Editor's Introduction

In the current endeavor to refocus and revitalize the Management Consulting Division, two themes are being emphasized through several activities. One theme is the revisiting and re-exploration of consultancy essentials and fundamentals. The other theme is to reexamine the linkages and interface between academic and practitioner consultants. One of the activities is this special issue of the Communiqué.

This special issue is based on a pretty straightforward idea—if you want to learn what people are thinking, ask them. It follows that if you want to learn about the above themes, invite a lot of experienced and thoughtful colleagues to candidly say what's on their minds in their own way. And that's how what follows came to be.

The series of letters below are as I received them (except that I've standardized both the salutation and the closing). I think you will find these letters refreshing and meaningful. They deserve slow an careful reading. You will find a mixture of familiar and new ideas, questions, and practices. You will find much that stimulates, provokes and begs self-reflection. You will find you get to know each of these thoughtful consultants a bit better. You will find your own ideas, feelings, and beliefs about consultancy, getting a bit clearer—mine have. And, of course, enjoy.

To each of the authors below, my sincere appreciation for sharing with us.

Craig C. Lundberg
Cornell University

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Dear Colleagues:

Thanks for the invitation to think aloud about consulting. I've been thinking quite a lot about it in the past couple of years. For a growing number of us "practitioner" consultants, the essence of consulting is becoming more critical to unveil, and more murky as we peel away the layers.

Part of this has to do with the failure of consulting and our organizations during (at least) my lifetime, and the search for understanding. I have sought illumination in Complexity and Chaos theory; others have returned to Systems Analysis with renewed energy and deeper insights; others still have
turned to postmodern art and literature as the source of knowing. Many of us find ourselves bereft of what was once our expertise. Methods, techniques and technology that served us well for many years, or at least provided a living, are vaporizing as our experience—and that of our clients—proves at best disappointing. So we search for new ways of seeing, thinking, being and doing. There is a shift afoot.

Of course, in the midst of this shift there is also high energy for holding on to the "truths" of the past, and what hasn't worked is repackaged, or mixed with a bit of the new in an unstable hash, and turned into The Way to remake our organizations. As the paradigm shifts, the center seems to be going supernova, spitting out its final energy in a fireball.

Paraphrasing Joel Barker, when the paradigm shifts, we all go to zero. This is a source of great fear or great possibility. I like the possibilities. In my consulting practice, my colleagues and I have moved from being experts, with high-on-the-hierarchy knowledge, to being collaborators, with contextual expertise that is essential but only part of the information that perturbs the system to a new way of being. Instead of selling answers, we now present new ways of seeing to generate questions.

I believe we are all searching. Perhaps success in the future will be measured by how well we create a true community of inquiry and establish dialogue among those in organizations, academic and research centers, consultants, artists, poets...the list goes on. The practitioner-consultant interface you ask about begins here. I want the partnership of academics in thinking more deeply, surfacing assumptions and discovering new knowledge. But collaborative inquiry, this community-in-dialogue, requires more than just the administrative sciences. It requires us to be open to information and relationships all around us. Perhaps A.R. Ammons, a poet at Cornell University, has more to say to us about our organizations than a new analysis of pay and performance. Ammons says:

I see narrow orders, limited tightness, but will not run to that easy victory: still around the looser, wider forces work: I will try to fasten into order enlarging grasps of disorder, widening scope, but enjoying the freedom that Scope eludes my grasp, that
consultant every enjoy or embrace the client's many manifestations of resistance to the helping process? Can a consultant ever offhandedly accept a client hiring another consultant in his/her place who will do exactly what the client wants even though it is not the "proper" course of action?

These are aspects of the consulting process that elicit questions from my students like, "isn't that other consultant unethical?" and "how do you stand all that denial from clients?" And my answer is, "Consulting is a marvelous profession, if you can "take the beating."

Sincerely,

Ellen A. Fagenson

George Mason University

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Dear Colleagues:

Over the past year I have had the opportunity to both sell and deliver change management consulting services to large, prestigious companies across industries. The following observations are some of the lessons I have learned which I would like to share with you who are also consultants.

First, presidents and VPs (particularly in Human Resources) have responded best to consulting styles that reflect more "sharing" than "telling" or "selling." The entry into a firm is probably as important as any other phase of the consulting process; without the welcome, there is no following phase. Genuine, honest, personal and professional styles of engaging potential clients works. "Being human works," a client recently told me.

Second, nothing speaks louder to clients than a consultant's past experience (successful experience) with other leaders in their field. This is becoming more the case with the increasing number of consultants entering practice. Building a consulting practice, therefore, involves selecting clients whom you would gladly use as references: both to obtain new business and to substantiate your credentials and work done.

Third, whatever consulting techniques, methods, or technologies consultants use, I believe listening and sharing processes with clients is essential. "Client shared expertise" is important as problems become more complex, and as clients demand that consultants "share the risks" of solutions enacted.

