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# flawless consulting

A GUIDE TO GETTING YOUR EXPERTISE USED



4<sup>TH</sup> EDITION







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Founded by Peter Block in 1980, Designed Learning was established to offer workshops based on the ideas in his books, including his most well-known works, *Flawless Consulting: A Guide to Getting Your Expertise Used* and *Community: The Structure of Belonging*. Since then, the team at Designed Learning has delivered training to thousands of people in 35 countries and 5 languages, internally for global companies and in public, open enrollment workshops.

At Designed Learning, our vision is to create workplaces and communities that work for the common good of all through conversations to consult, convene, and empower. We do so by believing in an alternative narrative that values individual choice, accountability, co-creation, and the power of invitation over mandate.

In partnering with our clients, we help develop new skills to engage teams, invite collaboration, overcome isolation, and deepen connection, especially in a virtual environment. We design structured learning experiences that awaken a sense of purpose to create organizations that people believe in and will thrive in—individually and collectively. Through our highly experiential in-person and virtual workshops, consulting, and coaching, we invite opportunities to move toward a more human culture of relatedness and connection where people learn how to build trusting relationships, get their expertise used, feel a greater sense of belonging, and accept freedom as a pathway to accountability.

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**WILEY**



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Published by John Wiley & Sons, Inc., Hoboken, New Jersey.

Published simultaneously in Canada.

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***Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data:***

Names: Block, Peter, 1939- author. | Nowlan, Janis, illustrator.

Title: Flawless consulting : a guide to getting your expertise used / Peter

Block ; illustrated by Janis Nowlan.

Description: [Fourth edition]. | Hoboken : Wiley, [2023] | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2022054062 (print) | LCCN 2022054063 (ebook) | ISBN

9781394177301 (cloth) | ISBN 9781394177325 (adobe pdf) | ISBN

9781394177318 (epub)

Subjects: LCSH: Business consultants.

Classification: LCC HD69.C6 B57 2023 (print) | LCC HD69.C6 (ebook) | DDC  
001—dc23/eng/20221115

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2022054062>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2022054063>

Cover Design: Paul McCarthy

Cover Art: Courtesy of Heather Block



*To Leslie Stephen, who is a genius in bringing clarity, order, and insight to words.*







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## INTRODUCTION:

### WHAT IS ENDURING | WHAT IS NEW | KEEPING IT SIMPLE

Welcome to Flawless 4.0, the 4th edition of *Flawless Consulting: A Guide to Getting Your Expertise Used*. The purpose of this version is to retain what has been important about the book, and then infuse it with what is occurring in this moment in time. It offers further distinctions, clarity of language, and applications that have accumulated over the years. It is an act of adaptation to ways the world has changed. And not changed. The intention is to affirm what is timeless and worth re-engaging more clearly and to translate this to the talking and wave patterns that are the winds on the surface of the sea nowadays.

We hear every day that we live in an era of constant and radical change. Science and digital technology are the headlines. We have adopted the language of disruption. What is new and next is the core value of modernism. Marketed as the Information Age. The Digital Age.

Underneath this storyline resides the human condition. In all its forms, whether in personal, organizational, or community life. In peace or violence. Poetry or politics. This condition—which is essentially dependent on relationships, whether virtual, artificially intelligent, or live, PowerPointed or handwritten—is enduring, compelling, and certainly problematic in all its forms. Perhaps by design and in the nature of things.

The context of the human condition is what keeps shifting. This requires fitting the core elements of consulting skills into a way of creating an alternative to the still-overriding belief in control, consistency, and predictability. It means informing by our actions, our institutions to what it means to be human. This is the permanent meaning of what is expressed in this book. And, the intent of sustaining our humanity is also a way of having influence when you have no control. Not only being authentically human, but also being powerful is what these ideas are about. We can be who we are and still make a living.



Here are the adaptive shifts and new elements of this edition:

1. We can improve the power and connectedness of our virtual time together. Too often we have transported our prior meeting formats into the virtual gathering. Someone speaks. Announces the agenda by saying what is on a slide. As if we cannot read.

Instead of distancing ourselves by predictable agendas we can choose structures that accelerate connection in a virtual setting. How to design a meeting. Live or not. What used to be called a webinar. We can restrain the use of PowerPoint. Build relationships by designing the specific structure of what we can now call a High-Engagement Virtual Hour. This is about creating connections and trust for people who may never be in a room together.

2. We can broaden the venue for using your consulting skills to every place you care about. We thread throughout the steps and skills ways to redesign your contracting and discovery skills for use wherever you want build trust and make a place better. Your work in neighborhoods and towns, faith communities, social service organizations, public service, and education. We show how to bring relationship authenticity and directness into activism, into all activities you care about and want to have ways to be more powerful. This is all about reconstructing how we contract, discover, and push choice forward, regardless of the room or purpose of the room you are in.
3. The methodology, mostly expressed through questions, has been enhanced. Six partnership-building questions have been added to the menu. These questions can be used any time people gather. Bringing these practices into every meeting you go to will help produce energy instead of reducing it.
4. The language and behaviors that lead to impact have been simplified and enhanced. There are more pathways to get to the point in an accelerated, kind, and authentic way. We all know that building trust is essential; our promise here is to accelerate the build.

The times have rarely called with such urgency for ways to bring people together. Gaps among functions, levels, outsiders, strangers are only widened by our isolation. Covid was and maybe is a big pause. We have for centuries commodified human beings as replaceable objects. Our hope is that the Flawless Consulting ideas and practices can help end this isolation. One room or large gathering or community at a time.

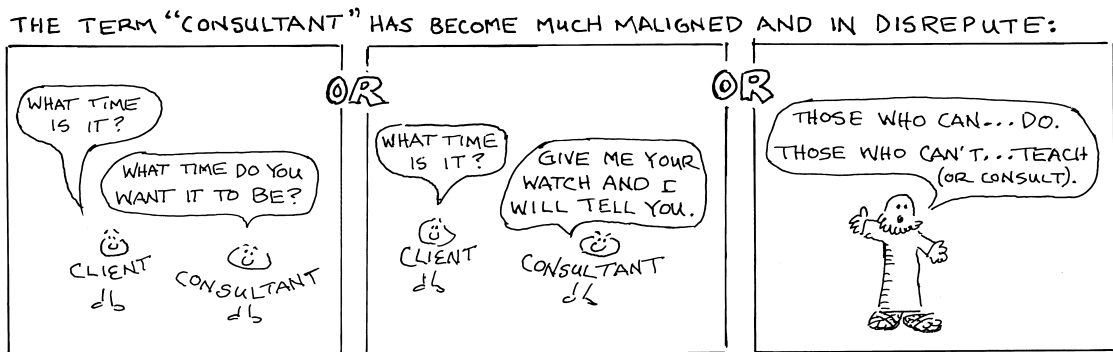
“ . . . do we decide the questions at all? We decide the answers no doubt, but surely the questions decide us?”

— *Lewis Carroll*



## CHAPTER 1

# A Consultant by Any Other Name . . .



**ANY FORM OF HUMOR** has some truth in it. The truth in the prevailing skepticism about consultants is that the traditional consultant, internal or external, has tended to act solely as an agent of management: assuming the manager's role in either performing highly technical activities that a manager cannot do or performing unpopular activities such as reducing costs and people that a manager does not want to do. The most dramatic examples of consultants' taking the place of managers is when they identify people who will be let go or functions that will be eliminated. It goes by the term *restructuring*. The intent of this book is to give you options in responding with impact beyond your impact on the real pressures that are driving managers to the point of outsourcing what is very difficult. This is the value proposition of both internal and external consulting.



When you are asked directions and you tell someone to get off the bus two stops before you do, you are acting as a consultant. Every time you give advice to someone who is faced with a choice, you are consulting. When you don't have direct control over people and yet want them to listen to you and heed your advice, you are face-to-face with the consultant's dilemma. For some of you, this may be your full-time predicament. Some of you may face it only occasionally, functioning part time as managers (having direct control) and part time as consultants (wanting to influence but lacking authority to control).

## **Some Distinctions**

A *consultant* is a person in a position to have some influence over an individual, a group, an organization, or community but has no direct power to make changes or implement programs. A *manager* is someone who has direct responsibility over the action. The moment you take direct responsibility, you are acting as a manager.

Most people in staff or support roles in organizations are really consultants, even if they don't officially call themselves consultants. Support people function in any organization by planning, recommending, assisting, or advising in such matters as these:

- Human resources or people,
- Information technology,
- Financial analysis,
- Auditing,
- Systems analysis,
- Market research,
- Product design,
- Long-range planning,
- Organizational effectiveness,
- Safety,
- Learning and development,
- Diversity equity and inclusion,
- Project management, and
- Many more.

The recipients of all this advice are called *clients*. Sometimes, the client is a single individual. Other times, the client may be a work group, a department, a whole



organization, or a neighborhood. The client is the person or persons whom the consultant wants to influence.\*

In organizations, clients for the services provided by support people are called *line managers*. Line managers have to labor under the advice of support groups, whether they like it or not. But by definition, any support function has no direct authority over anything but its own time, its own internal staff, and the nature of the service it offers. This tension between the line manager (or client) who has direct control and the support person (or consultant) who does not have direct control is one of the central themes of this book.

The key to understanding the consultant role is to see the difference between a consultant and a manager.

Listen to Lynn:

“It was a great four-month project. I headed the team from administrative services that installed the new management information system. We assessed the problems, designed the system, and got Alice, the line manager, to let us install the system from top to bottom.”

Lynn is clearly very satisfied—but this is the line manager’s satisfaction. The team wasn’t really acting as a consultant; it took over a piece of the line manager’s job for four months.

This distinction is important. A consultant needs to function differently from a line manager—for the consultant’s own sake and for the learning goals of the client. It’s okay to have direct control—and most of us want it in various forms. It is essential, though, to be aware of the difference in the roles we are assuming as to when we have it and when we don’t.

Much of the disfavor associated with the term *consultant* comes from the actions of people who call themselves consultants but act as surrogate line managers. When you act on behalf of or in the place of the manager, you are acting as a surrogate manager. When the client says, “Complete this report for me,” “Hire this person for me,” “Design this system for me,” “Counsel this employee,” or “Figure out which jobs stay and

---

\*You will mainly see the terms *consultant* and *client* used throughout the rest of this book to reinforce this belief and—especially if you are in a staff or support role—to assist your thinking of yourself as a consultant.



which jobs go,” the manager is asking for a surrogate. The attraction of the surrogate manager role is that at least for that one moment, you assume the manager’s power—but, in fact, you are doing the manager’s job, not yours.

Your goal or end-product in any consulting activity is some kind of change. Change comes in two varieties. At one level, we consult to create change in the line organization of a structural, policy, or procedural nature—for example, a new compensation package, a new reporting process, or a new safety program. The second kind of change is the end result that one person or many people in the line organization have learned something new. They may have learned what norms dominate their staff meetings, what they do to keep lower-level people in a highly dependent position in decision-making, how to involve people more directly in setting goals, or how to conduct better performance evaluations.

