THE CONSULTANT'S INFLUENCE ON GROUP VALUES

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ABSTRACT

In this essay, we define the consultant as a valuable resource for groups, so long as the value she adds strikes a just balance among the interests of the group and its members. It focuses on the relationship between consultants and groups, which is as important in voluntary organizations as it is in the conventional consultant's field of industrial organizations. Managerial and professional groups contract for consultancy as part of the serious business of maintaining, but also of renegotiating, the values that are so important to members. The essay explores one way in which the consultant can play an influential part in helping a group to renegotiate its values. This essay explores the issue of the effective appropriation of consultancy by groups. By the "consultant," we mean someone whose services are bought by groups and organizations for such purposes as lending weight to their policies, adding a new skill that is lacking, identifying the real problem, or offering a mechanism by which a strategy or change may be brokered. Different terms are used, and the categories differ, but it appears that, based on such accounts at least, and bearing in mind more sophisticated attempts to legitimize the role of the industrial consultant in particular, a certain degree of congruence can be established among the descriptions. If that is so, then we are confronted with a largely generalized model of consultancy that can be discussed in respect of some significant categories: consultants' roles, the interests served, and their techniques of persuasion. In the essay, we provide a set of operational definitions. What is the profession of "consultancy"?

KEYWORDS: Psychology, psychological counseling, consultant, group values.

INTRODUCTION

It is important to establish what we mean by a consultant. A consultant is a professional (usually self-employed) working in an external or internal capacity with an organization or organization members over a specific period of time or on a specified project or operation. There are many types of consultants, e.g., HR, IT, public relations, financial services consultants, but in this context, I will be focusing on management consultancy in general terms. Management consultants can be part of a multinational organization or a small consultancy firm specializing in change. HR consultants offer advice and support in relation to staffing issues such as selection, assessment, conflict resolution, industrial relations, and developing reward strategies. Both HR and management consultants are brought in to solve an organization's problems, although there are differences in focus, style, and possibly other skills. The common aim of all consultants is to offer the organization a fresh and external perspective on an individual or organizational problem (optimally without becoming embroiled in intra-

organizational politics, which may cloud objectivity). Leadership and management consultants offer guidelines on the latest theories relating to leadership, development, and personnel management to meet the needs of the business strategy. This is not to say that the HR or IT consultant's theory is all of the same quality or reflects the structure of each consultant's training and experience; it is more to provide a segmented picture of a consultant. Starting with a definition of a theory is important because the word consultant in and of itself does not essentially elicit a trained individual, but rather a person 'who provides expert advice professionally.' Hence, one of the starting premises of this essay is that the word 'consultant' does conjure an image of a professional with at least some formal education.

Group values are the bedrock of organizational membership and exert a strong influence on employee behavior and decision-making. These values reflect how colleagues believe they should treat one another, what members should do to contribute to the well-being of the organization, and who the group is and what it stands for. In short, they form the basis of organizational culture. Corporate values play a role in identifying and reducing inherent conflicts of values within individuals, groups, and the organization at large. Holding values in common may lead to enhanced personal, task-oriented, and organizational orientations.

Belief in the spirit of 'us' emanating from the population of corporate values has been shown to be related to indicators of job satisfaction and team cohesion. Through the resolution phase of value conflict, these can have significant effects on the attitudes of employees toward their colleagues and organization. Since the level of individual group values can in part be determined by life experience, current or recent change taking place within the organization, this may add an external aspect to the value determination process. With respect to the wider organizational community, corporate values are reflected in products and services, and in the external public to shareholders, customers, and employees. This means that the external perception by shareholders or consultants, and how they operate, can impact the dynamics of the values.

To clarify the source and mechanisms of the consultant's normalizing influence, we must consider the relation of attitudes to role behavior, the channels that facilitate influence, and the processes by which changing attitudes affect behavior. We can usefully divide the relevant questions about attitude-behavior relationships and social influence into two major categories: (1) What is the relation between social roles in groups and the values and attitudes that are held? (2) How are attitudes developed in interaction? How do other people, information, and the social context more generally affect the process of attitude formation, transformation, and expression?

The basic question about the behavioral significance of group values and attitudes is whether they act like physiological drives. It is true that particularly strong sentiments about moral and value-laden issues are resistant to neutralization or incorporation. However, in many instances in the interpersonal norms and in other areas, the group's position is really only relevant as a guide to how to act, as long as situationally defined role requirements are clear and consistent and behavior is monitored. We have evidence that indicates the necessary and sufficient conditions for social influence are: (1) the nature of the information flow; and (2) the dominant communications context. Clearly, these two aspects of an influence structure predicate its appearance.

Organization change is a complex process that is influenced by numerous factors, both internal and external to the organization. As such, organization change is difficult for the organization itself to manage and is often tackled using the services of an outside consultant. The role of the consultant in affecting organization change has generated considerable research interest in the past two decades. A number of researchers have sought to identify what the consultant actually does in a typical setting. Others have questioned why clients follow the consulting advice and engage in the process of management change. These studies have generated a wealth of evidence about the behavioral style of the consultant, consulting output, the consultant's own needs and goals, as well as the logic of intervention.

