Organizational Consultation: An Appreciative Approach

VIII. The Consultative Process: Stages 3, 4 and 5

William Bergquist

Having built a strong, trusting relationship with one's client and having reached a preliminary agreement regarding the nature of their working relationship, usually it is time for the consultant to become better acquainted with the organization and the specific issues that of primary concern to her client. The third, fourth and fifth stages concern this information gathering process, as well as the analysis of this information and the feeding back of the analysis to the client.

Stage Three: Information Gathering

Many consultants—especially those who define themselves as experts—are inclined to bypass the third, fourth and fifth stages of consultation and move immediately to planning and implementing the activity for which they have been hired. Although this neglect may be of little consequence in some instances, most consultants have encountered problems at one time or another because they did not know enough about the client and institution they were serving.

The information collection stage may be elaborate and quite formal or it may be very informal, consisting entirely of a few conversations and notes about organizational environment. The consultant may try just to "get a feel" for the organization by arriving a few hours before the start of a workshop. Under such circumstances, consultants must allow the impressions they form to influence any subsequent action. Consultants should be prepared to change the design of the workshop in response to new information acquired about the institution. Too often, they are not. Strategies for gathering information usually will emerge quite naturally from the questions considered when formulating a consulting contract. Even if clients initially think that information collection is unnecessary, the contracting process is likely to convince them that they need to get a better hold on the convening problem or need before working with the consultant on a specific intervention.

Preferably, the client and consultant both will be engaged in *information collection*. The consultant may ask the client to accumulate documents to answer certain questions while the consultant is conducting interviews or making observations. If the client is involved in information collection, she is more inclined to believe and take ownership of the conclusions derived from the information. Furthermore, the larger the number of people who are collecting information, the richer the quality of information obtained from a variety of sources will be and the less likely is a single bias or perspective on the data.

Numerous information sources are available to a consultant and client. They need not confine their attention to a single source. At least three different sources/perspectives should be tapped when conducting a consultation. When only one source is used, the method of information collection itself can influence the system being studied (a version of the Heisenberg Principle). If two sources are used, the consultant risks obtaining contradictory information based in part on differing methodological biases. There is no clear-cut way to resolve these differences. Three or more sources of information allow for constructive resolution of these discrepancies. Typically, at least two sources will yield similar information, or, at least, common themes. If all three information sources yield discrepant data, it is evident that the system being studied is complex, contradictory and in need of further investigation. These discrepancies cannot be dismissed as merely methodological artifacts.

Ten different methods for collecting information are available to most consultants and clients:

(1) interviews
(2) observation
(3) participant-observation
(4) document review
(5) unobtrusive measures
(6) obtrusive measures (participant-observation of reactivity)
(7) performance tests
(8) questionnaires
(9) critical incident checklists

(10) general information about comparable problems and programs at other institutions.
A consultant is limited only by time and imagination in her use of these information collection tools.

Interviews

Interviewing is one of most widely used and generally appropriate methods of information collection for consultants. Interviews can be conducted individually or in small groups. Sometimes they are open ended: the interviewees' responses to initial questions (which usually are determined ahead of time) dictate the nature and scope of later questions. At other times, the questions all might be specified prior to the interview. Interviews can be scheduled formally or can occur informally in the cafeteria, in the hallway, in an automobile, or via the computer. They may be conducted in person, by telephone, by email or even via social media. A random sampling of organizational attitudes and perceptions can also be conducted with limited time and personnel through the use of polling techniques: Every fifth or tenth person in a digital telephone directory is called and asked a few brief questions.

Observation

An effective consultant will make extensive use of observation when the opportunity is available. Though observations are time consuming, they provide the consultant with rich insights into the real workings of the client system. A consultant might observe continuing projects having to do with the consultancy (for example, training sessions or committee meetings) or events that reflect on the milieu of the organization (for example, spontaneous activities, award celebrations or special events).

Participant-Observation

In some instances, a consultant might deem it useful to assume a participant-observer role by becoming actively involved in some event related to the convening problem or need (for example, using procedures or materials that have been produced by the department with which she is working). The participant-observer records not only what she has observed but also her personal reactions to participation in the event.

In the case of all three of the first information collection methods, the recording process itself can be assisted at times by the use of an audio recorder or video recording device. In most instances, unfortunately, recording equipment (even after being agreed to) will disrupt an interview, observation or participant-observation and distort the information being collected. A consultant may therefore prefer to take written notes or mental notes that can be written or recorded on an audio or video later.