In its most general use, *consultation* describes any action you take with a system of which you are not a part. An interview with someone asking for help is a consulting act. A survey of problems, a training program, an evaluation, a study—all are consultations for the sake of change. The consultant’s objective is to engage in successful actions that result in people or organizations managing themselves differently and better living out their own intentions.

The terms *staff* or *support work* and *consulting work* are interchangeable, reflecting the belief that people in a support role need consulting skills to be effective—regardless of their field of technical expertise (finance, planning, engineering, personnel, systems, law). Every time you give advice to someone who is in the position to make the choice, you are consulting. For each of these moments of consultation, there are three kinds of skills you need to do a good job: technical, interpersonal, and consulting skills.

Here are the distinctions.

## ***Technical Skills***

Above all, we need to know what the person is talking about. We need expertise about the question. Either in college or in our first job, we were trained in a specific field or function. This might be engineering, sales, accounting, counseling, IT, or any of the thousands of other ways people make a living. This is our basic training. It is only later, after acquiring some technical expertise, that we start consulting. If we didn’t have some expertise, then people wouldn’t ask for our advice. The foundation for consulting skills is some expertise—whether it is scientific, such as coke particle sizing, or nonscientific, such as management or organizational development. This book assumes you have some area of expertise.



## ***Interpersonal Skills***

To function with people, we need to have some interpersonal skills, that is, some ability to put ideas into words, to listen, to give support, to disagree reasonably, to basically maintain a relationship. There are many books, therapists, and seminars available to help people with these human skills. In fact, there is a whole industry about achieving better relationships that is devoted to improving these skills. Just like technical skills, interpersonal skills are necessary to effective work, life, and even consultation.

## ***Consulting Skills***

Each consulting project, whether it lasts 10 minutes or 10 months, goes through 5 phases. The steps in each phase are sequential; if you skip one or assume it has been taken care of, you are headed for trouble. Skillful consulting is being competent in the execution of each of these steps. Successfully completing the business of each phase is the primary focus of this book.

## **Consulting Skills Preview**

Here is an overview of what is involved in the five phases of consulting.

### ***Phase 1: Entry and Contracting***

This phase has to do with the initial contact with a client, perhaps a manager or executive, about the project. It includes setting up the first meeting as well as exploring the problem, whether the consultant is the right person to work on this issue, what the client's expectations are, what the consultant's expectations are, and how to get started. Contracting also occurs on a regular basis with ongoing relationships. Each time something shifts or is completed, a contracting discussion is needed. When consultants talk about their disasters, their conclusion is usually that the project was faulty in the initial contracting or re-contracting stage.

### ***Phase 2: Discovery***

Consultants need to come up with their own sense of both the problem and the strengths the client has. This may be the most useful thing we do. We also need skill in helping the client do the same. The questions here for the consultant are: Who is going



to be involved in defining the problem or situation? What methods will be used? What kind of data should be collected? How long will it take? Should the inquiry be done by the consultant or should it be done by the client?

### ***Phase 3: Analysis and the Decision to Act***

The inquiry and engagement must be organized and reported in some fashion. The consultant is always in the position of reducing large amounts of data to a manageable number of issues. There are also choices for the consultant to make on how to involve the client in the process of analyzing the information.

In giving feedback to an organization, there is always some resistance to the data, which is a sign we are dealing with important issues. The consultant must handle this resistance before an appropriate decision can be made about how to proceed. This phase is really what many people call strategy and planning. It includes setting ultimate goals for the project and selecting the best action steps leading to making the situation better.

### ***Phase 4: Engagement and Implementation***

This involves carrying out the planning of phase 3. In many cases, the implementation may fall entirely on the line organization. For larger change efforts, the consultant may be deeply involved. Some projects start implementation with an educational event. This could be a series of meetings to introduce some change, a single meeting to get different parts of the organization together to address a problem, or a training session. In these cases, the consultant is usually involved in rather complicated design work, and in running the meeting or training session.

### ***Phase 5: Extension, Recycle, or Termination***

Phase 5 is about learning from the whole process. This is the decision whether to extend the process to a larger segment of the organization or deeper into this group. Sometimes it is not until after some implementation occurs that a clear picture of the real problem emerges. In this case, the process recycles and a new contract needs to be discussed. If the implementation was either a huge success or a moderate-to-high failure, termination of further involvement on this project may be in the offing. There are many options for ending the relationship, and termination should be considered a legitimate and important part of the consultation. If done well, it can provide an



important learning experience for the client and the consultant, and also keep the door open for future work with the organization.



When you look at Figure 1.1, you will see a preview of some of the skills and topics covered for the events leading to engagement and implementation.

### The Preliminary Events



**Figure 1.1** An Overview of Consulting Skills



Consulting skills here are grouped into four phases: contracting, discovery, feedback, and decision. These are called the preliminary events in something being improved. They include the initial contacts, the planning meetings, the inquiry and analysis, and the feedback and decision-making meetings.

Engagement/implementation is when you finally do something with enough impact to be noticeable to many people in the organization, and they have the expectation that change, or learning, will occur because of that event. The preliminary events are, in many ways, more crucial for success than the engagement/implementation. An understanding of consulting skills therefore is really an understanding of preliminary events that are a necessary prelude to any real change.

## **The Promise of Flawless Consultation**

One reason consulting can be frustrating is that you are continually managing lateral relationships. As a support person or consultant, you are working with a line manager in a context in which there is no clear boss-subordinate relationship between you. Vertical relationships are easier to understand. If your boss gives you an order, you know that he or she has the right to tell you what to do. But if your client makes a demand, you don't necessarily have to obey. The power balance in lateral relationships is always open to ambiguity—and to negotiation. When we get resistance from a client, sometimes we aren't sure whether to push harder or let go. This book is about managing this ambiguity.

Taken as a whole, this book is about flawless consultation—consulting as best we can, independent of the eventual outcome. It concentrates on the preliminary events because competence in contracting, discovery, and feedback creates the foundation for successful outcomes in the implementation stage. We have deliberately avoided discussing and demonstrating consulting skills in an overall step-wise sequence of chapters because some concepts and competencies must be brought to bear in every stage of a consulting relationship. So we have included chapters treating consulting assumptions, goals for a consulting relationship, and consultant role choices, as well as one on what flawless consulting means in practice, along with the chapters that specify and illustrate the skills required for each of the preliminary events. There are also interspersed chapters on such issues as client resistance and the special considerations of the internal consultant's role to demonstrate the belief that successful consulting demands more than a methodical, step-by-step application of technical expertise.



The promise is that if you consult in the way this book describes, your consultation can be flawless and you will:

Have your expertise better used,  
Have your recommendations more frequently implemented,  
Work in more of a partnership role with clients,  
Avoid no-win consulting situations,  
Develop internal commitment in your clients,  
Receive support from your clients,  
Increase the leverage you have with clients,  
Establish more trusting relationships with clients, and  
with whoever is important in your work.

The use of the term *flawless consulting* is presumptuous, but it is not accidental. A basic value underlying this book is that there is in each of us the possibility of perfection, independent of the outcomes in the world. There is a consulting professional inside each of us, and our task is to allow that flawless consultant to emerge. On its surface, this book is about methods and techniques. But each technique carries a consistent message more important than any method: that each act that expresses trust in ourselves and belief in the validity of our own experience is always the right path to follow. Each act that is manipulative or filled with pretense is always self-destructive.

Working in organizations means we are constantly bombarded by pressure to be strategic in relationships, to speak in an indirect way, and to ignore what we are experiencing at the moment. Flawless consulting offers the possibility of letting our behavior be consistent with our beliefs and feelings, and also to be successful in working with our clients. The focus in this book on techniques and skills in consulting is simply a way to identify the high self-trust choices we all have as we work in organizations and in communities. From the first day on our first job, each of us has struggled with the conflict between being ourselves and conforming to the expectations we think our employers or clients have of us. The desire to be successful can lead us into playing roles and adopting behaviors that are internally alien and represent some loss of ourselves. All of us question whether we can be ourselves and still make a living.

Consultants, internal and external, are especially vulnerable to this conflict because we are supposed to be serving our clients' needs. Our projects also tend to be short



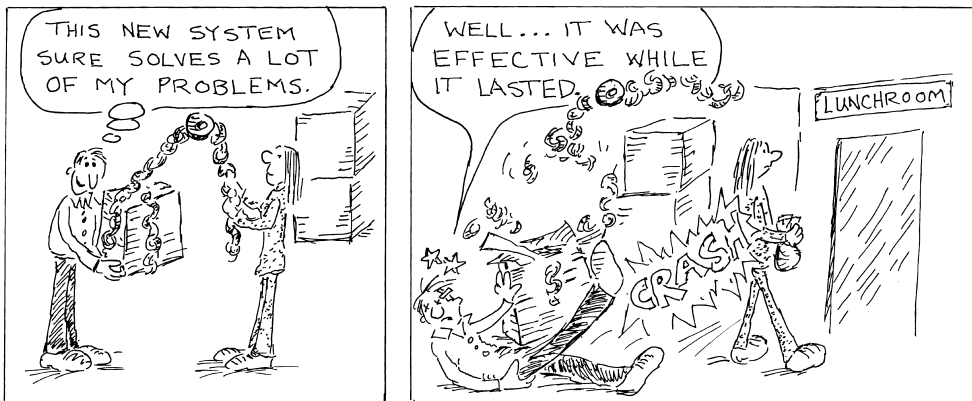
term and quite specific, and we work at the pleasure of the client. It is easier to terminate a consultant or support person than to terminate a subordinate. In hard times, managers end consulting projects and reduce overhead costs before they reduce their own workforce. This sense of vulnerability can become a rationalization for consultants to deny our own needs and feelings and to not be authentic.

This book offers an alternative. It says that trusting ourselves is the path that serves us well with clients and increases the chances that our expertise will be used again and again.



## PART 1

# Fundamentals









## CHAPTER 2

# Techniques Are Not Enough

**T**HERE ARE DIMENSIONS TO THE CONSULTING ROLE that transcend any specific methods we might employ and contribute to our effectiveness no matter what our technical expertise. A unique and beguiling aspect of doing consulting is that your own self is involved in the process to a much greater extent than if you were applying your expertise in some other way. Your reactions to a client, your feelings during discussions, your ability to solicit feedback from the client and give feedback to a client—all are important dimensions to consultation.

## Roles Consultants Choose

Having leverage requires confronting the doubts at each stage of the consulting process—during contracting, discovery, analysis, and while preparing for the feedback meeting. Waiting until the implementation phase to overcome resistance is too late.

Ed Schein has identified three ways consultants work with line managers: in an expert role, a pair-of-hands role, or a collaborative role.\* The choice depends on individual differences in management style, the nature of the task, and the consultant's own personal preference.

As you consult in a variety of situations, it helps to become aware of the role you typically assume and to be able to identify situations where this will help or hinder your

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\*These roles were first formulated by Ed Schein in the 1960s. He was one of the first to see the limitations of the expert role for consultants and opened the door to the collaborative potential in the helping process. His book *Process Consulting Revisited* (1998) more fully describes the power of process consultation as a vital capacity for those in a helping position. I strongly recommend that book and all of his books.



performance. Only then can you make a conscious choice among alternatives. One discovery that people often make in such self-analysis is that they begin to identify situations where they can operate more successfully in a collaborative mode. However, the realities of most organizations are such that there will be times when the pair-of-hands or expert roles are more appropriate and other times when they cannot be avoided.

