Organizational Consultation: An Appreciative Approach
IX. The Consultative Process: Stages Six to Ten

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This essay concerns the second half of the consulting process—when information turns to action and the consultant is "earning her keep" with the provision of specific recommendations or at least enriching insights about the important issues facing her client. This second half includes re-contracting, planning for intervention, intervention, evaluation of the intervention and exit. While not all of these stages are required in each consultation, they must always be kept in mind when the consultant is working through the consulting process with her client.,

Stage Six: Re-contract

After the conclusion of the initial information-oriented stages of consultation, it is essential that the client and consultant reflect on their progress and determine the ways in which this progress clarifies or alters the nature of their working relationship. If a reassessment of expectations, roles, goals or concerns is not needed, the client and consultant have been either extraordinarily insightful or prophetic at the outset, or the information being generated and findings being conveyed were not new to the client or were of little practical value. On the other hand, extensive and disruptive re-contracting will not be necessary if the client and consultant formulated the original contract (Stage Two) in a deliberative manner, and if the client has been kept fully informed of developments during the initial five stages of consultation.

Explicit re-contracting usually will not occur without the direct encouragement of the consultant. The client should be invited to sit down with the consultant to discuss the consultancy and to begin planning for the next steps (leading to Stage Seven). When the consultation is complex, an in-person discussion is preferable to a telephone conversation. Furthermore, the group that is to meet for this re-contracting should be kept small so that discussion can be candid and productive. Input from other sources (the audience) should be brought in by the client and shared openly with the consultant.

In some instances, the consultation will terminate at this point, the client having obtained sufficient information and insight into the problem to be able to move ahead on his own.
In other instances, the consultation will have just begun. The client and consultant will plan for one or more interventions that will build on the information that has been provided through the first stages of consultation and that will be compatible with the newly reformulated client-consultant contract.

Stage Seven: Planning for Intervention

In beginning the process of translating data into action, it is essential that the client and consultant give adequate attention to the goals of the client system. The client and consultant have to decide whether the current situation warrants *change or stabilization*. One need not begin with the assumption that change is essential to solution of a current problem. Change is appropriate in those instances where there is significant discrepancy between the current situation and the desired (target) situation. In other instances, a series of precipitous changes or the client's failure to accept or acknowledge the strength and sources of gratification in the current situation may indicate the need for stabilization.

In most instances, the initial intervention of a consultant should focus on the achievement of an enabling goal—a goal that is not so much important in and of itself, but does enable (or at least increase the possibility) that other important goals get achieved. An enabling goal often can help break an organizational "log jam" and may have a greater impact than had been anticipated initially. By selecting an enabling goal, a client often can avoid debilitating debates over priorities to be assigned to two or more significant outcomes.

Stage Eight: Intervention

This stage is not only the most public and potentially the most significant stage in the consultation process, it is also the stage which is most idiosyncratic and, therefore, most difficult to describe and generalize about. By definition, any intervention that is responsive and tailored to the specific needs of a client system will be unique and of limited general application. Therefore, we will not describe specific intervention strategies in great detail, but rather refer the reader to later essays in this series about consulting in the domains of *information, intentions and ideas.*

In several instances, the models that were presented in previous essays incorporated previous stages in the consultation process (particularly data collection, analysis and feedback). In many instances a consultation will terminate before moving to action-oriented stages. In these instances, the information stages themselves constitute an intervention. A consultant and client, however, should be aware that they are stopping short of action when they make use of these information-oriented interventions (for example, survey-feedback or process consultation).

Stage Nine: Evaluation of the Intervention

The evaluation of a consultative intervention ideally will serve two functions: (a) formative improvement of the intervention while it is still being performed and (b) summative assessment of the overall impact of the intervention, which will be used for subsequent planning and decision-making. An effective evaluation of an intervention will contribute both to the client's knowledge of his own institution and to the consultant's awareness of his own strengths and weaknesses.

Formative Evaluation

As a tool for the formative improvement of a continuing program, the evaluation should be conducted throughout the intervention. Frequently, this will mean nothing more than periodic interruptions during a workshop or conference to inquire about participant satisfaction with the design and implementation of the event. At other times, a more formal evaluation might be provided at a natural break in the program. If a consultant is providing a series of workshops or is meeting with a number of different constituencies to sell them on a specific proposal, it is valuable to pause occasionally in order to determine if the strategies being employed need some revision. This mid-project evaluation usually is conducted by the consultant, client and several members of the audience. Even a written report is appropriate to formative evaluation if it can be circulated first in draft form to the client, the audience or a "pilot" group of readers for reaction and revision.