Fourth, the consultant's professional reputation and standards of excellence remain an essential part of the work with clients. While the consulting field remains an unregulated domain, each consultant's own reputation and standards increases in importance, especially if a client base is to be built and used to gain more business. We are what we say and do as consultants.

Finally, consulting should be fun. I continue to consult because I like interacting with people and combining theory with practice.

I realize these tidbits of reflection are not in any way new, but I think they are important to reiterate. While new consulting fads (re-engineering, working with the learning organization, TQM, and so on) will come and go, our shared experiences and lessons as consultants need to be heard and added to the communal "data bank." This having been said, I wish you well in your continued pursuits.

Sincerely,

Joe Weiss
Bentley College

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Dear Colleagues:

I've elected to focus my comments on just one issue-
-how to help clients know the good ones from the bad ones. I recently talked with several managers in different industries who, in effect, told me the same story. Each had retained a consultant and engaged in a defined project with his or her direct reports, only to find that the quality of the outcome in no way measured up to the pre-intervention promises; and in a couple of instances, the consultants almost single-handedly destroyed the teams with which they worked. Hence, the frequently asked, always significant, question: "How can I tell, in advance, the good consultants from the bad ones?"

I believe we, as members of this division, have a shared responsibility to help managements learn to identify consultant competencies and, in the process, protect themselves from charlatans. Unfortunately, managers are not overburdened with too much information about how to do that. As Bill Dyer put it, "Most people are more astute in selecting a new refrigerator or car than they are in retaining a $500-a-day consultant" (Dyer, W.G., [1978, Spring]. So you want to hire a consultant. Exchange, 2-5). Hence, managers are often left to themselves to differentiate between competent consultants and those who are, at best, less qualified and sometimes downright dangerous to organizations.

Although there are no easy answers, several factors indicate whether a consultant has the needed skills and judgment to be of help. Indeed, knowing the "right" questions to ask is the central issue in hiring a consultant. Some of these questions include the following:

---Do I need a consultant, or can the job be done by a speaker, trainer, facilitator, or resource person? Have I thoroughly checked out the consultant's credentials, including the person's background, experience, values, and professional skills?

---Have I thoroughly checked out the consultant’s references, including a list of current and previous clients? How long have they known the person? What kinds of services were performed? To what extent were they satisfied with those services? Would they retain the person again to do similar kinds of work? What were the person's strengths and weaknesses?

---What are my expectations regarding the role the consultants will fulfill in this project? Given the three primary consultative roles--expert, pair of hands, and collaborator--am I clear about the differences? Are our expectations congruent?

---Do the consultants attempt to clarify my expectations of both the consultants and the project?

---Do the consultants clarify my expectations of both the consultants and the project?

---Do the consultants clarify their own expectations of me and the organization?

---Do the consultants show me that they are competent? Do they model appropriate consultative behavior during the interview session, such as asking the right kinds of questions, showing an understanding of organizational issues, demonstrating an awareness of what happens in organizations, and evidencing effective problem solving skills? In short, do they spend their time telling me how good they are or showing me how good they are?

---How do the consultants handle conflict? Is there any evidence of defensiveness? Do they address their concerns in constructive and helpful ways?

---Do they intend to engage in diagnostic activities before they prescribe treatment? Do they focus on the problems facing my organization? Am
I convinced that they will understand the problems and unique characteristics of the organization before they lay out a plan for what they are going to do? How do they intend to collect their data?

---To what extent will I participate in the action planning and problem solving process?

---Do the consultants insist on building resources within the organization to insure a successful consulting project?

---Do the consultants raise the issue of consultant dependency? If so, how do they plan to handle this issue?

---Are the consultants aware of and willing to admit their own limitations?

---Are the consultant’s interpersonal skills consistent with the needs of my organization?

---What are the consultant’s attitudes toward financial matters? How open are they in discussing financial matters?

Certainly this list of questions is not all-inclusive. Many others could, and should, be asked by the client as the selection process continues. Further, some of these questions may be more appropriate for a given situation than others. Clearly, selecting the right consultant can contribute significantly to a successful project. What is certain is that the clients should thoroughly do their homework before retaining any consultant. A crucial part of that homework is knowing what things to look for in the selection process. As I see it, one of our responsibilities is to help them gain the skills to successfully accomplish that task.

Sincerely,

R. Wayne Boss
University of Colorado

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Dear Colleagues:

Consultation? What is it? What is its essence or purpose? When I received an invitation to write about the essence of consultation for the Communique, I felt like Theaetetus being questioned by Socrates in order to determine the essence of knowledge. For over 25 years I have consulted to business, governments, communities, non-profit organizations and even several universities, but I had never been asked the question, "What is the essence of consultation?" As a philosophy student, I had spent many hours discussing the essence of such entities as chairs and tables and of such axiological concepts as beauty, justice, and the good life...But consulting?

