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Perspectives on the Marginality of the Consultant's Role

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Attempts have been made over the past several years to develop guidelines and sets of behavioral criteria to improve both the practice of consultation and its conceptual models. For the most part, these guidelines and criteria represent various polarized views of the consultative process and of the consulting role. This paper presents a conceptual approach to consultation that may help consulting practice to move away from the polar positions now common.

TRADITIONS IN CONSULTING PRACTICE

Ornstein (1972) developed the idea of a two-sided person—*rational* and *intuitive*. The rational side encompasses analytical, verbal, problem-solving, linear thinking, reflected in much of our scientific and industrial development and, indeed, in the learning processes that dominate many of our educational institutions. The other, more intuitive side emphasizes the nonverbal, emotional, more esoteric, and even mystical approaches to learning, knowing, and being. There is a growing awareness that each person has both major modes of consciousness available—one rational, analytical, and linear and one irrational, emotional, and intuitive. One current line of study attempts to achieve a balance between these two different but complementary modes. The literature in organizational behavior abounds with pleas for integration, connection, and mutual development, but theoretical models of many behavioral phenomena (e.g., leadership, managing, communicating) still reflect the coexistence of the poles and the maintenance of the poles as they are. Consultative models using the dichotomy suggested by Ornstein are also often presented.

Organizational consulting was developed from two primary traditions (Jacques, 1947; Margulies & Raia, 1968). The major objective of the first was to provide a *technical* service to the client system. The consultant using the technical consulting model is primarily concerned with bringing expertise to bear on a

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problem experienced by the client. The consultant's relationship with the client is viewed as incidental to the problem-solving process, and generally the client is reasonable for formulating a plan for the implementation of the proposed solutions.

The second approach, process consultation, is aimed at facilitating an organizational diagnosis of the internal and sometimes external processes that affect the organization's behavior and subsequent performance. This approach is closely linked to the field of organization development and is the central consulting mode employed by OD practitioners (Margulies, 1971).

The key to process consultation lies in the ability of the consultant to create an empathic and symbiotic relationship with the client. In fact, to some extent, the effectiveness of and/or satisfaction with the consulting projects undertaken is often attributed to the degree to which such a working relationship has been developed between client and consultant. Briefly, the best client-consultant relationship might be described as one in which there is considerable openness between client and consultant, mutuality of interest, shared responsibility for direction and outcomes of consulting projects, and ongoing feedback about activities and behaviors relevant to the consultant project.

Characteristics of Technical Consulting Model

The technical consulting model in some ways is similar to Ornstein's (1972) description of the functions of the left hemisphere of the brain, which connects to the right side of the body and is predominately involved with the analytical, logical, thinking processes. The left side operates in linear fashion, sequentially dealing with data and sequentially following the problem-solving process. This mode may be thought of as the essence of the scientific process, in which order and logic prevail. The technical consulting model may be identified by the following characteristics: (a) focus on a specific organizational problem; (b) sequential data collection and analysis; (c) utilization of a problem-solving process that incorporates a series of sequential steps; (d) establishment of logical cause-and-effect relationships; and (e) emphasis on planning and future orientation.

These characteristics are remarkably similar to those described by Ornstein as the prevailing dimensions of the left brain hemisphere.

Characteristics of Process Consulting Model

The right brain hemisphere, which controls the left part of the body, is generally involved with processes that are described as feeling or emotion oriented, spatially rather than time oriented, and holistic and Gestalt oriented rather than sequentially oriented. Process-oriented consultation also is quite similar to Ornstein's analysis. The process model involves the following: (a) focus on the processes of the organization; (b) more orientation toward the human dimensions of organizational life; (c) present orientation; (d) focus on "helping" rather than specific technical expertise; and (e) more appreciation for the intuitive and little emphasis on logical or analytical approaches.