### ***Expert Role***

One way line managers typically relate to support specialists, as well as to external consultants, is client-to-expert. Consumer-to-expert. The support person becomes the “expert” in the performance of a given task.

**Example** An organization’s new corporate benefits strategy was completely overhauled, and it has become clear that the website and online delivery has not lived up to expectations. The overall design is okay; the problem is somewhere in the navigation and the non-intuitive way employees have to input information to the site.

At this point, the manager calls in a staff website design specialist, describes the difficulties, and says to the designer, “I have neither the time nor the inclination to deal with this problem. You’re the expert; find out what’s wrong and fix it. You have a free hand to examine the whole system and do whatever analysis and fixing is necessary. Keep me posted on your findings and what you intend to do.” The website designer becomes, in effect, a member of the manager’s staff with delegated authority to plan and implement a program of change subject to the same restrictions as other members of the manager’s staff.

Here is what is happening in this kind of relationship:

The manager has elected to play an inactive role. A consumer. The client expects to hold the consultant, that is, the website designer, responsible for results. The designer-as-consultant accepts the responsibility and feels free to develop and implement action plans. The manager is expected to provide the resources and the assistance needed to solve the problem.

Decisions on how to proceed are made by the consultant on the basis of specialized expert judgment. There is no need to involve the manager in technical details.

The consultant gathers the information needed for problem analysis and decides what methods of data collection and analysis to use.



Technical control rests with the consultant. Disagreement is not likely because it would be difficult for the manager to challenge “expert” reasoning. If the manager seeks to exert control over technical decisions, the consultant will see it as unjustified interference.

In this situation, collaboration is not required because the problem-solving efforts are based on specialized procedures.

Two-way communication here is limited. The consultant initiates and the client responds. The consultant expects and is expected to initiate communication in a question-and-answer mode. The consultant plans and carries out the engagement or implementation or provides detailed instructions for implementation by the manager, whose role is to judge and evaluate after the fact.

The consultant’s goal in this example is to solve the immediate problem. Neither the manager nor the consultant expects the manager to develop skills to solve similar problems in the future.

**Oops** Internal consultants especially are well aware of the problems involved in operating in the role of expert. Here are two big ones.

First, consider the consultant’s ability to make an accurate assessment. Given a problem that seems to be of a purely technical nature, the consultant can use technical expertise to isolate the problem and develop a solution. But problems that are purely technical are rare. Most problems have a human element in them, and if the prevailing organizational climate is fear, insecurity, or mistrust, people may withhold or distort essential information on the human part of the problem. Without valid data, accurate assessment becomes impossible. Action programs based on faulty discovery have little chance for success.

Second, consider the commitment of people to take the recommended actions. Studies done by outside experts seldom carry the kind of personal ownership and commitment needed to deal with difficult management issues.

### ***Pair-of-Hands Role***

Here, the manager sees the consultant as an extra pair of hands. The manager says, in effect, “I have neither the time nor the inclination to deal with this problem. I have examined the deficiencies and have prepared an outline of what needs to be done. I want you to get it done as soon as possible.” The manager retains full control.



The consultant is expected to apply specialized knowledge to implement action plans toward the achievement of goals that the manager has defined.

Here are some of the clues that the consultant is acting as a pair of hands:

*The consultant takes a passive role.* The order of the day is responding to the manager's requests, and the consultant does not question the manager's action plans.

*The manager makes the decisions on how to proceed.* The consultant may prepare recommendations for the manager's review, but approval rests with the manager.

*The manager selects the methods for discovery and analysis.* The consultant may do the actual data collection, but only in accordance with procedures that the manager has outlined.

*Control rests with the manager.* The consultant is expected to make suggestions, but avoids disagreement because it would be seen as a challenge to the manager's authority.

*Collaboration is not really necessary.* The manager feels that it is his or her responsibility to specify goals and procedures. The consultant can ask questions for clarification.

*Two-way communication is limited.* The manager initiates, and the consultant responds.

The manager initiates in a descriptive or evaluative mode.

*The manager specifies change procedures for the consultant to implement.*

*The manager's role is to judge and evaluate from a close distance.*

*The consultant's goal is to make the system more effective by the application of specialized knowledge.*

**Problems** The major problem emerges in the discovery phase. In a pair-of-hands role, the consultant is dependent on the manager's ability to understand what is happening and to develop an effective action plan. If the manager's assessment is faulty, the action plan won't work, and the consultant who provided the service becomes a convenient scapegoat.

To avoid this trap, the consultant may ask for time to verify the manager's assessment. And then the consultant might face another problem: managers who have a preference for consultants who take on the pair-of-hands role may interpret such requests as questioning their experience, their authority, or both. Once you bend over, it is hard to stand up.

## ***Collaborative Role***

Consultants who assume a collaborative role enter the relationship with the client with the notion that management issues can be dealt with effectively only by joining their specialized knowledge with the manager's knowledge of the organization. Problem-solving



becomes a joint undertaking, with equal attention to both the technical issues and the human interactions in dealing with the technical issues.

When consultants work through a collaborative role, they don't solve problems for the manager. They apply their special skills to help managers solve problems themselves. The distinction is significant. The key assumption underlying the collaborative role is that the manager or client must be actively involved in data gathering and analysis, setting goals and developing action plans, and, finally, sharing responsibility for success or failure.

Here's what happens:

*The consultant and the manager work to become interdependent.* They share responsibility for action planning, implementation, and results. They are partners. Each has wants that are important.

*Decision-making is bilateral.* It is characterized by mutual exchange and respect for the responsibilities and expertise of both parties.

*Data collection and analysis are joint efforts.* The selection of the discovery process to be used is done by both the consultant and the manager.

*Control issues become matters for discussion and negotiation.* Disagreement is expected and seen as a source of new ideas.

*Collaboration is considered essential.* The consultant makes a special point to reach understanding and agreement on the nature and scope of mutual expectations prior to initiating problem-solving efforts.

*Communication is two-way.* Both the consultant and the manager take the initiative, depending on the issues. Information exchange is carried on in a problem-solving mode.

*Implementation responsibilities are determined by discussion and agreement.* Assignments are made to maximize use of the available resources in line with the responsibilities appropriate to each party.

*The goal is to solve problems so they stay solved.* That is, the consultant establishes a helping relationship designed to broaden the competence level of managers to develop and implement action plans that will make the system more effective. The next time a similar problem arises, the manager will have the skills to solve it.

“The future is not some place we are going to, but one we are creating. The paths are not to be found, but made, and the activity of making them changes both the maker and the destinations.”

— John Scharr



**The Cost** There are also problems in trying to work collaboratively. Consultants often have special skills (e.g., in information technology or marketing management) that managers see as a quick answer to their problems. Managers who prefer to work with consultants in an expert role may interpret any attempts at collaboration as indifference or foot dragging. Managers with a preference for working with consultants in a pair-of-hands role may interpret moves toward collaboration as controlling. Plus, working collaboratively takes more time now in service of less time later.

## **Collaboration and the Fear of Holding Hands**

In a presentation on collaborative consultation, a person in the audience kept asking questions about the nature of collaboration: “Can’t it be a sign of weakness? Don’t you have expertise that you are denying if you operate too collaboratively? Clients want answers, not questions, don’t they?” Finally, with a lot of frustration, he said, “Well, I don’t want my consultants just sitting around holding hands with a client!” He was pointing to an area where there is considerable confusion about the distinction between the expert role and the collaborative role.

The core transaction of any consulting contract is the transfer of expertise from the consultant to the client. This holds whether the expertise is very tangible, such as skill in circuit design or systems design, or whether the expertise is very intangible, such as problem-solving or team-building skill. Whatever the expertise, it is the basis for the consultant’s being in business.

Part of the fear of holding hands seems to be that if you get too intertwined with the client, your expertise will somehow be diluted and blurred. A collaborative approach can come across as implying that the consultant and the client have equal expertise and are partners in technical matters. This might force the consultant to unconsciously underplay his or her own expertise in order to maintain a 50/50 relationship. If this were to happen, the fear of diluting expertise would become a reality. One consultant expressed this fear and confusion by saying, “I have forgotten more about managing inventories than most of my clients will ever know. They can hardly spell the word, and I am the corporate guru! How can I be collaborative under those conditions?”

The confusion is between collaborating on the technical aspects of the problem (which I don’t mean) and collaborating on how the stages of the consultation will be carried out (which I do mean). Here’s an example of where you draw the line between them:



<b>Areas of Collaboration</b>	<b>Areas of Expertise</b>
Expressing the wants of the client	Circuit design
Planning how to inform the organization of the study	Training design
Deciding who is involved in the discovery phase	Questionnaire design
Generating the right kind of data	Package design
Interpreting the results of discovery	Systems analysis
Deciding how to make a change	Pricing strategy

Regardless of the area of expertise, the way the consultation process itself is managed (the left side of this list) will greatly affect the client's use of even the most technical expertise. The more the consultative process can be collaborative, the better the odds for success are after the consultant has left.

## **The Consultant's Assumptions**

Any view of what makes for effective consultation relies heavily on the assumptions the consultant has about what makes an effective organization. And a world that works. These assumptions will be implicitly or explicitly a part of any recommendation the consultant makes.

Each of us doing consulting ought to be very clear about our own beliefs. Our own consulting behavior should be consistent with the style of management we advocate to our clients. If we are recommending to our clients that they tighten up controls, be more decisive, and set clear goals, we will be undermining our sense of our own integrity if we ourselves operate without controls, are indecisive, and aren't quite sure where we are headed. If we think our clients should work on being more participative and collaborative, we undermine ourselves if we keep tight control of the consulting project and don't act collaboratively with the very clients we are trying to encourage to try collaboration.

Think about what your assumptions about good management might be. There are countless models to choose from. Most organizations, for example, operate from a variation of the traditional military/church model of patriarchy. Structurally there is a great emphasis on the hierarchical pyramid and the clear implementation of authority and responsibility. The cornerstone of patriarchal management is strong leadership. This kind of leadership is seen as an individual ability to plan work, organize people to do the work, maintain control of those people and their results, and then delegate



responsibility to the right people to achieve results. The products of these leader-centered assumptions are individuals with an upward-conforming and downward-controlling orientation toward their roles.

This traditional emphasis on control and leadership qualities has shifted in the past 40 years (at least in the literature) to more collaborative or participative conceptions of organizations. Participative management and empowerment is a theme that runs throughout most assumptions about effective organizations today.

Your own assumptions about organizations determine in subtle ways your own consulting style and the skills you should be working on. Here are three of the basic assumptions that underlie the consulting approach presented in this book.

