

Organizational Consultation: An Appreciative Approach

VII. The Consultative Process: Stages 1 and 2

William Bergquist

The most effective organizational consultants are those who can assume many roles and serve many functions—they can move into any one of the four models we identified in an earlier essay. Such flexibility allows the consultant to be responsive to the unique needs and styles of clients as well as to the particular characteristics of the setting. Nevertheless, there do seem to be ten common stages that a consultant ought to take into consideration when planning any consultation. One or more of the ten stages that are being proposed can be dismissed in any one particular consultation. However, if a consultant consistently ignores one or more of these stages, she is much more likely to confront problems that could be predicted and consequently avoided.

The ten stages relate to one another in a sequential manner. In most instances, a consultant cannot move from one stage until she has negotiated the previous ones, although she may begin at different points in the process and often will repeat and cycle back through one or more stages during any single consultation.

The ten stages that encompass and can be used to guide most consultations are:

- 1. Entry:* the client contacts the consultant;
- 2. Initial Contract:* the consultant and client reach a preliminary agreement concerning their working relationship;
- 3. Information Collection:* the consultant (often in collaboration with the client) collects additional information about the client system;

4. *Information Analysis*: the consultant (often in collaboration with the client) assembles and synthesizes the information to arrive at a valid and useful description and understanding of the client system;

5. *Information Feedback*: the consultant conveys the description of the client system to the client in a manner that promotes understanding and movement from reflection to action;

6. *Recontract*: the consultant and client reach a new agreement about their relationship based on the information that already has been collected and analyzed and their experience in working together;

7. *Plan for Intervention*: the consultant and client determine the nature and design of activities that will be responsive to the problems and needs identified by the client and information gathered during previous stages;

8. *Intervention*: the consultant provides specific services for the client that are responsive to the problems and needs of the client system;

9. *Evaluation of the Intervention*: the client and consultant determine the extent to which the intervention successfully responded to the client's problems and needs, and was compatible with the contractual relationship between the client and consultant;

10. *Recontract/Exit*: the client and consultant determine whether further work is needed and to what stage the consultant should return if further work seems appropriate; if no further work is needed, the client and consultant plan for and initiate the consultant exit in a manner that ensures continuity of action taken as a result of the consultation.

Although the most visible stage in this process (intervention) usually is also the most important in determining the overall success of the consultation, it cannot stand in isolation from the other stages. An unsuccessful intervention often has been executed skillfully, but has not been preceded by sufficient "homework"; hence, it is inappropriate, ill-timed, understaffed, overstaffed, misunderstood or provided to the wrong people. Effective consultation always requires a sensitive balance between the rational and reflective stages of information collection, analysis and feedback, on the one hand, and the more intuitive and action-oriented stages of intervention planning and implementation, on the other hand. The remainder of this essay is devoted to a more detailed description and examination of the first two stages. The remaining eight stages are described and examined in the two subsequent essays.

Stage One: Entry

The initial contact between a consultant and client often determines the degree of success in a consultation. Furthermore, entry often lasts for a considerable period of time even though the consultation has seemed to move beyond this initial stage. When a consultant is brought in to conduct a short workshop or make a speech, this brief presentation sometimes serves as her "entry" into the institution and is not meant by itself to be a significant intervention into the client system. The essential tasks in any entry process are initial identification of the client and the audience, and, based on this identification, establishment of a trustful working relationship between the client and consultant.

Initial Contact with the Client Institution

Usually the first contact between an institutional leader and a consultant occurs via email, letter, telephone or personal encounter (at a conference, workshop, etc.) Typically, the initial contact includes a statement by the contact person about the general nature of the convening problem or need that precipitated the request for a consultant, as well as some general statement about the extent of the consultation itself. The consultant should share information about her fees, availability and, if requested, relevant background, knowledge or skills in the problem or need area defined by the contact person.

Identification of the Client and Audience

The initial contact person may or may not be the ultimate client of the consultation. Sometimes the individual is the real client, i.e., the entire problem that he or she confronts is within the client's capacity to resolve with consultant assistance. Sometimes, however, the client should be seen not as the ultimate operational client but as the *entry client*; that is, an individual through whom access to the *operational client* may be possible. Given this distinction, one of the tasks in the initial contact between a consultant and entry client is the identification of the "real" or ongoing client. In those instances where the ongoing client is not the entry client, he may be the bill payer or the person who works with the consultant on a daily basis.

