

The "Impossibility" of Being an Internal Consultant

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For some time now, I have been puzzled over the phenomenon that line managers seem to understand and accept their 'consultancy' role far more readily than the in-house specialists whose jobs have a more clearly defined consulting aspect.

. This phenomenon became clearly evident during a working conference for line managers, personnel managers and organisational development specialists entitled "Organizational Consultancy: A Tavistock Open System Approach." * Here again we found that many internal consultants found it difficult to understand what we were saying and those who did fought hard to 'prove' us wrong. The line managers seemed open to examining the concepts that emerged during the conference.

I finally got a clue as to what might have been happening when one of the O. D. specialists – during an application group- said he was very depressed. He added, "If I accept what the Staff have been implying, I'll have to start all over again".

What we had been. 'implying' was, in brief, this: The 'Consultant' (specialist or line manager) always tries to be aware of the 'inside' and the 'outside' - of what belongs to the system and what ,belongs outside it. He makes himself available for the projections of others, has an ability to hold the projections, sorts them out as far as possible, and reflects on what might be happening through hypotheses. He is aware that 'facts' might be projections, and 'feelings' might be introjections. He tries to struggle against accepting social fiction as truth and tries to puzzle out the purposes that organisation myths might be serving. He understands that organisational issues might be the result of the psychic relatedness between departments, with each department holding, on behalf of all the others, some of the total organisation's unconscious processes. The consultant never 'knows' - he is constantly on journey and occasional 'truths' (insights) do get discovered * *.

*The Working Conference was jointly offered by the Indian Institute of Management Calcutta and the British Council Division at Patna, India: 22-26 Nov., 1982.

** These thoughts were shared with the members mainly during three seminars that formed part of the Working Conference referred. to earlier: (1) Gouranga P. Chattopadhyay: 'Systems and the Unconscious'; (ii) W. Gordon Lawrence: 'Making Interpretations and . (iii).Zahid H. Gangjee: 'Understanding Socio-Technical Systems'.

Being an internal consultant myself I could empathize with the reluctance of the internal consultant members to accept - or even understand - the definition of the consultant role that we were offering. The message from within the organisation is 'be like us' - sane, 'rational' managers; do the 'acceptable' things; accept the 'truths' of economics, markets, etc. What we were offering seemed to be a 'dangerous' invitation into chaos.

Personal Unconscious Defences Against Accepting the Consultancy Role

Since that working conference, I have made it a point to talk with other in-house consultants. The scene that emerges is not too inviting.

Some internal consultants have not been able to manage the 'container' aspect of the role. Instead of taking in the projections and reflecting on them, they have introjected and somatized them into ulcers and piles. Others have defended themselves by developing hypertension of the eyes and other eye problems - perhaps as a defence against 'seeing' what is really happening around them. Some have become 'sole owners' of the organisation's unconscious processes and 'acted' them out within their own teams. Other 'sole owners' have taken the stand of "it's difficult for you managers (mere mortals) to know what is *really* happening so let me tell you" - the omnipotent stance. I have seen internal consultants 'dump their loads' on their client-managers and ask *them* to hold on to *it* - *instead*. I myself have personally experienced many of the above processes.

Another phenomenon seems to occur frequently. The internal consultant deskills himself. He 'forgets' his experiences and the skills of interpretation that flow from them. He stops being in touch with other consultants in the profession who might 'remind' him of his skills.

Politics of Relatedness

I have so far been trying to understand the reluctance of internal consultants to really look at their consultancy role by focussing on their individual situations. I would now like to look at how they perceive their contexts and use their interpretation of it to remain in their old stances.

The political aspect of organisations has been as old as Machiavelli (Bull: 19). This treatise on statecraft was written sometime in the late 15th or early 16th century. Recently however, there has been renewed interest in this phenomenon. Gordon Lawrence had the focus of the Leicester Conferences (Working Conferences of the GRT, Tavistock Institute) in September 1978 through 1981 on "Individual and Organization: The Politics of Relatedness". Miller (1979) describes what he means by the term 'political'. "In the way I use the terms in this paper, relations between two systems are political where one system is consciously or unconsciously attempting, or is perceived as attempting, to impose its goals and values on another". The thrust is to try and understand what is happening consciously or unconsciously in the organisation in order to move on in the consultancy role.