### ***1. Problem-Solving Requires Valid Data***

Using valid data eliminates a major cause of confusion, uncertainty, and resulting inefficiency in problem-solving. Valid data encompass two things: (1) objective data about ideas, events, or situations that everyone accepts as facts; and (2) personal data. Personal data are also “facts,” but they concern how individuals feel about what is happening to them and around them. If people feel they will not get a fair shake, it is a “fact” that they feel that way, and it is also a “fact” that this belief will have an effect on their behavior. To ignore this kind of “fact” is to throw away data that may be crucial to any problem-solving effort.

### ***2. Effective Decision-Making Requires Free and Open Choice***

Making decisions is easy. Making decisions that people will support is not so easy. Organizations seem to work better when people have an opportunity to influence decisions that have a direct impact on their work. When people feel that something is important and they have some control, they will be motivated to exert the effort to make things work. When they believe that something is important but they can exert no control, the common tendencies are to become cautious or defensive, play it safe, withhold information, protect themselves from blame. We don’t resist change, we resist coercion.

### ***3. Effective Implementation Requires Internal Commitment***

People readily commit themselves to things they believe will further their interests. If they see no link between what they are asked to do and what they want to do, the



probability of getting an all-out effort from them is not likely. You can order people to do things, and ordinarily they will comply—at least while you are watching. But if you want them to apply themselves, their internal commitment is required.

## **The Consultant's Goals**

Our assumptions about what contributes to effective consultant and manager performance lead to a set of preferred goals for each consulting job. Achieving each of these goals may not always be possible, but we can always be clear about our preference.

### ***Goal 1: Establish a Collaborative Relationship***

There are two reasons for consultants to strive for collaborative relationships with their clients. One is that a collaborative relationship promises maximum use of people's resources—both the consultant's and the client's. It also spreads the responsibility for success or failure and for implementation, and it's a nice way to work too. The second reason is that, whether they know it or not, consultants are always functioning as models of how to solve problems. The message contained in the way we act is much more powerful than our words. To talk collaboration and behave differently is confusing and self-defeating.

### ***Goal 2: Solve Problems So They Stay Solved***

It is possible to act in such a way that only the immediate problem gets solved. If the problem is that employees regularly come late to work, or the client wants, for example, actions that can be taken to prevent it, there are various possibilities: station the boss at the door in the morning with a pencil and a black book, or have room checks at starting time each morning, or issue a policy statement about lateness, or have meetings with employees about the need for punctuality. These actions might reduce the problem of lateness. And if internal (or external) consultants have been involved in making these kinds of recommendations, they might have contributed to an increase in the effectiveness of the organization. But this does not mean that the managers have learned anything about how to solve similar problems and thus become more competent.

The consultant's alternative is to work with line managers at another level of analysis: the way they handle lateness problems. For example, managers may not see lateness as being a symptom of discontent, or a symptom of inexperienced supervision



at the first level, or any of the other possible root problems lateness could be signaling. Also, it is possible the consultant is being asked to solve problems that line managers should be confronting themselves. Teaching managers the skills for solving a problem themselves next time requires that they understand that disturbing employee behavior is a symptom of more basic problems that they should ask for help and support for, but in the end they don't ask others to address problems that belong to them.

### ***Goal 3: Ensure Attention Is Given to Both the Technical/Business Problem and the Relationships***

Each situation has two elements: the technical/business problem that has to be resolved and the way people are interacting around that problem. In most organizations, primary attention is given to the technical/business problem. Consultants, however, are in a unique position to address the people or process issues productively. As third parties, they have no vested interest in the process issues—no power to gain or lose, no territory to expand or contract, no budget to increase or decrease. Consultants can urge attention to the process issues, and line managers will listen to them in a way in which they would not listen to each other.

## **Developing Client Commitment—A Primary Goal of Each Consulting Act**

Because consultants or support people have no direct control over implementation, they become dependent on line managers for producing results. It is the line manager who ultimately will decide whether to take action, and this choice will be based on how internally committed he or she is to the concepts the consultant is suggesting. Therefore, the consultant needs to be conscious of building internal commitment throughout the consulting process.

Effective consulting skills are the steps and behaviors that act to create internal commitment in managers. Each of us has seen examples of consulting projects where the study or report ends up on a shelf despite its cost and relevance. When this happens, it often means that somewhere along the line, the consulting process lost the managers who had to decide to use the results of the study. In flawless consulting, you move through the steps of a consulting process designed to build commitment and reduce the chance of losing the client along the way.



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Client commitment is the key to consultant leverage and impact. We can't order the client to take action. (In extreme circumstances we might decide to go to the client's boss and urge him or her to direct the client to use our recommendations, but this is a risky proposition—particularly if we want to stay in the good graces of our client.) So our impact is determined by the client's commitment to our suggestions. Building this commitment is often a process of removing obstacles that block the client from acting on our advice.

We may cling to the fantasy that if our thinking is clear and logical, our wording eloquent, and our convictions solid, the strength of our arguments will carry the day. And make no mistake: clear arguments do help. But they are not enough. The client and his or her colleagues and their way of being together is what is decisive. Their personal distance from their own responsibility is at the center of the world improving. Our task is to understand that their doubts and wish for safety is what stands in the way of commitment and our capacity to make the difference that we showed up for.







## CHAPTER 3

# Being Right—Really

**I**N ACTING AS A CONSULTANT, you always operate at two levels. One level is the content—the cognitive part of a discussion between yourself and the client. The client presents a certain organizational problem. Perhaps it's the need for training to improve workforce skills. Perhaps it's how the organization makes decisions. Or there may be a problem of system design or financial controls. The content level is the analytical, rational, or explicit part of the discussion, where you are working on what can be called the technical or business situation. At the same time and at another level, both you and the client are generating and sensing your feelings about each other—whether you feel acceptance or resistance, whether you feel high or low tension, whether you feel support or confrontation or indifference. So your relationship to the client during each phase is a second level of data that needs attention just as the content does.

A major objective of every consultation is to encourage you to focus on and value the affective, or interpersonal, aspect of the relationship you have with the client. Feelings are the affective side of the discussion and an important source of information for the consultant—information about the client's real concerns and what the possibilities are for establishing a good relationship.

Most of us have a great deal of experience working at the cognitive or content level of discussion. We come to a meeting equipped with our expertise, and we feel quite comfortable talking about problems we know something about. But there should be equal balance in the attention given to the content of the problem and the feelings you are having about the interaction that is taking place as you are working with the client.



Once you value the affective side of the relationship as an important area of attention, the second step is to increase your comfort level in putting into words how you are feeling about the relationship as it's going on. The third step is to grow more skillful in putting your sense of the relationship into words so you don't increase defensiveness on the part of the client.

## **The Affective Side of the Client-Consultant Relationship**

There are four elements to the affective side of consultant-client interaction that are always operating: responsibility, feelings, trust, and your own wants.

### ***Responsibility***

To have a good contract with the client, responsibility for what is planned and takes place has to be balanced—50/50. In most cases, the client comes to you with the expectation that once you are told what the problem is, you provide the solution. Your goal is to act out the fact that it's a 50/50 proposition.

Here is a small example. When you start a program, communication on the program is often required—when it will take place, what the arrangements are, why you're doing it. It's important that the client take the responsibility of communicating all of this to the organization—not because it's a task that only the client can do (in fact, the consultant might be in a better position to do it) but because it's a way of visibly expressing to the organization that the client is taking at least 50 percent of the responsibility for the program.

If the client wants the consultant to do this communicating and take care of all the administrative details, the client is saying that he or she wants to take a limited amount of responsibility. As a consultant, it makes sense at times to resist taking on this responsibility. This is a substantively small issue, but it's an example of what to look for in trying to decide in your own mind whether the responsibility is balanced.

### ***Feelings***

The second element that's always an issue is to what extent clients are able to own their own feelings, their own experience of the moment. In a way, this is working on balancing responsibility. The consultant needs to constantly keep in mind how much the client is owning feelings versus talking as if he or she is just an observer of the



organization. The consultant also has to keep in mind his or her own experience of the client. If the consultant is feeling that the client is defensive or very controlling, or doesn't listen or doesn't take responsibility, this is important to know. These senses are a key part of the discovery phase.

However the consultant feels working with that client, the people inside the client's organization are going to feel the same way. It is equally important for you to pay close attention to your own feelings during the consultation, particularly during the early stages, and use these as valuable information on how the organization functions and how the client manages.

## ***Trust***

The third element is trust. When most people work as a client with a consultant, they bring with them not only the prevailing image of the consultant as the expert, but also someone to watch out for. It is often useful to ask clients whether they trust your confidentiality, whether they trust you not to make them vulnerable or to take things over. You can ask them what doubts they have working with you. In this way, you're working to build trust. The more that any distrust is put into words, the more likely you are to build trust.

## ***Your Own Wants***

The fourth element on the affective side of the consultant-client relationship is that consultants have a right to our own wants from the relationship.

It's easy to fall into a service mentality, in which you see yourself charged with solving the client's problems and serving the client's needs—and it's possible to act in such a way that you, as the consultant, appear not to have any wants. The reality is that you do have wants. You may have organizational wants to have a client, so that your own organization feels that you're doing something worthwhile. You have wants for acceptance and inclusion by the client, and you require some validation that what you have is valuable and worth offering.

On a practical level, you have wants for access to that organization—to talk to people, to ask them questions. And you also have wants for support from that manager, meeting the people in the manager's organization, and dealing with the kind of resistance that you're likely to get. Your task is to understand that your wants are essential to the success of this work.



### ***The Point***

The point here is that paying close attention to your own style and your own feelings is an important dimension to the consulting relationship. Skill in consulting is not only skill in providing a program, a process, and procedures that respond to the client's needs. It's also your skill in being able to identify and put into words the issues around trust, feelings, responsibility, and your own wants. As you grow into your consulting practice, you will discover a deeper layer of concerns for building collaborative relationships with your clients.

### **The Business of Consulting**

At its heart, consulting is a relationship business. No matter how research-based or technical the project is, it will always reach a point at which the success of the work will hinge on the quality of the relationships we have with our clients. This relationship is the conduit or delivery system through which our expertise passes.

The way we contact and engage people around our expertise is an applied art and takes a hundred forms. At times it is one-to-one coaching with an individual or team. It can be working with a group on strategy or technology, or running a training session. Underlying all the ways we work with clients is a set of beliefs about relationships, learning, and the nuances of how change occurs that ultimately define our practice.

While this book is threaded with thoughts about good, or flawless, consulting practice, I want to take a moment to be explicit about its foundational concepts. When I am lost, unsure how to proceed, I return to a few ideas that ground me again and again, and serve to reassure. Each of these ideas has as much to do with the heart as the head; in fact, finding and sustaining this connection may be the whole point. Consulting cannot be done well without genuine caring for the client, and the challenge is to find ways to embody our care in the way we do the work. Our care is expressed partly in our behavior and style, but it is also a matter of how we structure critical elements of the learning and change process. And the story we have about what we are doing here.

### ***The Struggle Is the Solution***

Most persistent problems that call for consultation have no clear right answer. This means we have to get used to facing the paradoxical nature of the workplace and the human beings we find there. Think about how you deal with situations where two



opposing viewpoints are both true. Do we need more control or less? More centralization or more local control? Do people need more freedom, or will they abuse the privilege and go off in separate directions? Should we always tell the truth or do we acknowledge the political nature of organizations? Will more technology and better information help, or is the problem one of motivation and lack of training?