Interestingly enough, organization development, from which the consulting model has emerged, began as a holistic, basically intuitive process with major emphasis on the emotional, perceptual dimensions of organizational life. The approach was much needed in organizations in which the emphasis was much more on the analytical, logical, problem-solving processes. It has been suggested that because society values the latter dimensions more than the holistic, emotional dimensions, they are most cultivated and rewarded by the educational institutions and thus by most other organizations. The inception and popularity of organization development is not surprising. Organization development seemed to fill an important need or replace a missing ingredient. Organizations, being predominately task oriented, linear, and analytical, were aware of an imbalance in their organizational and managerial processes deriving from the lack of emphasis on right-hemisphere functions, an emphasis supplied by the organization development approach of the 1960s.

Because of a preoccupation with respectability and acceptance, however, OD practitioners have tended to emphasize the analytical, logical, linear aspects of the field and to neglect the intuitive, holistic aspects. Hence, even process consultation has developed its own technology, its own logical frameworks, its own sequential data gathering and processing, and its own logical problem-solving methodology. This causes the method to appeal both to the academic community and also to many managers who find their own methods to be more compatible with the left-hemisphere approach.

The role of the consultant is much more tenuous, much more *marginal*, and much more peripheral than is suggested by the process model; it is not nearly as distant, uninvolved, and task oriented as the technical model.

MARGINALITY AS A CHARACTERISTIC OF CONSULTANCY

The sociological concept of marginality (Gardner, 1945) refers to a person who is required to function in two or more groups for which norms, values, and goals differ. Sometimes the differences are not significant, and sometimes the differences are considerable and result in stressful situations for the individuals and the groups involved. Marginal roles are inherently stressful and anxiety producing (Lewin, 1951; Ziller et al., 1969).

Conceptually, the notion of marginality is not unlike what some social scientists have referred to as *boundary roles*. A person in a boundary role is related to one particular work unit but also belongs to another unit within the same organization or to another organization entirely. The importance of the boundary role is associated with the amount of time the boundary person spends with each unit as well as the *significance* of the contact between the boundary person and the organizational units.

Boundary roles are important both organizationally and psychologically. The consultant, although connected to the organization by his consulting role, is not a part of the organization. (This is obviously true only for external consultants; the boundary role is very complex in the case of internal consultants.) Psychologically, feelings, reactions, and ultimately behaviors utilized to cope with the difficulties of the boundary position can affect the performance of the consultant.

The contract-building phase of the consulting process involves more than establishing activities and conditions on which the consultant and the client agree. This phase establishes the boundary, which must be firm enough and clear enough that the integrity and the separateness of those operating at the boundary position are maintained. The boundary must, of course, also be permeable enough to permit transactions, inputs, and changes to occur between the consultant and the client system.

Boundary Functions

The Activities Boundary. Only one clearly specified set of activities can be called consultative, but the client may confuse these with other activities. The client may ask the consultant to perform certain activities that should be done by the client or that at least are not within the consultant's realm. For example, in a case in which "homework" is required of the team members prior to a team-building session, the manager may want the consultant to inform the team members of the importance of the homework and of the necessity to complete it prior to the team meeting. This is usually not the consultant's responsibility.

Membership Boundary. The external consultant is not an organization member; even an internal consultant must maintain a membership boundary, although the boundary is much more vague for internal people because they depend on salaries or rewards. In either case, the psychological distance between client and consultant is very important.

Model Boundary. Resorting to either the technical or the process model removes the consultant from the boundary. If he or she maintains a position on the boundary between the two, the consultant may utilize appropriate functions from each model. However, boundary positions, because of their inherent marginality, tend to generate considerable stress, tension, and personal conflict. These phenomena are of particular interest for consultants because the strategies used to resolve stress and tension can have a major impact on how effective the consultant is.