Staring at my computer screen, I tried to discern what was being asked, but all I could visualize was a blue field. I had never been involved in a consultation project as clear as my blank screen. In fact, I can frankly say that all my consultations began in chaos--someone came to me in search of help. Seldom have they had any idea what kind of help they were looking for. In fact, my first task has nearly always been to find out why they came to me and how they thought I might be of help. Why me?

Clients come in all shapes, sizes and personalities and speak various languages. Often I do not even know the language they speak. Some speak chemistry and others speak engineering, corrections, medicine, and psychology, but they all believe I have some knowledge, experience or technique which will make them better or help them in some way. On their first visit I do little more than ask why they have come to me and what it is they want me to do for them. Nearly always they say that they have heard that I have been of help to some person or organization or they have read something I have written or heard me
speak at some gathering or another.

I listen and they tell me why they have come in search of help. Like Carl Rogers or Obi-wan Kenobi, I nod my head and listen. In the old days, I smoked my pipe, but now I simply hold my head in my hand like Rodan's *The Thinker*. The key is to be still and quiet. They come and they tell. They always do if I just keep my mouth shut. This is very difficult for me because I am an incurable extrovert, but over again and again I have discovered they will tell me everything I need to know to help them if I keep quiet—if I keep my ego out of their problem and my thoughts to myself until I can discern the cause of their condition.

One of my more non-diplomatic colleagues says I am a professional friend. But I have learned from experience that the keys to the cure are found in that very first meeting, and if I can listen not to the words, but to the tone of what is being said, I can help the clients find answers to their perplexities. No one pays my fees unless they are in pain and it is my first task to understand that pain—to listen to their complaints about profits and losses, as well as about poor quality, executive egos, and departmental turf wars. Like an old priest, nothing surprises me any more. Indeed, I believe I have heard it all—about the executive addicted to cocaine or the horses, the abusive boss, the sexual scandal, the political infighting.

People and organizations pay my fees not because of my knowledge about management, strategic planning, self-directed work teams, or conflict resolution. They pay my fees because they have confidence in me. Because I do not judge or ask too many questions. I do not pull out my managerial audits or SPS charts. I have nothing to sell. In my early days as a consultant, I had lots of techniques and procedures to sell, but what my clients paid for was me. It wasn't the organizational audit, the new organizational plan or promises of improved performance. Sure the formal contracts addressed such issues as learning objectives, deliverables, time tables, etc., but these were nothing more than ritualistic ways of justifying their decision to hire me. They needed to feel they were in control and they used the contract as their security blanket. I learned early never to argue over the contract, because its contents were never the issue and fees seldom mattered.

What was important was that I cared and made myself available when they called. What I did was listen and when they seemed stuck I would offer a story about how some company dealt with a similar problem or suggested alternatives. Sometimes they would see answers to their own problems in my stories. Sometimes after talking for several hours they would thank me and leave. During these sessions, research chemists have developed new hypotheses and were then able to go about their research, executives have realized they have had to move their companies in new directions, discovered their own addictions, hired accountants, reorganized their operations, etc.

Sometimes I help them look at the data or issues they have been fighting using a new theory or sometimes even an old one they hadn't used in a long time. Once I have heard them out, I have to help them see. At this point, I primarily rely on the Socratic dialectic, and like Socrates, I have always had a theory in mind when asking the questions. Instead of Euclid's Geometry or the Pythagorean Theorem I have as my model such things as general systems theory, behavioral theory, goal theory or some other theory. In my consulting practice I use hundreds of management, organizational,
and psychological theories. Every consultant has his/her favorite theories. It is my belief that the more theories in the consultant's arsenal the better. I am always leery of single theory consultants. Actually a lot of my business comes from problems created by Johnny One Note consultants pushing their snake oil. I hate to say it, but there are a lot of folks out there wanting to buy a quick fix and quite often they get in a fix.

The essence of consulting is listening, caring, and asking questions based on useful theory. In other words helping clients bring order to their chaos or understand and appreciate their chaos. Each consultation has its own reality and yet existentially each and every consultation has its own essence. As universal as the process may be no two consultations are exactly the same. Again and again I am amazed at what my clients learn and I am even more amazed that I always have clients. To paraphrase from an eastern philosopher, "When the client is ready the consultant will appear."

Sincerely,

Terry R. Armstrong
University of West Florida

Dear Colleagues:

Some thoughts about consultancy:

Let's assume that the Academy of Management recognizes consulting--as related to, but distinct from, research and teaching. Let's also assume that the Academy of Management is not just concerned with studying how (other) consultants do consulting, but (implicitly or explicitly) sanctions its own members to do consulting. Last, let's assume that some consensus exists on what is competent, professional, and ethical consulting.