Document Review

A consultant usually will ask the client to send pertinent documents about the convening problem or need and will review these documents before arriving at the organization. Some documents should be read carefully, especially those concerning goals, policies and outcomes related to the convening problem or need. Additional documents can be reviewed quickly for broad themes and particularly unique or contradictory perceptions or recommendations. The review of technical documents will be limited by the technical knowledge of the consultant and may require him to request additional explanations from members of the organization.

Unobtrusive Measures

Other types of information found in reports, order forms, budgets, and related archival sources are of value, even if they do not have to do directly with the convening problem, for archival sources of information tend to be nonreactive or unobtrusive. The collection of this information will not disrupt or influence the continuing events of the institution. Graffiti, prevalent jokes, minutes from important committee meetings, and records of equipment use are of comparable value. These unobtrusive measures tend to be descriptively rich and persuasive. They reveal something about the "real life" of an institution.

Obtrusive Measures

The reactions to certain data collection procedures are also of some benefit, for these reactions tell much about organizational strengths, problems and milieu. The way in which a consultant is "wined and dined", for instance, may be indicative of the manner in which inclusion takes place in this organization. Inclusion is, in turn, an important determinant of organizational morale, interdependency and information flow. Similarly, to the extent that a consultant disrupts the flow of work when observing it, one can infer (with confirming evidence from other sources) that there is no precedent for peer observation and probably strong attitudes supporting professional autonomy. Such information has value when interpreting the apparent success or failure of a project to influence professional behavior. The response of people to the current consultation or to a previous consultation is indicative of attitudes, goals and receptivity to change. The obtrusive event serves as litmus paper. It reveals prevailing attitudes at an institution.

Performance Tests

Various psychometric devices should also be available to a consultant and client. Performance tests can be used to determine relative levels of achievement in a specific area, as well as attitudes. In regard to achievement, the problems associated with a particular project often can be understood better if participants are given one or more tests to establish their current level of competency. The tests that are given need not influence the employee's performance appraisal, but instead can be presented as a diagnostic test or as a measure of program effectiveness.

As a measure of attitude, a performance test enables a consultant and client to skirt the difficult process of directly inquiring about another person's attitudes. One might assess an employee's attitude about the company data base by asking him or her where the online catalogue is located -- an indicator of the respondent's familiarity with the data base—rather than by asking if the person supports the data base or asking how often he visits it. The respondent may be inclined to express a more positive attitude about the data base than he actually feels or overestimate the number of visits/uses made, but it will be difficult to distort or disguise knowledge (or ignorance) of its location and, for example, its sections. Of course, one must assume that people are most knowledgeable about things they value highly. There is ample evidence in support of this assumption.

Questionnaires

A second psychometric device, the questionnaire, is used by consultants almost as frequently as interviews. Sometimes the consultant, in cooperation with the client, will design and distribute a questionnaire that specifically focuses on the convening problem or need. At other times, a standard questionnaire is used to cut down on design time or to compare one institution or program with others. A questionnaire can take many different forms: multiple choice, checklist, true-false, matching, scalar, short answer, or open ended.

In recent years, situational-descriptive questionnaires have been popular. The respondent is presented with a specific description of a situation and asked to indicate which of several responses he is most likely to make. Used in this way, the questionnaire becomes a measure of personal attitude or competence. Respondents also can be asked to predict how they think a certain group of people will respond. Used in this way, the questionnaire reveals the respondent's perceptions of the particular group. The respondent is not being asked to evaluate the group's probable response, but only to predict what it will be.

Critical Incident Checklist

A third psychometric device is closely related to the situational-descriptive questionnaire. Through the use of critical incident checklists, a respondent is asked to indicate how frequently a specific event or outcome is generally found to be critical to an institution's success or failure in solving a specific type of problem. An indication of its relative frequency of occurrence can be of considerable value to a consultant and client in assessing the severity of the problem.

General Information

The tenth source of information resides in the memory of the consultant as well as in the memory of the client (and audience). This is the general knowledge one has acquired about this type of institution (and about organizations in general). One need not direct this knowledge only to an intervention (such as making a speech or conducting a workshop). Information about nationwide or regional trends, new funding priorities, different production and business models, and institutional practices can be thrown into the hopper during the information collection stage along with information about the client system. The general knowledge can be used as a signal. When information-gathering methods generate data that are discrepant not only with information from other sources in the organization, but also with general trends in this type of institution, they should be viewed skeptically, though not necessarily dismissed.