The consultant is continually faced with stress and ambiguity (Cotton, 1977). For the most part, these conditions have been attributed to the complexity and difficulty of the consultant's job as a change agent. However, although it is true that the problems of change often are compounded by the complexities of relationships, technologies, management processes, etc., the consultant's stress experience per se does not result from the situation or the processes of change but is inherent in the consultant's role because of the boundary position of the consultant, which by its nature is ambiguous, stressful, and tense. Traditionally, OD consultants have tended to overlook this reality and have focused on the nature of the consultant's skill, the inherent uncertainty of the change situation, or the complex situational variables—all basically external to the consultant. The stress and tension of the consultant's role are derived from the boundary position, and the suggested "principles of good consultation" try to alleviate the stress and tension by resolving the essential and existential dilemmas experienced at the boundary. The difficulty is, of course, that these dilemmas cannot be resolved

through the application of models or principles but must be faced existentially by the person occupying the boundary position.

I feel that effective consultation is related to the consultant's ability to build marginal relationships and to stay on the fringe, rather than the consultant's ability to build close, sensitive, empathic relationships with clients or the consultant's ability to utilize his or her technical expertise. The behavioral dilemma for the consultant is first to find the fringe area for each of several dimensions and then to maintain the boundary relationship with the client rather than to assume any extreme or polar position. The use of polar positions (either process or technical models) is a way of avoiding or resolving personal dilemmas experienced in consulting. Although resorting to one pole or the other resolves the conflict, important characteristics represented by the other position may be ignored.

Existential Dilemmas of the Boundary

Both the process and the technical consultation models ignore the boundary notion and work toward resolution of the existential personal dilemmas by identifying and suggesting extreme behaviors for the consultant.

Consultants who are acutely aware of their personal experiences in the consultant's role face a number of dilemmas (personal conflicts) that must be resolved continually as consultant work progresses. An existential approach to these dilemmas would encourage the consultant to ask, "What dilemmas (or conflicts) do I experience now, and what might be an appropriate resolution so that I can behave effectively in my boundary role?" By using this approach, a consultant might learn to live with the dilemmas effectively rather than to avoid them.

The Involvement Dilemma. The technical OD model implies that the consultant takes the client's statement of the problem at face value and provides the client with a technical solution. There is little need for or emphasis on building client-consultant relationships; the consultant simply provides the best technical solution for the problem facing the client. The consultant remains detached. In the OD process model, on the other hand, the consultant works toward building an effective working relationship with a client, which is characterized by openness, confrontation, and involvement. The client and the consultant work together to promote solutions to problems and organizational growth.

Each model represents a different view of reality. The dangers in both are evident. Using a technical model, the consultant can become so detached from the client system that sensitivity to the client is lost. The client system's ability to use proposed solutions and to muster resources to solve identified problems, or even whether the consultant is working on the "right" problems, may not be addressed. Using a process model, on the other hand, may cause the consultant to be overly responsive to the client and more a part of the client system than not. The consultant's usefulness may diminish as he or she becomes enmeshed in the organization. If the consultant is seen more as an advocate than as a consultant, the consultant's role is additionally diminished. What neither of these models

incorporates is the marginal role of the consultant, who is neither attached to nor a part of the system but in a boundary position.

The Responsibility Dilemma. Using the technical consulting model, the consultant develops a strategy to resolve the client's problem and generally leaves the implementation of such solutions to the client. The consultant who uses the process model stresses the importance of joint action between client and consultant; however, the consultant devotes a good deal of attention to creating client ownership of the change process as well as of the implementation phase. Each model provides an opposite view of required consultant behavior in relation to the ownership of problems and problem solutions. The consultant in a boundary position neither owns nor disowns the process and the project. The consultant assumes responsibility for certain aspects and insists that the client bear the major responsibility for others. The issue of ownership of the project is dealt with as the need arises, is examined, and is decided in light of particular steps, phases, or activities that must be accomplished. The consultant determines responsibility for specific change activities and for change in the client system. The most effective response is probably on the fringe—certain aspects of the responsibility fall into the client's realm and others fall into the consultant's. Because conflict is at the boundary between system and consultant, it must be faced and resolved there.