Collectively, they have accounted for the acceptance of consulting advice and the impact of consulting on the client-manager, his or her clients, the group, the sociocultural organization, and ultimately, the client-consultee organization as a whole. They have, however, failed to account for one of the most important aspects of consulting behavior: the consultant's influence on the client group. This is not to say that the area has been completely overlooked in previous analyses. Indeed, a number of specific group interventions have been prescribed by organization development consultants, including role negotiations, group cleansing, force field analysis, and role diagnostics. It suggests that they see the group as a "mechanical model, subject to parallel processes of diagnosis, analysis, and therapy: a sequence of parking, cleaning, and testing. Prompt attention is given to evil gremlins."

The growth of any organization depends in good part on the values that control the means of doing its work and the serving of which its management recognizes as the key to its success. These values are the ethical and moral aspects of any change that a consultant recommends. A consultant does not serve the best interest of the organization when he acts as a witness against management. He sees only one side of the coin and must share the values of the organization if he is to help it. As such a member, he can give guidance, but he needs the support of management rather than a commitment to any particular course of action. If the consultant is directly responsible for the recommended action, he should be an active participant in the implementation of the advice.

The effective use of consultation must seek its "climax" in counseling management in how to use selective guidance and not in the making of decisions. The ethos of democracy pervades effective groups. They operate, however, on the assumption that the leader has the responsibility to make the initial decision when the group cannot function effectively. The leader can delegate decisions and authority to the group, but the ultimate decision is his. The choice of values seeks consideration in the democratic process in which everyone affected has an opportunity to make inputs. The means to this end constantly change, but the ends remain consistent.

While theoretical perspectives are certainly important to consider, evidence-based consultants want to know what kinds of relationships have been found between consultants and group values. In order to engage more directly with these questions, this chapter will look at empirical research on the subject. In particular, this part of the review presents two case studies that contain claims about unilateral change within organizations, offers some additional analyses of these cases, and then provides results from a third case study that includes a lot of relevant data on the nature of a consultative relationship. The case studies discussed in this section can be used to illustrate earlier points about the nature of culture and organizations and unilateral

change. They demonstrate, in real life, arguments made in earlier sections about what consultants might be doing and can do. They provide real-life illustrations of how a consultant might go about working with group values in order to promote positive qualities of an organization's value system, both consistent with and different from those initially held by a group of employees. This section ends with survey research that includes some responses to a question on the presence of consultants in organizations and a measure of group values. Consistent with the tenor of the rest of the book, the data are modest in demonstrating that consultants 'cause' changes; they do suggest, through correlations, that consultants are not just biased observers when it comes to evaluating the effectiveness of their own work.

Marrying theory and case studies, the book offers three in-depth examples of consultant influences on group values. We present overarching themes for consultant practice, interventions, and potential hazards. The Cox case is a yearlong case study at Cox Communications. The intervention took place at an enterprise level across five large departments within Cox. The Kaiser case analyzes an intervention in an emergency department from a teaching hospital. The fifth-column concept provides an alternative to the "us-them" dynamics. During the yearlong intervention, ethnography and content analysis provided data about shifts in values among staff. It also revealed individual practitioner responses to the group cohesion intervention. Pre- and post-intervention survey results were compared to track changes in staff attitude. The St. Francis case drew on previously published data about an intervention at St. Francis UCA hospital.

Table 3.1 provides a detailed look at key developments pre- and post-consultant involvement. Data comes from before and after intervention at the St. Francis acute care hospital. It analyzes the collision of internal and external group values. By addressing the point of collision, the consultant hoped to quell internal dissension and build unity among staff. Using a comparative anxiety inventory, the findings discussed earlier were cross-validated. Such a finding is surprising given the small sample size of disaffected practitioners at the St. Francis hospital. This data were presented in detail because, given the approach's previously untested nature, severe problems could have emerged from preventing resistance to the intervention. In fact, surprisingly, no such interference was experienced. The limited use of this assessment method meant that before and after data was not available in the Kaiser and Cox cases, which shared many common themes with St. Francis. The Chapter 3 case studies on consultant influence on group values approach is being used successfully by other practitioners.

This study has explored the perceptions of employees concerning the influence of consultants on group values and presents four relevant issues to determine: (1) How widespread is this view? (2) Has this view influenced behavior? (3) Can it add evidence as to the conclusions of the more in-depth case studies about whether, how often, and under what conditions group values change due to intervention? (4) Whether group values can and have changed is an important question, and one that cannot be answered by philosophers but must be answered by empirical social scientists. Opinion surveys can be one way of providing evidence useful to persons attempting to answer this empirical question and to scholarly philosophers writing for them.