Summative Evaluation

As a vehicle for summative assessment of an intervention's impact and worth, an evaluation can take many different forms. A large-scale evaluation may be commissioned if the intervention has been broad based and long term. Often, this evaluation will be conducted by another consultant or by someone specializing in program evaluation. If an outside evaluator is being used, she should be brought into the consultative process at an early point (certainly by Stage Six or Seven), so that she may understand fully the purposes of the evaluation and develop a friendly working relationship with the consultant. Rivalry between a consultant and evaluator can be disastrous.

A summative evaluation should answer the following questions:

Has the intervention successfully achieved the "enablement" goal(s) identified in Stage Seven?

What forces operating in or on the client system have facilitated or blocked achievement of the enablement goal(s)?

What next steps, if any, should be taken to achieve the enablement goal(s) or to move the client system toward the achievement of other (outcome or enablement) goals?

A summative evaluation which focuses only on the first of these questions will not be particularly helpful to the client or consultant in re-contracting, in planning for future interventions or in planning for the consultant's departure from the client system.

Planning for Evaluation

In the implementation of either a formative or summative evaluation, a client, consultant or external evaluator should use all of the data and information sources generated and made available during the third stage of consultation. During the evaluation, additional interviews might be conducted, the intervention might be observed, a questionnaire might be distributed, critical incidents might be identified and so forth. The evaluation should build on the existing information base, with the existing information being considered "pre-intervention" data that can be compared with "post-intervention" data. This comparison enables the client and consultant to assess the nature and amount of impact that can be attributed to the intervention.

Many consultants and clients assume that the primary beneficiary of any evaluation is the client, for an evaluation is the way in which a consultant can be held accountable for her work. Thus, many consultants do not push for an evaluation, nor do they help to plan it. They assume that an evaluation is the client's responsibility and should be initiated by the client.

An evaluation need not just serve the needs of the client. A consultant's own needs can be expressed legitimately at this point in the consultation. Although these needs must be deferred during most of the previous stages of consultation, they become appropriate at this stage. The evaluation should be designed so that the consultant gains a maximum amount of insight about his own work with this client system. The client owes this to a consultant, for supposedly the client is already the beneficiary of insights gained by the consultant from evaluations of previous consultations.

Stage Ten: Exit

Any consultation should be viewed as a temporary arrangement between a client and consultant that continues to exist only as long as the consultant is doing for the client system that which the system cannot do for itself. A consultant should be working herself out of the job from the first day she meets with the client. During the final stage in the consulting process, the independence of the client should be kept at the forefront when decisions are made concerning the continuation of the consultation.

Strong arguments can be made for continuing a consultation that has been successful already. The consultant will have credibility. Her intentions and competence will already have the client's and audience's trust. She will have intimate knowledge of the client system and of the ways in which this system can best be served by a consultant. Yet, precisely because of her increased value to the client system, the consultant and client must be cautious about extending the consultation. If the consultant becomes i*ndispensible* to the client system, she will not be working in the best interests of the client, for the client will have become dependent on the consultant's knowledge and skills rather than building knowledge and skills within his own system.

Many consultants prepare for exit by training people within the client system to take over the consultant role. A consultant might invite one or more members of the client system (or the client himself) to serve as an apprentice or assistant in conducting an intervention or in collecting and analyzing data. If the client is involved in all stages of the consultation, he already has gained a great deal of knowledge about the consulting process and is ready to incorporate many of the consultative practices into the daily life of the institution Information-oriented activities, for instance, might be incorporated into the continuing institutional research initiatives of the organization.

A decision regarding the continuation of a successful consultation is obviously quite difficult. In some instances, the consultation should be continued, and the client and consultant should return to one of the two previous contracting stages (Two or Six). The intervention may have opened up a new set of questions that can be answered only by returning to the information-oriented stages. In other instances, the consultant and client will begin planning for another intervention.

If a decision is made to conclude or terminate the consultation, the client and consultant should take time to reflect on what they have learned from the consultation, both personally and professionally. If the consultation has been successful, then the client and consultant should take time to celebrate their mutual achievement. Neither party can be successful without the good intentions and competency of the other party.

Looking Forward

With this introduction to the models and processes of consultation, we turn in the next set of essays to a particular approach to organizational consultation that builds primarily on the fourth Model of Consultation and that relates specifically to the intervention stage of organizational consultations. This approach is appreciative in nature and concerns the processes not just of change but also of stabilization. It builds on the existing strengths and successes of the organization with which the consultation is working and on the capacity of the client to move into the domains of information, intentions and ideas within her organization.