The Acceptance Dilemma. Another issue for a consultant on the boundary is personal acceptance. The consulting role can be lonely, especially at the boundary, where the consultant is neither in nor out. Two ways to resolve the dilemma are (a) to work for acceptance by the client system or (b) to assume a consultation stance with minimal contact on no personal relationship with the client so that the issue does not have to be faced. To stay on the boundary at a point at which acceptance is never totally achieved nor ever totally denied is a real challenge. The consultant is seen as an "outsider" who is becoming "one of the family."

The Problem with Contingency Approaches

Polar models are simply abstractions of reality, useful for descriptive purposes, but rather narrow from the point of view of practice. Basically, contingency theories have incorporated the fact that situational variables, to a large extent, determine the appropriateness of the model employed. In some cases, contingency approaches also take into account the fact that the characteristics and skills of the individual manager or leader will in part determine the particular behavioral model that is apt to be most effective. In essence, contingency models are *alternating* models; as the situational variables change, the individual simply employs the appropriate model. This approach is used in the areas of leadership, management, and organization, as well as consulting.

The steps in the contingency approach are as follows:

1. Identify the models that encompass the behavioral phenomenon (e.g., leadership, consulting). Presumably these models are inclusive and cover all situations and the subsequent behavior.

2. Identify the factors that influence the choice of a particular model.
3. Assess these factors and choose the appropriate model for the appropriate situation.

Because contingency approaches emphasize alternating styles or behaviors, depending on situational factors, these approaches tend to stress extreme examples of the desired behavior. Another dimension of the contingency approach could be a decision about whether or not to adopt a marginal role, but because any other role is not optimally effective, the decision must be to adopt one. Some approaches, most notably the Tannenbaum and Schmidt Leadership Model (1958), emphasize variations of the general contingency approach by suggesting possible mixtures of the polar situations, but the result, once again, is the development of several models, distinct in nature, to be employed under certain conditions. What is often ignored is the *simultaneous existence* or *complementarity* of the polar positions and the need to integrate them at the boundary.

Staying at the Boundary: Toward Simultaneous Complementarity

Effective behavior in a marginal or boundary role is difficult for two reasons. First, there is the tendency to develop and use polar models to relieve the consultant from the dilemmas of the boundary position. This tendency may be analogous to the physiological reality of the left and right brain hemispheres, but, nevertheless, the preference for one mode over the other detracts from each situation and from effective creative consulting.

Second, it is difficult to recognize the *complementary functions* of the technical and process models and to develop an integrative rather than an alternating approach to them. How to stay on the boundary and how to develop a simultaneous-complementarity approach are difficult questions with no clear-cut answers. Some suggestions for consultants who wish to remain on the boundary follow.

Cultivate the Poles. The technical and process models imply certain sets of skills: rational, analytical, and theoretical on the one hand, and intuitive, emotional, and holistic on the other. Most consultants prefer one set of skills to the other and rely on those that are most familiar and comfortable. Being on the boundary requires a consultant to use and integrate both sets of skills.

Considerable theory has been developed, primarily in Gestalt therapy, that deals with polar opposites and the process of integration. Perls (1951) used the term "creative pre-commitment" to describe the situation in which an individual is poised at the "indifference point" of a continuum—aware of the situation but not yet committed to action on either side. Creative precommitment is not a state of indecisiveness but rather "a phase of orienting to diverse possibilities" and choosing the required characteristics of each polar position. Some consultants may experience difficulty and discomfort in situations that demand unfamiliar behavior. More creative consultation can surely emerge if consultants integrate aspects of the polar positions rather than retain a commitment to one particular consulting approach representing only one polar model.

Recognize and Appreciate the Polarity. Most consultants are committed to their own approaches and tend to be critical of other approaches. They may overuse theoretical skills to the point at which a strength becomes a weakness. Most training and educational programs for consultants emphasize the need for consultants to operate from their own frames of reference and to do what "feels right" from their own points of view. The fallacy is that consultants are likely to neglect other possibilities. Training that is integrative and that develops skills related to both models is necessary.