Now: Where and how does one learn to be an effective consultant? Given that the Academy of Management is a professional association of Ph.D. holders (primarily), are current business schools teaching Ph.D. students to do effective consulting? Do many or most business schools offer Ph.D. courses on consulting? Can students major or minor in consulting? Would the schools of business accept applicants into their Ph.D. programs who indicate that consulting (not research) is their primary objective for obtaining the Ph.D. degree?

What internships are required (and provided) that enable Ph.D. students to acquire the skills to be effective consultants (and not just espouse theories of consulting)? What examination process will assess these consulting skills? Are business school faculty (who are primarily focused on research and teaching) equipped to judge others' skills in consulting? Should Ph.D. consultants be licensed similar to clinical psychologists and psychiatrists?

My questions are intended to suggest that schools of business may be designed--intentionally--not to support effective consulting. Those who seek or hold Ph.D. degrees must therefore acquire consulting skills on their own--in their own particular way. The fact is that almost anyone can become a consultant with or without a college education. Consultancy is also a popular route for unemployed managers (displacing by delayering, downsizing, restructuring, and so forth). That a Ph.D. degree in business or management might communicate to many others that the holder has the knowledge--and skills--for effective consulting is potentially dangerous to client organizations and the Academy of Management.

Sincerely,

Ralph H. Kilmann
University of Pittsburgh

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Dear Colleagues:

Here are my thoughts stimulated by the invitation to write to you about consultancy--its essence, the kinds of changes we need to face, the helping relationship, and the consulting enterprise.

The essence of consulting is helping clients to accomplish something they could not otherwise do, perhaps due to their lack of expertise, certain resources, or specific skills. With respect to what is currently underappreciated, it remains process consultation. Why? First, it looks easy. What possible deep expertise could be required? Second, and related to the first reason, is the fact that everyone these days does it. They are called facilitators. And with a half day of training, anyone can do it. What I am pointing out, of course, is the anomaly of process consultation. Done expertly, the client barely knows (if at all) that competent help is being provided.

Times have clearly changed since I began to consult about change. In my view, there have been at least five major changes that have and are impacting both organizations and consultancy: from growth to decline to consolidation, from moderate to warp speed, from complexity to even greater complexity, from confusion about consultant’s jargon to a sophistication about popular concepts, from relatively little concern for ethics to a much greater preoccupation with ethics (I spell these out in my Winter 1993 article in Consulting Psychology.)

The helping relationship is the core of consulting, but it comes in two fairly different forms. One is the one-on-one, usually face-to-face (or one-to-small group) and requires especially the skills of listening, empathy, coaching, diagnosis and, at times, counseling. This form of consulting focuses more on process and is the "softer" side of our work. The other form requires a different set of skills and involves conducting a project for the client--a study, a particular intervention such as a workshop or training program--and requires such skills as research, writing, oral presentation, survey methodology, etc.; that is, skills that are more associated with content and the "harder" side of our work. With respect to the two forms, I believe the "softer" is more difficult.

Instead of addressing the consultant practitioner/academic interface per se, the point I want to make is that whether one is a full-time practitioner or an academic who does consulting as well, the business of consulting work these days is far more competitive than ever before. As Jimmy Durante used to say, "Everybody wants in on the act?" This exponential increase in competition has occurred only within the last five years or so. Why? Consulting work continues to look attractive if not glamorous and powerful to many young people. And with the growth of the industry, more firms are actively recruiting. Another reason is the fact that company downsizings have put many people into the marketplace, some who are realizing a dream they may have had to be on their own, albeit earlier than planned, and others who cannot find another corporate position right away and are relying on consulting work for an income. Whatever the reasons, the facts are that the consulting industry is bigger than ever before and the market is flooded with consultants and consultants-to-be.

I think that today organization consulting and OD leaves us in two places:

First, we clearly have a set of standard tools that effectively address small-to-medium size problems in organizations today. A client says, "I am really having a tough time with my subordinates. I think I'll call
our OD consultant for some team building help." Another may say, "We are having difficulty with our customer service. We may be organized inappropriately. I think I'll call our I/O psychologist for some help." We have standard ways of facilitating teamwork and for looking at people's work responsibilities to see how they fit or do not fit together with other people's work responsibilities. Moreover, we can train people in these consulting skills. We know how to do it.

The second place is quite different. We consulting psychologists and OD practitioners are beginning to face in another direction, not a direction that is incompatible with the other place where we have landed today, noted above, but different. We are on the threshold of a paradigm for the effective management of large-scale organization change. Large-scale system change has been written about before (e.g., Beckhard and Harris, 1987), but now we are beginning to understand much more clearly what the primary levers are for initiating and implementing organization change, levers such as culture, values, key leadership acts (providing a vision and clear sense of direction), the reward system, and management/executive practices. Think about what I am trying to say this way: Traveling in a car you have no doubt experienced fog on the road. The experience can produce considerable anxiety. My most memorable experience in fog has been on the water in my boat. Even with a good working compass, the experience can be a bit frightening, not being sure of just where you are regardless of compass reading, and what is about to emerge in front of you as you proceed ever so cautiously through the water. Anxiety changes to elation when the fog begins to lift and you can then see more clearly your surroundings and how to proceed: with assurance about what you are doing and what, as we say in the boating world, your correct heading is or should be now.