Stage Four: Information Analysis

This stage often is ignored in descriptions of the consulting process. Information collection is assumed to lead directly into information feedback, yet such a sequence seems to neglect the fact that a consultant (and client) has a mind, and, as a result, will screen out some of the data that are collected and add a particular perspective to the data that are retained. There is an even better reason for acknowledging this stage. It is at this stage that the consultant's expertise and past experiences can often be of greatest value to the client. Rather than lecturing to the client or providing a set of descriptions of programs at other institutions, the consultant can apply all of the theories, concepts and knowledge of other programs directly to the task of making sense of the institution with which she is working.

What tools does a consultant need to conduct information analysis? Obviously, these tools will differ widely, depending on the nature of the data that have been collected. Too many consultants come up with the same analysis regardless of the institution with which they are working. These consultants often have a very limited set of analytic tools available to them. Information analysis should involve discovery and surprise. If there is nothing "new" in the information, the consultant should seriously question its adequacy. Perhaps additional information should be collected. Is the consultant's bias overly determining the information? Does she need another perspective from a different constituency or consultant? Should she use additional information collection methods?

General Principles

A few general principles of information analysis are appropriate and useful. First, information should be identified, screened, organized and synthesized in such a way as to address the central concerns identified by the client during the contracting stage. The trust of the client in the intentions of the consultant is often placed on the line at this point. If a consultant uses her own agenda in working with the information, the client may feel betrayed.

In keeping with the client's concerns, a consultant may feel frustrated because there is so much more she could do with the information. The consultant certainly can use some of the information to expand the horizon and concerns of her client, but the consultant should not attempt to lead the client too far away from the initial concerns. Even if the client may be convinced of the validity of broader issues, the audience for the consultation will usually lag behind, thereby leaving both the consultant and the client out on a limb. Broad perspectives on the client system should be applied to the convening problem to describe the milieu within which the problem can be understood clearly and solved. One must always balance a broader descriptive *landscape* rendering of a problem, however, with a more intimate and ultimately pragmatic, in-depth *portrait* of the problem.

Progressive Focusing

Analysis should not necessarily be delayed until all information is collected. Rather, the consultant (usually with the client) sometimes begins to analyze the information soon after data collection has started. The analysis itself can help determine the type of further information that should be collected and additional methods that should be used. Hypotheses, themes and images can be identified in a preliminary manner. They are then subjected to progressively closer scrutiny. Specific hypotheses are confirmed or disproved with subsequent data. The process of "progressive focusing" can serve as a valuable guideline for this important phase of a consultative process.

There are typically three stages in progressive focusing:

(1) observation
(2) directed inquiry
(3) search for explanation.

During the first stage, a consultant identifies a wide variety of images and impressions. Incidents that have been particularly intriguing are described, recurring trends are noted, and issues frequently arising in discussions or interviews are identified.

During the second stage, a consultant selects specific topics for more sustained and intensive inquiry. A change of emphasis accompanies this development. During the first, exploratory stage, the consultant has become knowledgeable about the scheme. This general level of knowledge enables the consultant’s questioning during the second stage to be more focused; communication to be more coherent and relaxed; and, in general, observation and inquiry to be more directed, systematic, and selective. The third stage consists of the consultant seeking general principles underlying the organization of the problem being addressed, spotting patterns of cause and effect within its operation, and placing individual findings within a broader explanatory context.

STP and TMR Models of Analysis

While there are few guiding principles for information analysis, other than being responsive to the client's concerns and beginning the analysis at an early point in the data gathering process, several organizing schemes are found to be of value.

One of these schemes, the "STP" model of problem analysis encourages one to place information in one of three categories:

(1) information that defines the situation (S) or current state of the client system being studied
(2) information that clarifies the target (T) or desired future state of this system
(3) information that points to a proposal (P) or plan that will help the client system move from its current situation to the desired target.

A second model, called "TMR", enables one to study a problem from three different perspectives.

(1) A problem can be studied as a task (T) difficulty. The client system is unable to accomplish its assigned job in a satisfactory manner.
(2) A problem can also be studied with reference to method (M): The client system is unable to adopt a method of operating that will enable it both to accomplish its assigned task and to meet the personal and interpersonal (relationship) needs of its members.
(3) A problem can be considered from a relationship (R) perspective: The client system is unable to function in a manner that is personally and interpersonally gratifying for its participants.

Stage Five: Information Feedback

This stage serves two primary functions. First, the client and/or audience can use the information conveyed to plan more effectively for future action which will solve the convening problem or move the client system toward a specific goal or target. Second, the feedback enables the consultant to test his perception of reality in the client system.