Be Aware of Complementarity. The consultant periodically must reassess his or her own strategy and approach to be sure that complementary features of the polar models are being employed. The most common error is to think that either the technical model or the process model is complete in itself. It is difficult but possible for a consultant to incorporate both models at one time.

Avoid Polarities as a Way to Solve Existential Dilemmas. The existential dilemmas of the consultant's role come with the job and must be faced and resolved again and again. Escaping the stress and conflict of the boundary role by resorting to a polar model may seem the easy way, but a consultant must continually reappraise strategies and approaches that are to be used, thus avoiding taking a polar position.

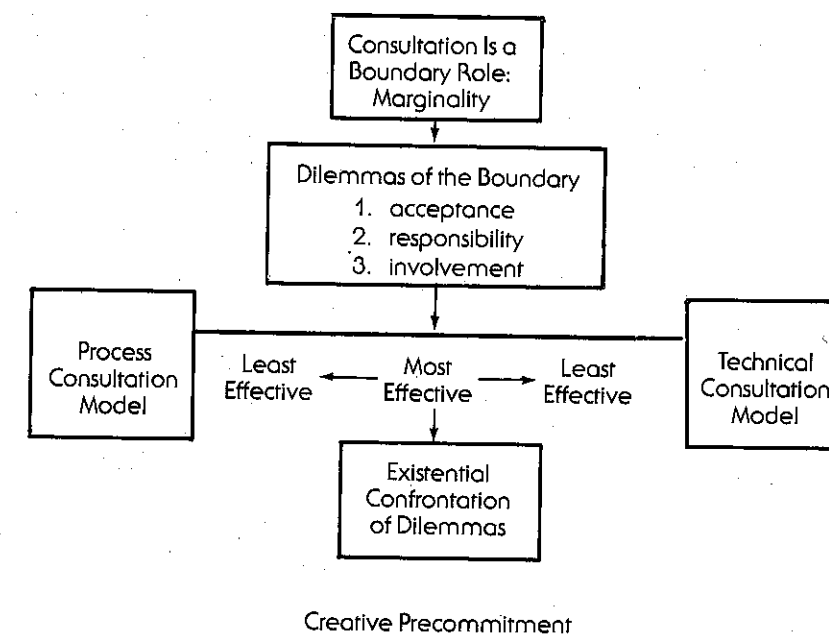


Figure 1. Marginality and Consultant Effectiveness

SUMMARY

To summarize, the consultant's role (particularly that of the external consultant) is marginal, and the effective consultant operates at the boundary. When key consulting issues such as involvement, responsibility, and acceptance are resolved in ways that do not allow the consultant to operate on the boundary, the effectiveness of the consultant's role is diminished. Consultants must learn the personal and professional skills to resolve these consulting issues in ways that reinforce the boundary position.

Perhaps the traditional methods for developing the consultant's personal awareness and sensitivity are not enough. Gestalt therapy does offer a way to approach and integrate polarities, but Ornstein (1972) suggested even more radical approaches to personal education.

Individual development of "emotional muscle" to cope with the stresses, tensions, and conflicts of the boundary role is vitally important because, in a sense, the consultant at the boundary will always experience those *existential dilemmas* related to the role. Effective consulting is related to the consultant's ability to confront and resolve these dilemmas as they arise in each situation. Resolving these conflicts by adopting behavior that is exclusively at one pole or the other undermines the boundary role and creates a consulting mode that may be a distortion of the real demands of the situation.

The first step in the development of consulting behavior, which takes the need for both the technical and process aspects of consultation into account, is understanding the two polar positions thoroughly. This approach is different from the "usual" contingency model, which suggests that process and technical behaviors can be utilized alternately. A conceptual approach to consultation and the consulting role can be developed that views these behaviors as complementary. The result can be a more effective consultation process, a more flexible consulting style, and, perhaps most important, a consultant who is less apt to resort to only one style and is more apt to be responsive to needs of the client and demands of the situation.

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