Every consultation involves these kinds of questions. Even in very technical consulting, questions like these are embedded in the architecture of our solutions. We make a serious mistake if we choose one or the other, or even try to find a middle ground. We lose the benefit of the unique ideas at the two poles when we compromise for middle ground. The best outcomes emerge in the effort to understand the truth in both sides. The consultant's task is to evoke an exploration of the polarity, postpone the quick answers, and make sure that the complexity of the question is acknowledged before action is chosen. It is in the struggle to transcend both sides that a resolution is found.

For example, we need control, and we also need local choice. People need more freedom, and they will at times abuse it. More technology is vital, and motivation and skill are everything. It is the tension in these polarities that informs action that is based in reality and stays alive. If we can accept that this sort of tension is always present, then the action we take at a particular moment will in some ways not matter: whatever we choose, we will pay a price for it. So why not acknowledge this, see the struggle as the path, and resist the temptation of certainty and speed?

### ***The Question Is More Important Than the Answer***

What this means is that we have to learn to trust the questions—and recognize that the way we ask the question drives the kind of answer we develop.

We get stuck by asking the wrong question. The most common wrong question is that of the engineer in each of us who wants to know how we get something done. This question quickly takes us down the path of methodology and technique. It assumes the problem is one of what to do rather than why to do it or even whether it is worth doing.

The “how” question has several variations. Take them as warning signs.

- How long will it take? We want to make good time regardless of where we are going.
- How do we get them to change? If only they would change, we would be better off. The top thinks the bottom is the problem; the bottom thinks the top is the problem, and when they get together, both agree the middle is the problem.



- What are the steps needed for . . . ? Life can be reduced to a step-by-step plan. PowerPoint is the icon, points made for taking the world to scale. Blueprints with milestones are the drug, and more discipline is the prescription that never cures.
- How do we measure the effect? This implies that there is no value in the invisible world. It is the measure of reality that becomes the point. Philosopher Alan Watts once said that we have reached the point at which we go to a restaurant and eat the menu. We have become more interested in the definition and measurement of life than in living it.
- How do we communicate this? The problem is they do not understand us. “A problem in communication” is the ultimate empty diagnosis. It denies real conflict and raises spin to the level of purpose. Our finest example of this is Washington, D.C., where the primary work of the political class is to manage image and the news. Questions of communication are most often the easy way out of questions of will, courage, and commitment.
- What are other organizations doing or where has this worked? We want to lead and wish to go second at the same time. There is some value in discovering what others are doing; it gives us hope. More often, though, the question is a wish for safety, for when we hear where it has worked, we then talk of how unique our situation is.

These questions are so appealing because they demand so little. They promise a world that is logical and predictable. They also externalize the problem and are focused on change from people who are not in the room. What’s more, they shrink the problem to manageable size by treating it as a matter of skills rather than questions of purpose.

“It’s true that in blundering about, we struck gold, but the fact remains we were looking for gold—asking the right questions.”

— *Francis Crick*

## ***Beyond How***

“How” questions will take us no farther than our starting place. They result in trying harder at what we were already doing. The questions that heal us and offer hope for authentic change are the ones we cannot easily answer. Living systems are not controllable, despite the fact that they evolve toward order and some cohesion. To move a



living system, we need to question what we are doing and why. We need to choose depth over speed, consciousness over action—at least for a little while.

The questions that lead to a change in thinking are more about why and where than about how. Some examples:

- What is the point of what we are doing? We live in a world measured by speed, convenience, and scale. Are we here to make money, meet budgets, grow the operation? Is this enough? And who is the beneficiary of this? Who are we here to serve, and what price are we willing to pay to stay true to our answer?
- What has to die before we can move to something new? We want change but do not want to pay for it. We are always required to put aside what got us here to move on. Where do we find the courage to do this?
- What is the real value of our product and service? And in whose eyes? How valid is our promise, and what are the side effects of how we deliver on the promise? Are our vision statement, for an enterprise or a department, and the way we present ourselves a picture we even believe is true?
- What personal meaning do people find in what we are doing? What intrinsic rewards exist for us? Do we show up voluntarily, or have we indentured ourselves simply to sustain our life outside work? Many people think work is just that, work, and to expect more is to be a fool.
- What would happen if we did nothing? When is change for its own sake? Maybe we should just get better at what we do now.
- What are the capacities and strengths that we are not using fully? Give up on fixing weaknesses; find out what more is possible. Sometimes we do not even know our gifts as individuals and as institutions. What strengths do others see in us? Years ago in our consulting firm, we asked clients why they hired us. They said that what they found attractive was our seeming disinterest and reluctance in working with them. We were shocked. We thought that if we seemed aloof, it was because we were disorganized; they saw it as a sign of integrity.
- And what are we leaving for the next generation? This question is for the second half of life, but it is still a useful focusing exercise. Our materialistic culture consumes its resources and bets on science or miracles to cope with what we leave for those after us. What will our legacy be?

These are difficult questions, ones that require faith and patience. They do not substitute for action, and at some point we do have to ask, “How?” But the “why?” questions



are designed for learning and change, and in that way they are very practical indeed. It is in the dialogue about these questions that change occurs. They are questions for the client to engage in at the top and bottom and in between; they are not questions for the consultant to answer.

It is hard for some to engage in this level of abstract dialogue, even though these are the questions we each privately ask ourselves. No matter how difficult, these are the questions our clients must deal with among themselves first and then publicly. The route to genuine change is less obvious than a list and some milestones; without some depth to our inquiry, our thinking will never change, and we destine ourselves to the pursuit of quick fix and fashion. And if a consultant cannot pose these questions, who will?

### ***Insight Resides in Moments of Tension***

To value struggle, entertain maddening questions, and live with paradox in the service of thinking differently is hard. Really hard. Our instinct is to move toward comfortable subjects, reach for the habitual way of working. If we consultants propose questions about meaning and demand an extended period of reflection, we will be blamed for not being practical, action-oriented, and step-minded.

If we view this tension as a flaw in the process, we will jump ship at the first salvo and retreat into comfort. Many of my mistakes have occurred when I became anxious about the process and reverted to the safe harbor of action plans and lists. Once the actions were listed, we all breathed a sigh of relief and smiled at the familiar feel of milestones in our hands. That was the good news.

When I would look back at those times, though, the changes that came out of those efforts were always disappointing. Follow-through was weak, optimism quickly faded, and even the effort to push the changes along left most people feeling that nothing had changed. We just had more action items on our plate. I let those clients down by yielding to the tension too easily. If I had persisted longer with the difficult questions, asked for more rethinking of the basics, I would have served the client better.

Another source of tension might simply be the strained relationships among those in the room. If resolving this strain were easy, they would have done it before we got there. We are often faced with tension that is historical and tenacious. Everyone feels it, but no one wants to name it. Do we dive into it or manage around it?

The door to new ways of thinking does not open easily, and it is the tension in the room and naming it that actually becomes the key. The tension points to where the



resistance or doubt resides. Discussing the tension makes insight and resolution possible. If we can see the tension as energy and go toward it, big insights will follow. If we manage around it, we risk losing the day.

When the tension surfaces, it needs to be named, discussed, and acknowledged. The consultant has to push the discussion into the difficult areas. We have to ask ourselves when we will be in a better position to move ahead. When will be a better time to discuss failure, conflict between individuals and groups, feelings of futility and doubt? More structure is not what is needed at these moments; it is courage that is in short supply. By naming the tension and supporting a discussion of what it means, we gain some learning about the emotional part of work.

This is what learning requires and what clients need from us. It is the patriarchal culture that wants to keep a lid on feelings, which is what running from the tension is about. The key is understanding that the expression itself is what is valuable, not the answer or resolution. If we can support both sides in expressing things they find hard to discuss, then the decisions made afterward will be of a different nature.

## **Staging the Client's Involvement, Step by Step**

We have been discussing in a somewhat general way the consultant's role orientation and assumptions and ways to make a project more collaborative. The following sequence will make these ideas very concrete. The stages leading up to implementation of a change—what are called the preliminary events—can be divided into 12 specific action steps. Each step provides an opportunity to involve the client in the process without unnaturally downplaying your specific expertise.

Maximum client involvement and commitment will occur to the extent that you, the consultant, act at each stage in the following ways. These are steps you can take to make the 50/50 responsibility for the project a reality.

### ***Step 1: Define the Initial Problem***

Ask the client to state what the problem is. If the client is thinking more of a new possibility than a problem, state this in your own words. Add to this statement what you think might be some more underlying causes of the problem or important elements of the possibility.



***Example: IT Consultant***

*IT consultant:* “What do you think the problem is?”

*Client:* “The software you guys did for us doesn’t do what it needs it to do half the time. I think the design may be faulty. I want you to check the code and make sure it works as it should.”

*IT consultant:* “I will check the programming code and test the software’s functionality. Also, as a potential part of the problem, I think we should consider how well the users understand this application. Plus we should look into the kind of training and supervision they receive, especially on the night shift.”

*Comment:* It is not just up to the client to make the initial problem statement. You should feel free to add your 50%, even at this early stage.

***Step 2: Decide Whether to Proceed with the Project***

The purpose of early discussions is to determine whether proceeding in this project will be successful, for you and the person on the other side of the table. In deciding whether to proceed, you also have some choice. If the project is set up in a way that you think it won’t succeed, you have options. You can seek conditions where it can work. Often, you are assigned to pursue a project and make it work. To implement what top management wants to see happen. This makes it all complicated and we will get to this dilemma soon.

***Example: Financial Services Consultant***

*Client:* “Let’s go ahead with the project to do a complete audit of the purchasing function. And let’s have it done in 30 days.”

*Financial services consultant:* “A complete purchasing audit is a big order. To accomplish this in 30 days is almost impossible. We have a list of projects that have to be reviewed by our committee. If those expectations of yours are firm, we had better reevaluate whether we can give you what you want.”

*Comment:* Clients usually feel that the decision to go ahead is strictly up to them. By questioning the decision, the consultant is acting as a 50/50 partner. The intent is not to say no to clients, but to make the decision to go ahead a joint decision.



### ***Step 3: Select the Dimensions to Be Studied***

Given your expertise in the project, you may know best what aspect of the problem should be analyzed. The client, though, has operating experience with the problem and the people and can be asked what to look for.

#### ***Example: IT Consultant***

*IT consultant:* “Next Monday I will start examining the program code and testing its functionality. I will also interview the users about how they operate the software for certain routine procedures. It would help if you and the affected department managers would make a list of the areas you would like investigated and also any questions you would like the software users to answer.”

*Comment:* Although it takes only a simple question to involve the client in deciding what to look at, often the question is not asked. If a questionnaire is to be used, you can have the client select some of the questions.

### ***Step 4: Decide Who Will Be Involved in the Project***

The client often expects the consultant to do the whole job. Creating a consultant-client team to do the job is a good way to build client commitment.