Usually, the ongoing client is the person to whom the consultant is directly accountable.

The consultant may find the following questions helpful in defining the ongoing client:

If the consultation is successful or a failure, who will be given credit or blame for it?

Who has the authority to change the nature or goals of the consultation?

Who will benefit immediately from a successful consultation?

Who will be responsible for the implementation of any recommendations that emerge from this consultation?

With whom should the majority of information that is gathered during the consultation be shared?

Who is hurting most in this organization and seems to be most in need of immediate assistance?

In answering these six questions, the consultant may discover that several different possible clients emerge. Therefore, a consultant must reflect on the primary purpose of the consultation, and then focus on the client who is identified through those questions that are most closely associated with this purpose.

In general, consultants should identify one person or a small group of fewer than five people as the primary ongoing client. A larger group of people can rarely provide sufficient guidance for a consultation. With a larger group, a consultant typically spends considerable time monitoring and negotiating the interactions between members of the client group. While these activities often provide useful information about interactions throughout the institution or organization, they often distract the consultant from the collection and analysis of information from a broader constituency. Thus, while a large client group is often installed to ensure broad representation in the formulation of a consulting contract, the effect may be to reduce the consultant's effectiveness in gaining a broad representative perspective about the institution.

The consultant and client also may wish to identify an *audience* for the consultation. This larger group of people should meet with the consultant frequently, advise the client about the nature and purpose of the consultation, receive most or all oral and written reports from the consultant and, in many instances, be involved in planning for consultant interventions. The audience may be selected on a representative basis to reflect the diverse interests and perspectives of the institution, or may be comprised of those people who are in a position to implement any recommendations that emerge from the consultation. Decisions concerning the client and the audience for a consultation should not be viewed as unalterable. Frequently, a different person or group will be identified as the client after a consultation has begun. An

effective consultant frequently asks herself, "Who is the client?" The answer to this question will often have a profound impact on the design and processes of a consultation.

Some consultants believe that the client should always be the entire institution or even "society." Unfortunately, laudable attempts to identify the greater good of a consultation often lead to major problems of both a practical and ethical nature. First, when the institution is defined as the client, a consultant often gets very little support, very little help with problem definition and little support for ongoing evaluation of the intervention. A consultant is not in any essential, tangible manner connected to the institution. Second, accountability is usually lacking when an institution is defined as client. To whom does the consultant report; upon the basis of what criteria is the performance of the consultant to be evaluated?

Third, arrogance is often inherent in these broader definitions of clientship. Why should the consultant be the one to define what is "good" for the "institution" or for "society"? How is one to define a greater good in a manner that is not subjective and personal. Fourth, there is an ethical issue concerned with the use of an institution's funds to serve some purpose that may not be of high priority to those in the institution. While a consultant has every right to seek social change in society, this change effort should not be funded and supported by those who do not necessarily advocate the change.

Consultants should not accept any job or work toward any goal that is incompatible with their personal values; nor should consultation be used to promote or perpetuate personal values. Effective consultants will select jobs that they find to be personally -- not just financially -- rewarding, if they want to avoid disillusionment and professional "burnout." However, consultants also should be sensitive to the ways in which personal gratification can distort the definition of a problem or an independent identification of the "appropriate" client for a consultation. Therefore, the consultant should work initially with the entry client concerning the identification of the ongoing client and should continue to reassess this decision with the ongoing client during subsequent stages in the consulting process.

Establishment of a Working Relationship

The second major agenda of the entry process—establishing a trustful working relationship between consultant and client—requires that both the consultant and client demonstrate competence and good

intentions. Consultants effectively convey good intentions and competence in several ways. While good listening skills (including paraphrasing) are essential at all stages of consultation, they are particularly important during entry. The consultant must allow the client to describe the problem fully without discounting this description or probing too rapidly for deeper issues or sources of difficulty. At entry, a consultant should be concerned with clarifying the client's perceptions of a convening problem or need rather than attempting to alter the client's perception of this problem or need.

Through active and empathic listening, the consultant conveys good intentions and an initial trust in the client's perceptions and intentions. Challenging the client prematurely often signals the consultant's mistrust of the client's motives and can lead to a nonproductive consultation. Bad intentions often are conveyed, as well, through premature offering of solutions or through treatment of a client's convening problem as if it were routine, unimportant, or easily solved. The good intentions of consultants are conveyed when they treat the client's problem as unique and significant to the client and hence to themselves.