But internal consultants seem to have interpreted the political aspect of organisations in their own way. The move seems to be to take the role of a politician and attempt to manipulate the organisation into doing what is 'good' for it. The consultant may become an instrument of power for the top management to force change. This seems to be a convenient decision for any internal consultant - a via media that allows them a defence against being seen as 'unacceptable'. Kakabadse (1982) actually builds up a blue-print of how to do it. He suggests the following stages: "(i) Identify the stakeholders. (ii) Making the stakeholders comfortable. (iii) Fitting the image. (iv) Networking. (v) Making deals. (vi) Withholding and withdrawing, and (vii) When all else fails." He ends with an exhortation - "Don't be afraid of being political": The paper provides a fascinating insight into the stress of holding onto the consultant role. It is preoccupied with comfort-providing suggestions and even advocates "getting rid of the stakeholder" though it acknowledges that it is a "high risk strategy". The defence against the anxiety of the internal consultant role means that the organisation is converted into a battle field with the internal consultant aiming at winning at the cost of his clients losing!

In my other article appearing in this book I have tried to puzzle out what might be happening in Indian organisations. Given the culture of dependency (Chattopadhyay: 1975) the Client-managers set up the internal consultant as an omnipotent figure who 'has all the answers'. The model unconsciously being held is that of physician or lawyer, who 'knows best' and will 'take care' of the situation. Yet there is a resentment and a growing awareness amongst client managers that this might not be the most effective model of relatedness. Perhaps this is why the line manager members at the working conference seemed to understand and accept their consultancy role with less reluctance than their internal consultants.

The Dynamics of Resistance

A paper by Gosling (1979) helped me to understand what might be taking place and the processes underlying the resistances to the consultancy role. It refers to the sources of conservatism in groups. Gosling focuses on the reluctance to give up a relationship and the pain of loss. Even though the individual may cognitively realise that the relationship must change - or end - there remains an attachment in order to avoid the pain - sometimes physical - that this change may result in. He says, "The pain is the result of two injuries to the self: first, an amputation of the attachment figure which besides being an object of attachment in itself has also come to contain a number of projected parts of the self; and second, an abandonment by a reflected and corresponding archaic internal figure that has in the past provided a sense of confidence in the self."(p. 78).

This reluctance to change is also because of the fear of the unknown. There is an anxiety regarding what the changed situation will now hold since "changes threaten to remove

people or social structures and so to revive experiences of undermining grief...”(p. 78). Gosling then moves onto discussing another process which, to me, throws a new light on what might be happening to maintain the status-quo of dependent relatedness between internal consultants and their client managers. I am quoting from him in some detail.

“Each member of a group inhabits three realms of reality. First, he inhabits his private world of thoughts and dreams, uncommunicated and largely uncommunicable. Second, he inhabits a world that is shared by the others, conceived of in terms of time and space about which a good deal of agreement can be gained without much difficulty. This is the ordinary world of common sense that is objectively perceived. And third, he inhabits a world of shared creations of the mind, fantasies, attitudes, values, assumptions, and misgivings, that have little that is conclusive to show for themselves objectively, but by virtue of being ‘held in common’ have a great influence on the life of the group members and are in that sense extremely real”. (p. 81).

This 'world of shared creations of the mind' exerts a tremendous influence on what goes on inside the boundary of the group and also on what the group will allow into its boundary for examination. This is the stuff from which group norms emerge; norms not only about behaviour, but also about what members can think and how they might feel. Even when this "world of shared creations of the mind" is hindering the group from moving on with its explicit primary task it brooks no questioning or testing.

Here is where the consultant has a real problem. Even if he can 'step out' from the "world of shared creations of the mind" and try to reflect on what might be really happening, the organization members try not to listen - and may actively block his making hypotheses - because pondering on them may lead to their questioning themselves. Often the consultant who continues with his primary task has to carry many negatives dumped on him by the members of the organisation in their attempt to render him taskless. It is difficult for the consultant to continue with his task and manage his own boundaries. We have earlier seen some of the unconscious personal defences that arise. .

In the title of this paper I put the word 'impossibility' in inverted commas. What I have been trying to highlight is that unless the internal consultant and the client managers really understand what it means to be a consultant - the stresses it entails and the defences that arise against the anxiety - and get in touch with the real nature of the relatedness between client and consultant, there will be no need to use the inverted commas. It will simply be a situation where it is impossible to be an internal consultant.

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