power structure, what kind of financial and time commitments would be made, and how the contract would be terminated. At this stage, it is crucial to determine who the client system really is, particularly to discover whether there is a difference between

the client system and the individual or office that pays the bills.

Work Focus 7. Time Perspective and Accountability

Another part of formulating the contract includes clarifying the projected time period allowed for accomplishing the desired outcomes and the evaluation procedures to be used in assessing progress toward the desired outcomes. This time perspective may include agreement about milestones at which the progress of the working relationship will be reviewed and decisions about continuation or termination will be made.

Because of an ongoing structural relationship to the client system, the inside consultant probably has a more difficult time arriving at some criteria for evaluation and termination or continuation. However, the inside consultant certainly should be closer to the flow of data about the success or nonsuccess of the helping efforts. The outside consultant may have an easier time proposing objective evaluation procedures and obtaining the client's commitment to provide the necessary data for evaluation. But the outside consultant usually works with the time perspective of a much more ad hoc relationship, with accountability being expected much sooner.

EXAMPLES FROM OUR EXPERIENCES

Gordon: I'm finding that more and more clients are ready to develop written agreements. Frequently, there is a discussion with certain members of the client system about who will do what, and the timing, etc., but the contract about financial arrangements is with somebody else in a different office. This can bring about some real problems. For example, recently we had worked out the arrangements for a three-day workshop for the top executives of a national government agency. But then the agency postponed the event because

the contract office had some questions that hadn't been answered and some forms that had to be signed.

Ron: For things such as time schedule and commitments, we have found it helpful to develop a first draft of the contract and then to say, in essence, "I need to check this out with colleagues who are going to be involved, and I would like you to do the same. Because both parties tend to forget some things that become very important later, we need to have a critical review before finalizing anything."

Frequently, the persons who are negotiating the working relationship become so enthusiastic about doing the project that they neglect certain expense items, or become unrealistic about time schedule, or give low priority to some things that are very important to other people. Gordon: Another important aspect of contracting is having a tryout or a pilot project of limited duration and magnitude, before asking either part) 'to go into something larger and long term. For example, in a recent team-building program with a large school system, we asked for a small pilot project within two buildings, with careful observation and documentation by some internal staff members in order to assess and review the feasibility of the design and the results that might be expected. This relieved a lot of pressure, provided some good testing on feasibility, and was a good basis for developing a working relationship; it made a larger, more comprehensive design workable and fundable.



Notes

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