Respondents to a survey carried out in two government and two Treasury organizations were generally negative about the role of consultants in organizations. In response to the two survey questions on consultants' effect on group and organizational values, 33% of all staff and 59%

of top managers agreed or partly agreed; the influence could be beneficial. Half of all staff, but only a third of top managers, felt that the role of consultants in changing group/organizational values was also undesirable. A study of consultants is primarily a case-study-based investigation, but a small survey of 36 people has been conducted. When asked whether "consultants working on a specific project have affected the organization's values", 52% of persons working in government agencies who had been exposed to consultants said yes. Given the biases operant in this study, it seems extremely likely that group values are in fact influenced, and indeed change, by some consulting interventions. The prime source of indication is the question "Have you seen group values change, disappear or be replaced as a result of an intervention?" and the positive responses to this. The case studies and quotes reported are informative and helpful in substantiating a more general argument. Concretely, the researcher must use a survey method to test how widely the view that consultants influence group values is held. The research has also suggested a new route for practitioners who seek to measure the effect of a consulting intervention from the staff perspective. This method offers some advantages, both practical and theoretical. The possible consequences of this particular survey were also considered and discounted.

All the consultants interviewed have observed or have become aware in some way or another of situations where a client greatly values the consultant's declared influence. Two consultants talked of their dual role as serving the responsibilities of learning and treatment. When a client expects or values either role, the consultant's communication of those responsibilities helps the client to measure what he is getting. Always having some effect on the client's internal system, any responses to personal questions or personal influences must be consistent with the communication of treatment only or learning plus treatment. Failing to make the system's operation known in such a way that clients will know they can invite and stand internal system activity toward him in the treatment plus learning role is professionally unethical according to the codes of practice written by several professional bodies.

It is a matter of integrity not to be influenced other than is communicated, just as when asked about the intentions of an invasion of another country, it is a matter of integrity to tell the truth required. This leads to other situations where acting as a consultant is, in a sense, unethical, particularly for the consultants who said that they are always prepared to give some personal information if asked questions about themselves. This is a justifiable ethical stand in the cure role provided that the consultant recognizes the patient/consultant contract and consistently communicates only a cure role. Sincerity and empathy with responses for which a client is inviting at a given moment is not forthcoming if the role is learning plus cure.

The issue of confidentiality is real to management and to the employees who participate in a program and must be dealt with and respected. Actually, once the consultant breaches the trust of those who deal with him or begins to take advantage of that information, he has lost much of his ability to influence both the thinking and the action of the group. The consultant can and should discuss with management and specifically with the top man his obligations to the employer and to what extent he can expect cooperation without continually reporting his perceptions on the basis for management action. In the case of employee groups, the consultant must follow a similar procedure of obtaining and observing the rules or norms and making them known to the groups lest he forfeit the confidence and the trust of those with whom he works. Reliability is the foundation of all group potency.

One of the compulsions of all consultants is a need to influence events. It is never sufficient for a consultant to have an understanding of the factors responsible for group performance. To a greater or lesser extent, he seeks to modify these factors. This usually means that the people involved are intact to some degree. Nevertheless, consultants of all philosophies and orientations do affect the values and behavior of the group with which they are working. It is impossible to be present over an extended time and not in some way influence what goes on. Group members may likewise seek to influence the actions and values of the consultant. This statement of mutual influence is just another form of the dilemma of role definition of the consultant. In essence, should he shape values, or should he act to prevent or at least minimize such shaping?

There are certain areas of anomie in which the group and organization consultant operates where a certain amount of value shaping is not only useful but entirely appropriate. There are others where the degree of freedom and autonomy of the varying group members must be given serious consideration. Clearly, relationships and values that hurt, damage, or limit are of concern. Equally so are those that are constructive or stimulating. The management consultant is not merely a provider of data overload; he can also serve as a change agent. But the alternate need of the client for protection, autonomy, or self-determination must be taken into account. This concern with influence overlaps, of course. Autonomy of opinion, freedom, and perhaps even occasionally the importance of constituency support are other, broader ways of stating some of the concerns mentioned.

CONCLUSION

Some conclusions of this essay are that the consultant's contributions are important and wide-ranging, and subject to ethical considerations. To the extent that values shape actions, consulting is a values project. That is, as much as for our clients' values, the presence of the consultant also shapes group values. This means that dimensions of consulting that involve questions of power, influence, and hegemony are profoundly important to the work, and are complex and nuanced. An appreciation of and contribution to our understandings of these complex dependencies is needed. More focused empirically based studies would enable us to compare different consultant-group relationships, especially in terms not only of what effect they have on group members but how it gets there. Research could also examine the impact of different consulting approaches on values. Practices that improve the trust of group consultants could also be investigated as these are likely impossible without trust. The implications of these discussions for our profession and the professional development of consultants are implicit in the essay and should be made explicit. Finally, as institutional influences have coagulated and fragmented groups in a variety of ways, this essay argues that understanding group values will be important for practitioners as organizations become increasingly structurally fluid and amorphous.

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