#### ***Example: Financial Services Consultant***

*Financial services consultant:* “To make this project successful, I would like two people from your organization to work with me on it. I will need five days of one of your regional purchasing managers’ time and eight days of one of your home office purchasing people. The three of us will be responsible for ending up with an analysis of the deficiencies and strengths of the existing purchasing system and a recommended redesign to address them. I will be in charge of the project and make the major time commitment, but two people from your group will help the project immensely.”

*Comment:* Doing the job by yourself is always simpler and faster. Having people from the client organization takes more time and agony, yet this involvement directly encourages commitment and promotes eventual implementation of the work.



### ***Step 5: Select the Method***

The client has ideas about how the data should be collected. Ask what they are.

#### ***Example: IT Consultant***

*IT consultant:* “I will definitely look over the software, test its functionality, and talk to the end users. Whom else should I talk to? Should we meet with people in a group or individually? What other areas of the operation should we look into, and how should we approach them?”

*Comment:* Again, these are simple but important questions to ask the client. You are doing this 30% for the new information you might get and 70% to model and act out a 50/50 way of approaching this kind of project. By your behavior, you are helping the client learn how to solve problems like this for themselves.

### ***Step 6: Do Discovery***

Have the client do the discovery with you.

#### ***Example: IT Consultant***

*IT consultant:* “I would like one of your supervisors to work with me as I go through the division and talk to people. Perhaps the supervisors could interview a sample of the software users to determine what they think could be done to make it work better. Then I would like to hold a large group meeting to engage them in how we proceed.”

*Comment:* There are two main risks in having the client do some of the discovery: (1) people may withhold information because they are talking to those who have some power over them, and (2) some of the data may be distorted because the line organization has a stake in making itself look competent and guilt free.

These are risks you can be willing to take. You will get your own data, and usually you have enough experience to know rather quickly what is really going on. If need be, you can go back to the people a second time, alone. The advantage of having the line people do some of the data collection is that whatever information is shared up the line, the right people are hearing it—the people who can do something about it.



It does no good if the consultant hears the “truth,” but the line people don’t believe it. Above all, though, the process keeps beating the 50/50 drum.

### ***Steps 7 through 9: Funneling the Data and Making Sense of It***

Funneling a huge amount of data into a manageable amount of information, summarizing and organizing it, and making sense of it takes a lot of time. You also get a real sense of what you have by suffering through these three steps. Urge the client to be with you at certain points in this procedure. Analyzing what the data mean is fun, so involve the client in this too.

#### ***Example: Financial Services Consultant***

*Financial services consultant:* “Spend three days with me organizing what we have discovered and figuring what its implications are for the purchasing system we are investigating.”

*Comment:* Again, a simple, assertive request trades some of the efficient use of your own time for a client who has more invested in the outcome. On a highly technical project, the client may not have the background to meaningfully contribute to this stage of the project. In that case, you have no choice but to do it alone. Be careful, though; the client’s lack of background is our favorite excuse for excluding him or her at various stages.

### ***Step 10: Provide the Results***

Have the client share in presenting the data analysis in the feedback meeting.

#### ***Example: Financial Services Consultant***

*Financial services consultant:* “For this meeting, I am going to report what we learned about the purchasing system. George, the purchasing director, will report what we learned about the purchasing agents’ skills and attitudes toward purchasing procedures and controls.”

*Comment:* When line managers have the experience of reporting negative findings, their defensiveness goes down, and the feedback step is less likely to become an argument.



### ***Step 11: Make Recommendations***

More than any other stage, developing workable recommendations requires integrating your technical knowledge and the client's practical and organizational knowledge. Ask the client what he or she would do about the situation, having now heard the results of the inquiry.

#### ***Example: IT Consultant***

*IT consultant:* “We know that the short formal training program for end users is a major obstacle to their operating the software properly. What can we recommend that would reduce our dependency on them to figure out how to use it on their own?”

*Comment:* The action is simple once your strategy becomes clear. Even if clients cannot be creative about what to recommend, it is important that they struggle with the question.

### ***Step 12: Decide on Actions***

Once the study is done and the recommendations made, the client may want to take over the process and dismiss the consultant from the decision-making meeting. I always resist this.

#### ***Example: Financial Services Consultant***

*Client:* “Thank you very much for the new purchasing process you have developed, and the structural and procedural changes needed to support it. We will think about it and let you know when we think the organization will be ready for this.”

*Financial services consultant:* “I would like to be a part of the meeting when you discuss this. I care a lot about the project and know I could contribute to the question of timing and implementation. I realize your usual procedure is to discuss this without the consultant present, but in this case, I wonder if you could make an exception.”



*Comment:*

The danger here is that the client will take 100% of the action and leave you out in the cold. So, you have to ask to be included. In addition to your own needs for inclusion, you are also saying to the client by your action that when someone in their organization has made an important contribution to a project, the person should be included in the decision-making meeting. If the client still chooses to exclude you, there may be little you can do other than sulk and look hurt.



Each of these 12 steps is one in a series of opportunities to engage the client, reduce resistance, and increase the probabilities of success. Taking advantage of these opportunities entails giving up some consultant prerogatives and freedom of action in the service of the longer-range goal of having a real impact. A note: even though these steps are listed in sequence, life rarely occurs that way. Each step is territory to be covered, regardless of the order in which they become possible.

For a downloadable copy of Checklist # 1, visit [www.flawlessconsulting.com](http://www.flawlessconsulting.com).

### CHECKLIST #1: ASSESSING THE BALANCE OF RESPONSIBILITY

On the following scales, rate who is taking responsibility in an important project you are now engaged in. Put a check mark where it currently balances out.

	Client has major responsibility; I have little	50/50	I have major responsibility; client has little
1. Define the initial problem			
2. Decide whether to proceed with the project			

(continued)



(continued)

	Client has major responsibility; I have little		I have major responsibility; client has little
		50/50	
3. Select the dimensions to be studied			
4. Decide who will be involved in the project			
5. Select the method			
6. Do discovery			
7. through 9. Funneling the data and making sense of it			
10. Provide the results			
11. Make recommendations			
12. Decide on actions			

Connect the marks you made. Any place the line deviates from the center shows an opportunity for you to restructure this project or your next one to take full advantage of using client involvement to increase your chances of success—especially the chances that your project will still be active and used after you have left the scene.



## CHAPTER 4

# Flawless Consulting

**C**ONSULTING CAN SEEM VAGUE and overly complicated when, in fact, it is possible to consult flawlessly and to do so quite simply. The way to keep it simple is to focus on only two dimensions of consulting. Ask yourself two questions whenever you are with a client:

1. Am I being authentic with this person now?
2. Am I completing the business of the consulting phase I am in?

## Being Authentic

Authentic behavior with a client means you put into words what you are experiencing with the client as you work. This is the most powerful thing you can do to build client commitment and have the leverage you are looking for.

There is a tendency for us to look for ways of being clever with a client. We agonize over ways of presenting our ideas, of phrasing the project so that it will appeal. Many times I have been with a client and found myself straining to figure out what will convince them that I am everything they are looking for. Projections of bottom-line savings are made, solutions for sticky employee problems are proposed, confirmations that the client has been doing everything humanly possible are suggested with a nod and a smile.

It is a mistake to assume that clients make decisions to begin projects and use consultants based on purely rational reasons. More often than not, the client's primary question is: "Is this person someone I can trust? Is this someone I can trust not to hurt me, not to con me—someone who can both help solve the organizational or technical



problems I have and, at the same time, be considerate of my position and person?” When we operate in too clever or manipulative a way, or lay it on too thick, especially when we are aligning our position with what we say top management wants, clients pick this up. They are thinking to themselves, *Wow! This guy is really laying it on thick. He is making me look like a fool if I say no.* Line managers know when we are trying to maneuver them, and when it happens, they trust us a little less.

Lower trust leads to lower leverage and lower client commitment. Authentic behavior leads to higher trust, higher leverage, and higher client commitment. Authentic behavior also has the advantage of being incredibly simple. It is to literally put into words what you are experiencing.

### **Examples**

*Client says:*

“Well, this audit shouldn’t take you too long. Couple of days, and you will be done. I wish I had some time to spend with you, but there are some really important things I must attend to. My assistant can give you some support. Also, don’t take too much time from any of my people. They are under a lot of pressure.”

*Consultant experiences:*

Feeling unimportant, small. My work is being treated as a trivial matter. This is how I make my living, but to this person, I am an interruption.

*Nonauthentic consultant response:*

“This audit could have far-reaching implications. The home office is looking closely at these audits to assess our top divisions. They are also required by the company.”

*Authentic consultant response:*

“You are treating this audit as though it is unimportant and small—a trivial matter. If it is an interruption, maybe we should reassess the timing. I would like you to treat it with more importance.”



*Client says:*

“I want your opinion whether my people are making mistakes and what they should do to correct them. If you decide they are incompetent to operate this



- operating unit, I want you to report directly to me at once. With names and specifics.”
- Consultant experiences:* Feeling like a judge, like I have to police the client’s employees.
- Nonauthentic consultant response:* “My report will describe how the unit is being managed and why there have been so many breakdowns. It will be up to you to take corrective actions.”
- Authentic consultant response:* “I feel I am being seen as a judge or police officer on this project. This is not the role I feel is most effective. I would like you to view me more as a mirror of what is happening now. You and your people can then evaluate what needs to be done and whether training is required. I am not a conscience.”



- Client says:* “To really understand this problem, you have to go back to when this operation was set up. It all started in November 1976 on a Thursday afternoon. There were three people in this operation. At the time, their only function was to fill orders and answer the phone. George was the nephew of the sales manager and had only a high school education. Our customers were mostly on the East Coast . . . [and on and on and on and on].
- Consultant experiences:* Impatience, boredom. Spending too much time on history. Losing energy.
- Nonauthentic consultant response:* Silence to encourage the client to go on, assuming the client will get to the point or that it is therapeutically essential for the client to go through all this detail.
- Authentic consultant response:* “You are giving me a lot of detail. I am having trouble staying with your narrative. I am eager to get to the key current issues. What is the key problem now?”





<i>Client says:</i>	“If you will just complete your report of findings, my management group and I will meet later to decide what to do and evaluate the results.”
<i>Consultant experiences:</i>	Exclusion from the real action. Postponement of dealing with the problems.
<i>Nonauthentic consultant response:</i>	“There might be some information that I have not included in the report that would be relevant to your decision-making process.” (Or acquiescence.)
<i>Authentic consultant response:</i>	“You are excluding me from the decision on what to do. I would like to be included in that meeting, even if including me means some inconvenience for you and your team.”

In these examples, each initial client statement acts to keep the consultant distant in some way. Each is a subtle form of resistance to the consultant's help and serves to reduce its impact. The nonauthentic consultant responses deal indirectly and impersonally with the resistance. They make it easier for the client to stay distant and treat the consultant's concerns in a procedural way. The authentic responses focus on the relationship between the consultant and the client, and force the client to give importance to the consultant's role and wants for the project. Simple direct statements by the consultant about the consultant-client interaction put more balance in the relationship; they work against either total client control or total consultant control. Imbalanced control in either direction acts to reduce internal commitment to the project.

Authentic behavior is essential to consulting flawlessly. Much of the rest of this book gives detailed and specific expression to what authentic behavior looks like in the context of doing consulting.