The consultant's competence is much more difficult to establish at the onset of a consultation than is intention—unless her reputation is firmly established already. Competence often is established only after the consultant visits the institution or initiates some activity. A consultant's initial intervention (interviews, workshops and so forth) is often an entry-level demonstration of competence. A sense of competence is also conveyed by the questions posed by the consultant to the client. While consultants should acknowledge the unique and significant nature of a problem for the client, they also should convey something about the relationship between their own past experiences and the immediate problem. Questions concerning staffing, strategies for implementing a program, ownership of a program, levels of program funding and program goals can suggest something about a consultant's own experiences in the area.

A consultant can demonstrate her competence most persuasively through her concern with all stages of a consultative process - not just the intervention. A consultant who agrees to run a major workshop that will significantly impact the future life of an organization should be concerned about needs assessment and institutional milieu, even at this early stage of consultation. A consultant who assists a fund-raising

campaign should be concerned with gathering information about past fund-raising initiatives and the current financial needs of the institution.

Inexperienced consultants often attempt to demonstrate competence (and reduce their own fears of inadequacy) by rushing prematurely into an intervention. A confident and competent consultant will move carefully and caringly into a consultancy. Ultimately, both intention and competence are established firmly through the formulation of a consulting contract—the activity and stage of consultation to which we now turn our attention.

Stage Two: Initial Contract

An explicit agreement about the needs and expectations of both client and consultant is needed at an early point in a consultation. Furthermore, this explicit statement should be linked to specific obligations on the part of both client and consultant. For these reasons, a contract is drawn up between the client and the consultant.

The contract need not be highly formal, if both parties are clear about its content and each has heard the other party articulate the agreements made in the contract. A written contract is usually appropriate, given the complex and often elusive nature of the needs, expectations and obligations that are identified. In some institutional settings (e.g. higher education), oral agreements may be more common than written ones. The tradition of the particular institution being served must be respected—though not at the expense of clarity regarding the needs and expectations of both parties.

An agreement (written or oral) must be precise and clear to both parties. In many instances, this process will be the critical aspect of a consultation. It can contribute significantly to the client's understanding of solutions to his problem and to a fuller understanding by the client of his own resources and the resources of people with whom he works.

Ingredients of the Contract

What seem to be the most important ingredients in a client-consultant contract? We would suggest five areas in which agreement should be reached:

- (1) the consultant's and the client's goal for the project

- (2) broad definition of the problem (to be redefined as the relationship progresses)
- (3) relationship of the consulting problem to the overall system
- (4) client resources and abilities applicable to the problem
- (5) consultant resources and abilities applicable to the problem.

In addition, five other areas should be included in this initial discussion regarding the contract. Each of these five areas will often elude a formal agreement and each is associated with our presentation in Chapter One of the Four Models of Consultation:

- (1) broad approach to the problem
- (2) nature of the consultant/client relationship (particularly with regard to relative ownership for the problem on the part of both parties)
- (3) expected benefit for the client (the so-called "return on expectation" rather than return on investment which is an inappropriate matrix at this point)
- (4) expected benefit for the consultant (including but not exclusive to compensation)
- (5) ability of each party to influence the other.

Contract Flexibility

The specific ingredients of any contract will depend on the nature of the client and the convening problem or need, and the preferred style of the consultant. The one ingredient that should appear in all contracts, regardless of the mode of consultation, is flexibility. Effective consultation should involve a series of increasingly precise definitions of the convening problem or goal, and a series of increasingly detailed and useful definitions of the client-consultant relationship. The contract must be reviewed and revised frequently to reflect these changes. A simple, set contract will be appropriate only in the case of a "one shot" consultation.

A flexible contract also reflects on the client's own growth during the consultation. Initially, a client may be unaware of, or resistant to, nontraditional but appropriate consulting roles. Clients may consider the only appropriate consulting role to be that of expert. Rather than calling into question this limited perspective, a consultant may contract initially for provision of expertise (workshop, speech or report). In doing so, the consultant can help the client recognize the limitations of this approach.

If the intervention is evaluated effectively, the client may discover that although the consultant did a good job, the heart of the problem still has not been touched. In the abstract, initially, a client may not easily be convinced of this point. Only when a first intervention has been completed, will the client be able to assess its appropriateness. Many early activities in a consultation are directed primarily toward re-clarification of the contract. The third, fourth and fifth stages of consultation (information collection, analysis and feedback), in particular, are often integrally related to contracting. We turn to these three stages in our next essay.