These are exciting times in organization change consultation because greater clarity about the complexities and paradoxes regarding organization change and how to deal with them is gradually beginning to emerge. The fog is now lifting.

Sincerely,

W. Warren Burke
Columbia University

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Dear Colleagues:

The invitation for comments on the interface between academic and practitioner consultants brought back my memories. I remember 1976, when having just published a two-volume set (A Theory of Group Structures) on my laboratory research, I founded a little management consulting company to test the theory and to apply it to designing organizations. To this day, I vividly recall the underwhelming enthusiasm by business persons for my theories. I remember the struggles to adapt myself to this new arena. I became painfully aware that I was an academic and not a practitioner consultant and that, if I were to avoid bankruptcy, I had better learn fast. In my heart I did not comprehend the consulting business despite having been a professor of business for 12 years. My attitude was that because my theories had passed strict research tests with flying colors, they were appropriate for businesses. I also believed that if I were to find something that worked in the real world, I ought to be able to see if it worked in the theoretical world. In short, I was a hot house lily suddenly lying exposed on a cold, windy plain populated by herbivores.

Somehow, with a lot of luck and a huge amount of effort, I managed to survive. Twice I almost had to declare.
bankruptcy. I have been sued and have had to terminate several ex-friends. Eventually, in 1981 I became the first full-time professor to become a Certified Management Consultant and have remained one ever since. Thus, I have been both an academic who consulted and a practitioner consultant. Professionally, I live on the interface between these two different worlds. Perhaps the following observations may help others avoid some of the pain and humiliations of my early career as a practitioner consultant.

The first observation is that many practitioners are hostile to academic consultants. The practitioners have to pay their own overhead, taxes, and benefits. Most have no safety net. They are a little jealous. Many academic consultants use their base in the university to cover these costs and thus are viewed as unfair competitors.

The second observation is the issue of ethics. Members of the Institute of Management Consultants are bound by a code of professional conduct. We see many academic consultants who violate this code. The code of conduct of a professional is not the same as an academic. For one thing, the root idea of the professional code is to place the needs of the client ahead of one's own. This includes publishing research. Your research idea might be your client's trade secret. Clients are not guinea pigs. For another, how many academic consultants pay for their own software, computers, and publications? I see frequent violation of intellectual property rights at the university, which is, as we all know (or should know), unethical.

The third observation is that clients are not students. They don't have to listen to us, take our exams, and endure our musings. In fact, the shoe is on the other foot. We must be willing to learn from them, pass their tests, and endure their musings. When the client actually implements our recommendations, there is risk to his or her career, the company, and the well-being of those who trust them. In comparison, the academic consultant risks little. The academic consultant must learn to exult in the success of his or her client and not in personal validation.

The fourth observation is the inadequacy of most published research for actually solving real problems. Our research strategy of reductionism and hypothesis testing often blinds us to the complex, compacted connectedness of most management problems. I find that client problems almost never fit neatly into our academic specialties.

The fifth observation is that, as I see the trend, clients want more than advice. They want implemented solutions. That means thinking hard about the context and content of the specific application and learning to think about the political realities and logistics of implementation. I don't think most academics are prepared for this reality. I know that I was not. Most lack the resources, time, patience, and understanding for doing the tedious work of obtaining implementation.

The sixth observation is that practitioner consultants truly depend upon the conceptual infrastructure built up over time by the collective research of academics. If practitioners are good, they are busy and if they are busy, there is little time for reflection and intellectual play. The practitioner community, whether or not it likes to admit it, is deeply dependent on the academic community for ideas, methods, and theories.

The seventh observation is that academics need the practitioner consultants to do the "downfield blocking" with the clients, to interpret our theories into workable
interventions, to develop problems for us to solve, and to train academics to become professionals. The practitioner consultants are often ahead of our textbooks and journals.

The eighth observation is that academia and management consulting are very different cultures. The academic consultant must be emotionally prepared for a culture shock. The academic with tenure enjoys job security, autonomy, freedom, and is generally accorded respect. The practitioner consultant is often like the fiddler on the roof. There is little security, work with severe constraints on his freedom to do as he pleases, and is often treated with a marked lack of respect and suspicion. The "if you are so smart, why are you not rich" issue dogs the relationship with many clients. To the particular consultant, this work is his or her profession and not just a way of picking up extra money. The work is demanding, difficult and emotionally exhausting. Few survive more than five years. The survivors are lucky, skilled, tenacious, and genuinely interested in helping. The ego trippers fail.