Feedback to Aid Planning

Some consultants (especially those who tend to stop at this stage of consultation) assume that the information feedback in and of itself will promote improvement, or at least change, in the client system. This assumption, in turn, is based on an image of rational man: if he has more information, a person will make better decisions, because it is assumed that information will strengthen perception and clear perceptions are supposed to be the key to solving many if not all problems. Unfortunately, this view does not always hold up, for the accumulation of information can yield power, which may or may not be used rationally or for the common good. Without accompanying clarity regarding the desired outcomes or without a safe place in which to explore alternative options for action, the planning process will lack direction and creativity.

Information does not always translate into action. The factors that blocked the accumulation of information before the consultant was called in now may block new initiatives. Information collection itself can become a substitute for action or even a barrier to action. A consultant can be easily lured into a repeated cycle of information collection, analysis and feedback which allows the client to avoid dealing with the risks and consequences of making hard decisions and taking concrete steps to alleviate identified problems. One must acknowledge the role to be played by information feedback in helping the client system to plan and initiate action. However, one also must recognize the need to move to the following stages to increase the possibility that something will eventuate from the feedback of information.

Feedback to Test Analysis

Feedback often provides an additional source of information to an organizational consultant in the reactions of various constituencies to information that has already been collected and the way in which this information has been analyzed. This "feedback on feedback" or "confirmational" process can take place in a variety of settings and at several different times. If the client is not already involved in information analysis, the consultant may wish to meet with the client periodically during the analysis stage to check on the progress of the consultation as well as to test out ideas. More informally, the consultant might wish to speak briefly with the client between interviews or observations to check out specific perceptions or hunches.

Confirmation can occur through individual or small group interviews. Interviewees are asked to respond to specific statements from a previous interview or to comment on an observation already made. Interviewees might be asked questions which will directly confirm or disconfirm a hypothesis or tentative conclusion. Confirmation can also occur through re-interviewing someone who has made a particularly controversial point, or once again observing a particularly revealing activity.

Most frequently, confirmation or disconfirmation will occur during a formal information feedback session. When significant discrepancies are noted during these sessions, not only should more information be collected to confirm or disconfirm a hypothesis, alternative hypotheses should be formulated to account for discrepancies. In some cases, the analysis of reasons for the discrepancies will reveal a flaw in the information collection strategy. New methods can be employed, new sources of information can be identified, or new roles can be assigned to the consultant, client, or other collectors of data. A return to Stage Three (Information Collection) often is warranted.

Planning for Feedback

In planning for an information feedback session, one should be particularly sensitive to the language and images being used. An effective consultant will not simply report out themes, hypotheses and conclusions as he has formulated them. Rather a translation will occur. Information will be conveyed, orally or in written form, through the use of terms and images that are understood by the client and audience, often ideally lifted out of some of the gathered data. The portrayal should be interesting, persuasive, illuminating and yet recognizable to the organization as reflective of their reality.

An effective consultant will approach the client system from many angles. What is it like being "inside" this problem or this organization? What does this problem look like from the outside? What does this problem or program look like from the perspective of a manager, a clerk, a vice president, a former employee? A variety of metaphors might be used. Some experienced consultants make use of classic myths to convey an idea (e.g., the Return of the Hero). In some settings, literary, religious, philosophical, historical or scientific metaphors or analogies are appropriate. Anything a consultant can do to avoid behavioral science, educational or management jargon will usually enhance a presentation!

The findings should be offered in a manner that maximizes their immediate use by the client and/or audience. A consultant should trace the implications of the findings, or build a process (such as small group discussions or "caucuses") through which the client or audience can discuss the implications during or after the presentation. In many instances, the consultant will want to generate a series of alternative responses to the findings. Only in the role of expert will the consultant want to recommend a specific course of action.

The findings will be of greatest use when made available to the client in as short a time as possible. This will take place if the client is involved actively with the consultant in information collection and analysis, and if the consultant makes a preliminary oral report on the findings before preparing a written report. An oral report maximizes the benefit of the feedback to the consultant, for reactions to the oral report may be used in the written version.

A written report will increase the number of people who are exposed to the findings -- another goal of information feedback. An initial draft of the written report should be reviewed by the client. The client's comments and recommendations need not influence or be incorporated into the final draft; however, the consultant should be able to justify a decision not to incorporate them. Any process that increases a client's or audience's ownership of the product of these first stages of a consultation is to be encouraged, for client ownership at this stage increases the possibility that significant and appropriate actions will be taken during the last five stages of consultation—to which we turn in the next essay.