## **Completing the Requirements of Each Phase**

In addition to being authentic, flawless consulting demands knowledge of the task requirements of each phase of the project. These requirements are the business of each phase and must be completed before moving on.

Here is a brief description of the requirements of each phase. They are discussed in detail in the rest of the book.



## Contracting

1. *Negotiate wants.* Setting up a project requires the client and the consultant to exchange what they want from each other and what they have to offer each other. Too often, consultants understate their wants and clients understate their offers.
2. *Cope with mixed motivation.* When clients ask for help, they always do so with some ambivalence. They want you to get involved and be helpful, but at the same time they wish they had never met you. One hand beckons you; the other says stop. A requirement of contracting is to get this mixed motivation expressed early in the project so it won't haunt you later.
3. *Surface concerns about exposure and loss of control.* Most of the real concerns clients have about pursuing a consulting project with you are expressed quite indirectly. They ask about credentials, experience, results in other departments or companies, cost, timing, and more. Often what they are really concerned about is (1) Are they going to be made to look or feel foolish or incompetent? and (2) Will they lose control of either themselves, their organization, or you, the consultant? These concerns have to be addressed directly as part of the contracting phase.
4. *Understand triangular and rectangular contracts.* You have to know how many clients you have. Your client has a boss and you may have a boss. If your client's boss and your boss have had a heavy hand in setting up this project, they need to be part of the contract. At least, their roles need to be acknowledged between you and your client. If it is you, the client, and the client's boss, you have a triangular contract. Throw in your own boss, and the triangle becomes a rectangle. Clarifying who is involved and getting them into the contract is a requirement of the contracting phase.

## Discovery and Underlying Concerns

1. *Layers of inquiry.* The initial problem statement in a consulting project is usually a symptom of other underlying problems. Your task as the consultant is to name the layers of the problem clearly and simply. If the client comes to you with a possibility instead of a problem, you want to know why this matters so much and what it means to the client, in addition to exploring the nature of the possibility.
2. *Political climate.* Whether your client is a family, a business unit, or an organization, politics is affecting people's behavior and their ability to solve problems. Your task as consultant is to understand enough about the politics of the situation to see how it will affect your project and the implementation of your recommendations. Too often, we collude with the client in pretending that organizations are not political but solely rational.



3. *Resistance to sharing information.* The client always has some reluctance to share the whole story or all the data we need to understand what's happening. This resistance, which often comes out indirectly with passive or questioning behavior during the data collection, has to be identified and expressed.
4. *The interview as a joint learning event.* Once we start collecting data, we have begun to change that organization. We are never simply neutral, objective observers. Beginning the process of our inquiry portends the implementation process, and we need to see it that way. When sticky issues come up during the discovery phase, we need to pursue them and not worry about contaminating the data or biasing the study. Too often, we see our role in discovery as a passive one.

### **Analysis and the Decision to Act**

1. *Funneling data.* The purpose of discovery is to get some action, not to do research for its own sake. This means the data need to be reduced to a manageable number of items. Each of the final items selected for feedback to the client should be actionable—that is, they should be under the client's control. Choose focus over comprehensiveness.
2. *Presenting personal and organizational data.* As we inquire about equipment, or compensation, or information flow, we also pick up data on our client's management style. We learn about the politics of the situation, and about people's attitudes toward the organization. One requirement of the feedback phase is to include this kind of information in our report. Personal and organizational data are not included to hurt anyone or to be gossipy, but as information on the context in which our recommendations might be implemented. It is also a unique kind of information that the client often cannot obtain from anyone else.
3. *Managing the meeting for action.* The feedback meeting is the moment of truth. It is the moment of highest anxiety for both client and consultant—anxiety for the consultant because of what is to be said, anxiety for the client because of what is to be heard. You need to keep control of this meeting so that the business of the meeting is covered. Presenting a clear picture to the client is only part of the agenda. The main goal is to work on the decision about what to do. The more the feedback meeting can address what to do, the better the chance is of implementation. The feedback meeting may be your last chance to influence the decision about implementation, so take advantage of the opportunity.
4. *Focusing on the here and now.* Another requirement of the feedback phase is identifying how the client is managing the feedback itself. Usually, the feedback process becomes



victim to the same management problems that created the need for your services in the first place. If the organization is suffering from a lack of structure or direction, for example, this will also affect how they handle your report. You need to be conscious of this and call it to your client's attention. If you are not acutely aware of how your own project is being handled, you will simply become the latest casualty.

5. *Don't take it personally.* This is the toughest to do. The reaction of the client to your work is more a response to the process of dependency and receiving help than it is resistance to your own personal style. You do have your own peculiarities; so does everyone else. If, however, you start agonizing about them during the feedback process, even to yourself, you're in big trouble. The resistance you encounter during the process is resistance to the prospect of having to act on difficult organizational issues. Don't be seduced into taking it personally.

### **Engagement and Implementation**

1. *Bet on engagement over mandate and persuasion.* Although a decision has been made, the real work lies ahead. How you involve people will determine their commitment at each stage. The instinct is to focus too much on the decision and not value the importance of how people are brought together to make it work.
2. *Design more for participation than presentation.* Each meeting has to be an example of the new way of working and demonstrate what employee attitudes will dictate success. This demands high interaction and forms of proceeding. People will not invest in what they have been sold, even though it seems as though they just want you to be clear about what is expected from them.
3. *Encourage difficult public exchanges.* Trust is built by dealing with the difficult issues early and publicly. Create room for doubt and cynicism from the beginning. Reservations that are postponed will come back to haunt you. The way we handle the difficult conversations will determine the credibility of the project and the client's view of whether we are an agent of the top or in service of all parties.
4. *Put real choice on the table.* Bring people into the decision about change as early as possible. Commitment comes from having choice. Resist the temptation to package the whole solution early in the name of speed. Commitment may be more important than perfection. There are always several right answers to every question.
5. *Change the conversation to change the culture.* Encourage dialogue that is void of blame, history, attention to who is not in the room, and that moves too quickly into action. Structure the conversation toward personal responsibility, questions of purpose and meaning, and what will be unique and new about the proposed changes.



6. *Pay attention to the room or the structure of a virtual meeting.* The structure of the way we come together has more impact on the attitude and commitment of our clients than we realize. The room itself, how everyone is seated, and the way we run the meeting carry strong messages about our intentions and who is important to success. Most of the places where meetings are held reinforce high control and mandated strategies. When we have choice about the structure of the room, take advantage of it. Same for the virtual world. Half the time should be for structured dialogue among participants.

It's entirely possible to move through the phases and skip some of these task requirements. In contracting, for example, most of us are pretty good at assessing client wants. But if we fail to identify client offers or our own wants as clearly as we assess client wants, we are in trouble. Wants skipped in the beginning are much harder to recover in later phases. An example is the consultant's desire to have clients support the project and tell their people about it. If this is not negotiated in the contracting phase, you will feel undercut later when you want to collect data from people who don't really know why you are talking to them.

Another key task of contracting is to discuss the client's motivation to proceed with the project. Sometimes your desire to begin the project may lead you to minimize this discussion. You may never ask point-blank whether the client wants to go ahead with the project and discover how much enthusiasm they have for it. If you find out later that the motivation is low, it may be too late to do anything about it.

Because of our desire to get a project going, most of us have a tendency to overlook and downplay early resistance and skepticism. We delude ourselves into thinking that once clients get into the project, they will be hooked by it and learn to trust us. This can lead to our bending over more than we wish in the beginning, hoping that we will be able to stand up straight later on. This usually doesn't work. When we bend over in the beginning, the client sees us as someone who works in a bent-over position. When we avoid issues in the beginning, the client sees us as someone who avoids issues. It is difficult to change these images and expectations of us—particularly if the client wishes us to bend over and avoid issues.

By not confronting the tasks of each phase, we are left with accumulating unfinished business that comes back to haunt us. Unfinished business always comes out somewhere, and usually indirectly. The client who felt we were coercing in the beginning of the project but never expressed that sentiment directly is the client who endlessly questions us later in the feedback meeting. Those endless questions are fueled



by the early feeling of coercion, not by our faulty data. It will be much harder in the feedback meeting to rework those feelings of coercion than it would have been to discuss them in the contracting meeting when the project got started.

Finishing the business of each phase and being authentic in stating what you are experiencing to the client are all you need to consult flawlessly.

But what about getting results and what about accountability?

## Results

By definition, being a consultant—and not a manager—means you have direct control and responsibility only for your own time and your own *support* resources. The line manager is paid to take responsibility for what the line organization implements or doesn't implement. If the client manager takes your report and chooses to do nothing about it, that is the manager's right. In the final analysis, you are not responsible for the use of your expertise and recommendations. If consultants really believe that they should be responsible for implementing their recommendations, they should immediately get jobs as line managers and stop calling themselves consultants.

This desire to take responsibility for activities that rightly belong to clients can become a major obstacle to consulting effectiveness. When we take over and act as if it is our organization (a wish we all have at times), the line manager is let off the hook. The organization may get the immediate problem solved, but managers will have learned little about how to do it for themselves. When something goes wrong with our system, as it inevitably will, we are either called back in again and again or the line organization will claim that our system was faulty to begin with. Both client overdependence and client disdain are bad for the consultant. It is essential to be clear on what you, as consultant, are responsible for and what the line manager is responsible for.

## Accountability

Just because we are not responsible for what the client does with our efforts does not mean we don't care what happens in the end. In fact, the impact that our consulting efforts have is deeply important. We want our efforts to be used. Every time. If an engineer consultant is called in to fix a furnace in a plant, the engineer will make recommendations so the furnace will be fixed and operated to run perfectly forever. The problem is that the consultant doesn't control how that furnace is operated. If we are



coaching a line manager toward greater effectiveness, that manager will decide what to listen to and act on, and that is the way it is.

This is the deepest frustration of doing consulting. You know your recommendations are sound and should be followed, but you are not responsible for how the furnace is operated and need to accept that fact. You are not responsible for whether your coaching clients keep getting in their own way. All you can do is to work with clients in a way that increases the probabilities that they will follow the advice and make the effort to learn how to operate the furnace or make the effort to deal with others in a different way.

The key to increasing the chances for success is to keep focusing on how you work with clients. All we can really control is our own way of working, our own behavior, our own strategies of involving clients and reducing their reluctance to operate the furnace differently. This is what we should be held accountable for: how we work with clients—not what clients do in managing or mismanaging their own operations.

The downside of our wanting to be useful is the desire to prove that our work led to good results. Needing to claim credit for the risks and efforts made by clients is a measure of our own inflation and the anxiety that underpins it. Our clients will know, even if they cannot name it easily, what contribution we made to their effort. Our need for concrete demonstration of our results is either to reassure our doubts or to serve our needs to market our services.

If I . . .

know my area of expertise (a given),  
behave authentically with the client,  
tend to and complete the business of each consulting phase, and  
act to build capacity for the client to solve the next problem on their own,

. . . I can legitimately say I have consulted flawlessly. Even if no action results from my efforts. Even if the project aborts in the early contracting phase. Even if my services are terminated the day I make my recommendations. Even if all these things happen, it is possible to call it a very competent job of consultation. If these things happen, it is not a happy consultation, for we all wish for the world to transform at our touch. But it is the best we can do.