Many of my academic colleagues who call themselves consultants are really just teachers with a different set of students. They come into an organization to offer ideas and then leave. Their impact reminds me of a fist plunged into a bucket of water and then withdrawn. The hand gets wet, there is a little less water in the bucket, and the contents of the bucket do not change. The better ones learn, invent, and improve.

The relationship between academic and practitioner consultants is unique for each interface. The ones that last evolve into a mutually mentoring relationship in which each side offers complementary and supplementary expertise and resources. The law of comparative economic advantage governs the interface. Both sides learn to accept and respect the contributions of the other for the sake of the client and professional growth. Adjustments occur in the relationship. The shifting comparative advantage of each, factored into the goal of serving the client, becomes the operating criteria for building a lasting, mutually mentoring relationship based on mutual respect, trust, and profit.

I hope these observations are useful to the evolution of a working interface between academic and practitioner consultants.

Sincerely,

Kenneth D. Mackenzie
University of Kansas

Dear Colleagues:

The invitation requesting views about consultation jangled my alert button a while back, and a recent fly-fishing adventure on the Pere Marquette for salmon and steelhead provided the stimulus for musings on the theme: "Balance as a Useful Metaphor for Consultation, and Fly-Fishing, Too."

I had long ago and publicly decided that consultation in my ideal was aggressively value-loaded. When my Mom asked what I did, consequently, my answer once was ready: "I try to increase the opportunities for responsible freedom for those in organizations--for others, and also for myself."

No doubt, that sounded a bit strange to Mom--indeed, perhaps bizarre. Her developmental arena had been pervasively authoritarian, and people in it were inclined to take more than their share, if they could get away with it. And if that required force or violence, so what else was news?

However, my one-liner once had about the right tone and substance. It met my normative impulses;
suggested contention with formidable targets, who could both resist as well as reject with great force; and the associated consultant style features a certain--ah--aggressive jauntiness.

I can even date and locate the heyday of this self-image--August 9, 1980 in Atlanta, at the Annual Meeting of the Academy of Management. Then, Jerry Harvey and I debated the proposition: Is the OD Intervenor Nebbish or Superman? Easy enough, in cases, if one were willing to risk.

Saying "No!" was one major way, e.g., that probably won't work; I can't accept the normative or ethical consequences of that; I don't do team-building that has the smell of a hit-squad already primed to discipline a member; I don't do a survey--at least 3 or 4 are necessary to establish a trend; and so on.

Jerry took the case for the nebbish; and yours truly was the other guy. A tape documents the seriousness-laced-with-fun. You can look it up, as the wily Casey Stengl used to say.

You can guess the scenario. I began my presentation with a long pause--I then removed my glasses, slowly started to undo my tie, and the familiar red S was soon revealed on my T-shirt. The audience was tickled at each stage, and then burst into boisterous applause as I opened my briefcase to extract a cute little red cape, stitched only that morning by my bemused wife, Peg. (No, we never got down to tights and full-length leggings. There are some limits, after all.)

The presentations proceeded in a high-energy context. For example, how could the intervenor be Superman or Superwoman? On occasions, fortunately not numerous, I got my come-uppance more quickly.

In more recent days, and especially during work on an autobiography, I have begun to shift my sense of self as consultant. "Balance" became more my orientation to interpreting the past, as well as for guiding future actions, than what got portrayed--even caricatured--that 1980 afternoon in Atlanta.

In fact, "balance" has been critical all along for me as consultant, but I did not sufficiently appreciate that reality. Consider a single elemental--my long-standing belief that the consultant ought to be a competent, caring, and comfortable "marginal" person in the sociologist's sense of that term--credible to client systems, while also being guided by a referent culture of traditions, guidelines, working theory, and operating values. That's clearly balance, with a capital B.

But reflection shows that the old sense-of-self often dominated. For example, this was the case when a group of us argued in the late 1970s, just as doubts among ODers had burgeoned, that a large-batch survey revealed high success rates
of OD applications—and nearly as much so in the public sector as in business. Some ODers doubted the results, and a few even clearly implied that we might only be selective perceivers.

Defensiveness dominated, not balance. The moderate part of the defense emphasized that our success rates fell smack in the ballpark of virtually all earlier estimates. The differences: we dealt with 574 OD applications rather than one or a few; we had enough cases to compare public and business applications; etc. However, the basic reaction was high-octane defensiveness. At a minimum, ODers whose personal success rates were low might well reconsider their theoretical and conceptual bases for intervening. Alternatively, low estimators might consider a different line of consultation, or none at all!

Now, those data could not have been suppressed, but the way they were reported and sometimes explained/defended no doubt created dissonance in their interpretation. If nothing else, our enthusiasm about sharing the good news could have been balanced by a stronger sense of the depressed condition into which many ODers had then settled. Nowadays, much of the ebullience has returned, and I wonder whether we paradoxically delayed that recovery by flying so determinedly in the face of the then-consensus.

