

RITUAL PIGS AND TRAVEL AGENTS

CONSULTANTS IN PERSPECTIVE

I recently carried out an attitude survey in my parent Division. Amongst a host of snippets of information valuable for pleasure and profit I discovered that two thirds of respondents believed that an internal consultant could be helpful in getting a project team up and running. This was moderately good news, since I'm hoping to be gainfully employed in this activity for a bit longer, but I wondered how well understood the consultant's role was amongst the cognoscenti represented by the readership of Outlook.

The first thing to recognise is that there are many kinds of consultancy. One of the difficulties that can arise between consultants and their clients is that the client may never have experienced many of the kinds of consultation possible and may not be aware of how the relationship could develop. This makes it difficult to "contract" at the outset without tying the relationship down much more than is necessary, or useful. There are some colourful names to describe the various kinds of consultancy "intervention" (a piece of jargon which can be misunderstood) - among them are The Salesman (I've got a solution, let me bend your problem to fit it), The Travel Agent (You've decided where you want to go, I'll help you plan your route), The Doctor-Patient (Tell me what's bothering you and I'll help you identify the cause and prescribe some treatment) The Purchase Of Expertise (You know what you want done and need an expert to do it) and of course The Ritual Pig (We're going to do something nasty and it would be handy to pin the blame for it on an outsider who can then be sacrificed). I would add to these The Spare Body (an extra hand on the deck) and The Community Policeman (Here to see that the rules are being obeyed).

I've left out of the list the one I regard as the most useful, Process Consultation, which uses a trained observer to give feedback to members

of a group about the way they are interacting with each other and with the task. Many readers will have experienced a very diluted form of this, perhaps with mixed feelings, during Leading Through Teamwork events but its potential to help a project team is immense. Unfortunately the participants may have to overcome an aversion to "touchy-feely" stuff before they can benefit. All too often The Task stands between the team and the desire to understand their own processes, and the consultant can't always make headway.

One criterion of successful consultancy is that the consultant should be from outside the immediate authority-group in which he or she is working. This independence is itself a valuable contribution to any situation and freedom from the constraints of group membership is a basic requirement for success. In a large organisation it's quite possible to be an employee of the same company and yet be independent of the client-group. More about this later. The other fundamental is that the consultant is not the manager and is not responsible for doing the task itself but is helping someone who is. He or she has no direct power to make changes and has to work through persuasion, suggestion and personality. To be effective it's "not enough to do a job well. You must be able to understand why and pass on that learning to others" (Charles Margerison).

Writers over the last twenty five years broadly agree that data gathering and analysis is the raw material of consultancy. It's not always clear what will turn out to be useful information, although consultants do develop a knack of scanning what's going on and homing in on things that later turn out to be key to understanding. It isn't always realised, though, that simply by observing an organisation you begin to change it in subtle (or not so subtle) ways. How the consultant goes about gathering information can have a profound effect on the outcome of the work. A "high anxiety point in any

consulting project... is when you have finished asking the questions, have all the information you are going to get, and now have to make sense out of it" (Peter Block). Most consultants have a range of diagnostic tools which will enable them to classify and simplify the information they have collected and present it to the client in useful and helpful ways. If you are a client, don't be surprised if the consultant wants to explain how he or she arrived at any conclusions; too many consultants' reports end up gathering dust on clients' shelves because the client wasn't sufficiently involved in the recommendations to feel a sense of ownership of their implementation.

Internal consultants have a few extra hurdles to leap compared with outside firms. For a start, there's the "prophet without honour in his own land" syndrome which leads managers to pay out vast sums to external consultants for work which could have been performed at least as well by company employees. Secondly there are the barriers of comparative grade in the hierarchy. This makes it hard for managers to accept advice from anyone junior in status to themselves and also inhibits internal consultants from being quite as open and honest as they should be. Ideally consultants should be rank-free for all professional purposes, but incurring the wrath of a powerful figure in the organisation remains a potentially career-limiting error and is best avoided if possible.

Similar considerations restrict one essential condition of professional consultancy; the right to decline an assignment. Where the subject matter is outside the consultant's field, or demands are made which the consultant feels are unethical or inappropriate, or the personalities simply don't "click", it's essential that the consultant should be able to decline or withdraw from the project. Again, this is sometimes difficult to do in practice without repercussions.

Research⁽¹⁾ carried out early last year amongst a representative sample of

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senior BT managers produced some useful information about their attitudes to internal consultancy. Most of them believed it was "a good thing" and insufficiently encouraged by the company, but the idea that consultants might help to define the problem as well as work on its solution was less popular, although consultants' delving below the surface to root out underlying problems did seem to be favoured. This included looking at "soft" issues of feelings, attitudes and processes. A fairly equal relationship, with "contracts" being genuinely negotiated, was supported, as was the right to decline mentioned above.

Although managers wanted to be involved in the analysis of information and in formulating any recommendations, they also wanted to have clear practical proposals put before them. The support of consultants in implementing decisions was seen as very desirable. One healthy finding of the research was that managers believed they should learn from consultancy assignments so that they would be able to do the job without outside help next time.

Despite the difficulties I wouldn't claim that a consultant's lot is not a happy one; it has its compensations as well as its frustrations.

Rod Gray
P&SM Programme Office
071 356 8773

Reference:⁽¹⁾ **Intervention Models
For Internal Consultants** R J Gray
Anglia University 1993