The usefulness of "balance" as a metaphor got multiple reinforcement a few weeks ago on a sandbar of a Michigan river. To sample only the highlights of anglers viewed as marginal persons in multiple environments:

---To balance the fish/person encounter, we used very light tackle (e.g., lures the length of a thumbnail or so) for large fish that knew how to gain leverage from a wild river.

---Several "balances" were established, and then quickly reformatted, as I struggled with a wild hen-fish—about 27 pounds, as it turned out—over the better part of a mile of river. Through riffle and calm water I went—at times floundering. When the water got too deep, which it did more than once, I had to scramble up the river bank—stumbling and half-running after "my fish."

---I lost one of those "balances" on a high bank, big time, and fell about 10 feet into 4 feet of river. Hence, after recovering enough to net the fish, the need to establish a new "balance" under suddenly-different conditions—standing on a sandbar, stripping off wet clothing to avoid hypothermia. The sun was shining, fortunately, and that day was relatively balmy—45° F.

---The "balance" of nature also was free to work itself out when the hen-fish was released—after restoring her coping capacities. None the worse for wear, she zipped off to seek a spawning area, or "redd."

So, here's to you. Tight lines in your future; and the best of balances, in streams and in all other venues.

Sincerely,

Robert T. Golembiewski
University of Georgia

Notes:


Dear Colleagues:

I have a vision of consulting that I would like to suggest is appropriate for science and practice. My vision couples science and practice much more tightly than I believe is usually the case. That is why I call it scholarly consulting. Scholarly consulting bridges universities and the world of practice. It is like the research activities that occur in university medical schools that combine the development of sound medical practice with the production of rigorous knowledge about clinical medicine.

The first characteristic of scholarly consulting research is to produce knowledge that is actionable and, at the same time, its use in everyday life is an opportunity for a valid non-trivial test of a basic theory in social science. In my view, Kurt Lewin's later research was an outstanding example. He developed the concept of quasi-stationary equilibria and tested it in the domain of prejudice. He tested features of the concept of valence by developing practical advice during World War II, of how parents could get their children to eat more spinach and drink more orange juice. He developed the concept of gatekeeper and tested it in leadership settings as well as those designed to sell war bonds.

In order for knowledge to be actionable in everyday life, it must exhibit a minimal gap between the knowledge as it is produced by scientists and as it is to be used by the practitioners. The most important requirement, in my judgment, to meet this test is sound theory and secondarily sound empirical research. There exists much first-rate empirical research (as defined by today's standards) that is not actionable. I am aware of no examples where theory, that is based on the properties of actionable knowledge (as illustrated by Lewin, for example, in the gatekeeper concept) that has not found to be actionable whether the empirical research around it is first-rate or of a lower technical quality.

Scholarly consultants would, I believe, find it enlightening to study the structure of actionable theory. Recently, I have suggested that if they did so, they will find that it combines features of positivistic and humanistic perspectives. They will find that too much of the humanistic view can be used as a defense; a bypass of the problem of producing knowledge that is testable; disconfirmable, in everyday life. Without such tests how will we ever know that we are not unrealizingly kidding ourselves and the public? I believe that in the name of being more humanistic we are distanced ourselves even more from what it means to show a deep respect for human nature (Argyris, 1993).

A second characteristic of actionable knowledge is that it can be used to understand the many and the individual cases. The concept of gatekeeper can be used to understand the dynamics of authoritarian and democratic leadership in general and over time. It can also be used to understand the dynamics of one leader and the subordinates in one instance over time.

Scholarly consulting questions the often-made distinction between "conclusion-oriented research" (basic) and "decision-oriented research" (applied) or, "discipline research" and "applied research." Those who practice scholarly consulting
will hesitate to take on a research that is intended to illuminate a decision or practical problem without also testing some social science theory. This is not to say that individuals should not conduct such research. It is to say that it does not meet the criteria of scholarly consulting (Argyris, 1993).

Everyday life is understood and managed through the use of the concept of causality. If I do such and such, I expect the following to happen. If the organization does such and such, the following will happen.

Actionable knowledge requires the use of a concept of causality that meets scientific standards and, at the same time, is usable by practitioners in everyday life.

If knowledge is to be actionable, the causality used by the researchers and the causality used by human beings in everyday life should be the same, or the gap between the two should be trivial. The larger the gap, the less the seamlessness between knowledge used to design action and the knowledge used to implement the actions, the less actionable is the knowledge.

Permit me an admittedly somewhat simplified figure.

Let the horizontal line represent time. Let us assume that human beings (or larger social entities) spend some time in diagnosis, understanding, discovering. They then spend some time in inventing solutions to whatever problems they have discovered. Let all this activity be relegated to the continuum on the left hand of the vertical line.

| ____________ | ____________ |
| time |

Let all the activity to the right hand side of the line represent action. Cognitive theorists maintain that the mind is necessary in both areas.

Now, for a puzzle. The dominant concept of causality in our field is based on variance. It stems from a long history of science probably beginning with Mills’ Methods of Difference. Using such a concept we can produce tendencies, trends, in all sorts of rigorous modes. The puzzle is that, when action is actually occurring, the human mind does not (and cannot?) produce a tendency. It always produces an instance of something, not a tendency.

If this is true, what is the transportability of the causal concept that dominates the left hand side of the time dimension to the right hand side. How do we make it more transportable? What changes in the concept of causality are likely if the knowledge is to be transportable with minimal loss of the rigor of the claim and the way it was tested?

Some practical payoffs of actionable knowledge:

1. Actionable knowledge is user-friendly, educatable, and implementable.

2. Actionable knowledge increases the freedom and the power of the user to test the validity of scientific knowledge. It educates the user to produce tough and searching inquiries about the knowledge produced by social scientists.

3. Actionable knowledge helps individuals to see unrecognized gaps and inconsistencies. In a recent paper, I have tried to show several inconsistencies and gaps in my own research over the past several decades. The inconsistencies and gaps were surfaced as I attempted to conduct actionable research in areas in which I had not previously studied. In the same paper, I try to show that scholars in the Behavioral Theory of the Firm exhibit gaps and inconsistencies that they have not, so far, recognized because they too have not
attempted to produce actionable knowledge that is typical in scholarly consulting (Argyris, in press).

4. Actionable knowledge will act as a driver for the scholars and practitioners to cross academic disciplines.

5. Actionable knowledge will help practitioners see, early in the game, superficial features of their programs. For example, in my view, much of leadership education designedly bypasses the problems of dealing with difficult and embarrassing organizational problems. It tends to cover up the bypass by asserting that such programs will open up Pandora's box and therefore are unrealistic.

A different perspective that I suggest is that if the critics are correct that such knowledge is likely to open up Pandora's box then it is unethical for scholarly consultants to collude with these defenses, especially in the name of being realistic.

6. Actionable knowledge will require a re-examination of the soft versus hard distinction. If soft were to be defined as knowledge that has low seamlessness that is not transportable into the world of action then much empirical quantitative research is soft (Argyris, 1980). Hard knowledge will be knowledge whose causal claims are framed in a way that they are disconfirmable, and one negative instance is an act of discrimination.

Sincerely,

Chris Argyris
Harvard University

Notes:


Dear Colleagues:

I do appreciate your invitation to share with Academy colleagues some matters that I believe are central to consulting. What follows is based on my "learnings from experience" as both an academic and a practitioner for now over 45 years.

Effective consulting is fed by two complex and highly interrelated wellsprings: (1) the individual's integrated knowledge/wisdom relevant to his/her consulting task, e.g., values, theories, principles, research findings, available processes (including techniques and methods) and (2) the individual's internalized knowledge of self (centeredness, emotional maturity). Typically, most attention of academics and practitioners is given to elements in the first wellspring--and, certainly, these are of great importance to one's effectiveness. However, much less attention is given to the second wellspring (in spite of its at least equal importance), and it is on this part of the equation I want to focus.

In consulting, one's being is the processor and carrier of relevant knowledge/wisdom and the implementer of that knowledge/wisdom in given client relationships and situations. Thus, one's awareness of self--of one's being--in the consultant-client relationship is central to one's effectiveness.

A consultant gets into difficulty when she/he is not reasonably whole--when "the left hand does not know what the right hand is doing." To the extent that the individual is beset by unknown and/or known but unworked-on personal issues, those issues can often seriously inhibit or distort one's perceptions and actions. For example, I may feel anxious in the presence of my client (in reality, a quite accepting person), seeing her as a threatening
figure (perhaps reminding me of my controlling, sometimes abusive mother). And with another, brilliant client, I may avoid confronting him on a key issue (although he could be helped by honesty from me) because of deep, gnawing feelings of self-doubt within me that inhibit my action.

In instances such as these, what I perceive and how I act are determined not by the reality of what is "out there," but rather by what is more or less unconsciously within me from my hidden-from-self past. I see what isn't there, and I act in a way inappropriate to what I face. I see and do things for the wrong reasons (thinking they are right) and do not see and do things for the right reasons because my own (unknown to me) deeper needs get in my way. I become, as a consultant and as a person, my own worst enemy.

I have long counseled graduate students interested in consulting and interns moving toward O.D. work on the importance (in my view) of committing one's self to a lifetime of personal growth and development. I have often said that we have primarily only ourselves to use in our consulting work. We need, to the extent possible, constantly to get to know ourselves better in depth. In my experience, so many consultants give major attention to facilitating change in other individuals and in larger systems. In fact, we often call ourselves "change agents." When I wrote an article in the 1950s entitled "Dealing With Ourselves Before Dealing with Others," I meant it then-and I mean it now. If we expect "those others" to grow and change, we should be expected and willing to commit ourselves to the same process.

Sincerely,

Bob Tannenbaum
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