This way of viewing consulting accountability restrains us from taking over for our clients and uselessly pressuring them to do something they won't or can't do. Taking over client organizations, pressuring to be heeded, complaining about the



way a manager manages: all reduce consultants' effectiveness. Focusing on our own actions and expressing our awareness of what we are experiencing with the client and how we are working all increase our effectiveness.

Our own actions, our own awareness: this is what we should be held accountable for. Fire me for not contracting well or not confronting the client's low motivation until the feedback meeting. Fire me for packaging the recommendations so completely and perfectly that the client was afraid to touch them. But reward me for contracting solidly with three managers who terminated projects when a new vice president was announced. Reward me for not beginning a project when a plant manager said it was necessary but all signs were to the contrary.

Completing the business of each phase and behaving authentically with the client: that's what flawless consultation, consultation without failure, requires. In all my years of consulting, all my failures (which I remember with distressing clarity) occurred either because I was so carried away by how I was going to solve the client's problem that I didn't pay attention to client motivation or because I wanted that client so badly that I didn't care what the contract looked like. In each case, I ignored some step in the consulting process, did not attend to the business of a particular phase, or chose not to deal authentically with my concerns about the client. Had I focused more on exactly how I was working with each client, these failures could have been avoided.

## **The Right to Fail**

Failures can be avoided, but this doesn't mean a consultant can expect to see meaningful improvement as a result of every single project. Internal consultants often ask, "You mean that if I behave authentically and take care of the business of each phase, I will win the support of a plant manager who up to now won't talk to me?" When they ask that question, they are expressing their skepticism. It is a rightful skepticism. No action by a consultant will guarantee results with a client. There are several reasons for this.

Each of us learns and uses information in different ways. It is often difficult for managers to accept help and be publicly open to suggestions. Privately they may be strongly affected by our work, and we may never know it. Pressuring clients to feel we have immediately helped them can be a tremendous obstacle to the learning we are trying to promote. If we can stay focused simply on the way we are working with clients, we will avoid compulsively pressuring the client, and the results will take care of themselves.



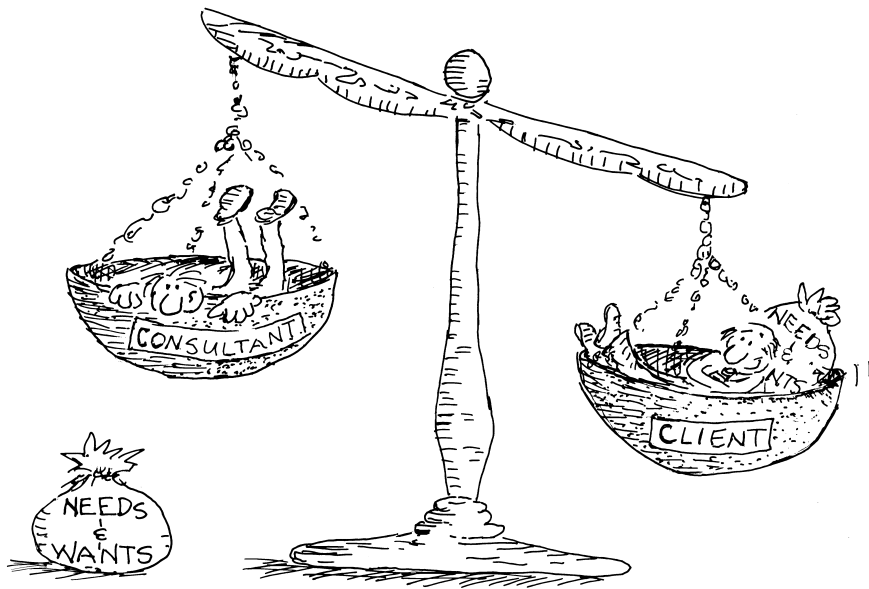
A second reason consultants can't judge their work just by managers' reactions is that client managers have a right to fail, whether we like it or not. Managers have a right to avoid dealing with operator problems on the furnace, to keep others at arm's length, to keep loose controls on petty cash, to have inconsistent pay policies for the field sales force. Managers have a right to suffer, and as consultants, we are usually too much on the periphery of their lives to really change this.

A manager's right to fail is especially hard for internal consultants to accept. If we are in an organization we care about and see a division going down the drain, we feel obligated to the organization and ourselves to try and turn that situation around. The wish is a fine one, for it gives meaning to our work. The mistake we can make is to take on the rehabilitation of that division as a personal objective. The manager of that division, not the consultant, is responsible for its rehabilitation. Taking over the manager's rights, including the right to fail, leads to consulting errors. It can also lead to frustration and despair, for you may be taking on a task that you are not positioned to accomplish. Your own responsibility as a consultant is to present information as simply, directly, and assertively as possible and to complete the tasks of each phase of the consultation. That's all there is to do, and it's within each of us to do that perfectly.



## PART 2

# Entry and Contracting









## CHAPTER 5

# Contracting Overview

**A**T THE BEGINNING OF EVERY WORKSHOP we conduct on consulting skills, we ask people what they want to learn about consulting. The first wave of answers is very reasonable and task oriented:

- How do you set up a project?
- How do you measure consulting effectiveness?
- Can you act as an umpire and helper at the same time?
- What do you do to elicit client expectations?
- How do you get in the door when you are not welcome?
- How do you establish trust?
- What are consulting skills anyhow?
- When do we break for lunch?

... and on and on.

As we get into the workshop, it is easy to see the real desires that underlie these wishes. What do consultants want to learn about consulting? We want to learn how to have power over our clients! How do we influence them, get them to do what we want, manage in our own image? And while we are doing all of this to them, how do we keep their respect and appreciation?

The phrase “power over our clients” is a distortion of the more promising expectation to have power *with* our clients. If we want to control our clients, we put ourselves on a pedestal and our clients on the ground. This arrangement is highly unstable because clients soon realize we want to control them and they are able to topple us with ease. And why shouldn’t they be able to topple us? Managers get rewarded for



keeping control and have to be politically savvy or they wouldn't be managers. So the desire to have power over the client is a no-win position for consultants. The realistic alternative is to have power *with* clients, to have direct and constructive impact while standing on the same level.

The point of maximum leverage for consultants is probably during the contracting phase of the project. There are possibilities for impact that may be lost for the life of the project if they are not pursued in contracting. The contract sets the tone for the project, and it is much easier to negotiate a new initial contract than to renegotiate an old one. Anyone who has been married more than a year understands this.

## **Contracting: The Concept and the Skill**

A contract is simply an explicit agreement of what the consultant and client expect from each other and how they are going to work together. It is usually verbal and sometimes written down. Contracts with external consultants are more often in writing because external consultants are trusted less than internal consultants, especially when it comes to money. Some internal consultants always like to have a written document describing the project they are working on. This is probably a good idea, even if it is just in the form of a letter. But, essentially, a contract between an internal or external consultant and a line manager is a social contract. It is designed not so much for enforcement, but for clear communication about what is going to happen on a project.

### ***The Word: Contract***

"We are not lawyers," people say. "A contract is a legal document that is written in formal language, it is binding and in writing, and it is stiff and formal. Why not call it a working agreement?" The word *contract* is useful in two ways. Because we are not accustomed to thinking of social or work relationships in contractual terms, the word calls attention to the need for specific expectations in the consulting relationship. Also, some of the legal connotations of the word *contract* are applicable to consulting relationships.

Legal contracts contain two basic elements that apply to consulting relationships: mutual consent and valid consideration.



**Mutual Consent Key Concept:** Both sides enter the agreement freely and by their own choosing.

The concept of mutual consent directly addresses the issue of how motivated the support person and the line manager are to engage in a project together. Many forces in organizations tend to coerce people into starting a project and working together. For example, the fact that everybody is doing it is often a pressure on managers. They don't really want to do, say, a survey of their employees, but that is the thing to do, and so it leads them into a conversation with an internal consultant about doing a survey. Internalized "shoulds" or the fad of the day can become powerful coercive forces. The support person also operates under many "shoulds." "A support person should never say 'no' to a line manager" is a belief that can lead to beginning a project that the support person does not believe in. The coercion can also be very direct.



When some variation of this dialogue occurs, the client and the consultant have an agreement about work to be done, but they are not working with a solid or valid contract. The consultant is operating under coercion and has not freely entered the agreement. It



is often not possible to negotiate a valid contract. That's okay. The key is that when a manager is eventually dissatisfied with the results of the new appraisal form, the problem should be defined as the imbalance of the original contract, not the elegance of the form.

**Valid Consideration Key Concept:** Valid consideration must be given both parties for a solid contract to exist.

For our purposes, *consideration* is the exchange of something of value between the consultant and the client. Internal consultants are especially accustomed to focusing on the consideration given to the client. The initial impetus behind a discussion between a line and support person is to discuss services to be provided to the line person. This service—or consideration—takes the form of advice, analysis, or just reflection. For a valid contract to exist, however, the support person needs to receive something of value in return. It is this side of the equation that is often undervalued, ignored, or assumed without discussion.

Support people often say that all they really need is appreciation—some knowledge that they have made a contribution. On an emotional level, that may be true, but there are some more tangible items that consultants need that should be a part of the original contract:

- *Operational partnership in the venture.* This means having influence on what happens, finding out about significant events, maintaining respect for the unique contribution you bring.
- *Access to people and information in the line organization.* Access means freedom of movement to pursue issues and data that seem relevant to you.
- *Time of people in the line organization.* The major cost to most improvement projects, even when capital investment is involved, is the time of people in the line organization to plan and incorporate changes into their operation. Many times, the consultant is given an assignment with the proviso not to take up too much of the time of the line people because “they” don’t want to interrupt production. This is a warning signal that the contract is inequitable and needs to be renegotiated.
- *Opportunity to be innovative.* Consultants generally want to try something different. You have a right to ask for this opportunity directly and not have to bootleg it.

In the next chapter, we delve more deeply into consultant needs and wants. What’s important to remember here is that you undermine your leverage if you underplay your own needs and wants at the beginning. The contract needs balanced consideration to be strong.



## ***Contracting Skills***

Again: To contract flawlessly is to—

1. Behave authentically; and
2. Complete the business of the contracting phase.

The business of the contracting phase is to negotiate wants, cope with mixed motivation, surface concerns about exposure and loss of control, clarify the contract for all parties, and give affirmation to the client. Before getting into the actual steps in a contracting meeting, here is a list of the consulting competencies required to complete the business of contracting.

You should be able to:

- Ask direct questions about who the client is and who the less visible parties to the contract are.
- Elicit the client's expectations of you.
- Clearly and simply state what you want from the client.
- Say no to or postpone a project that, in your judgment, has less than a 50/50 chance of success.
- Probe directly for the client's underlying concerns about losing control.
- Probe directly for the client's underlying concerns about exposure and vulnerability.
- Give direct verbal support and affirmation to the client.
- When the contracting meeting is not going well, discuss directly with the client why it is not.

More details about contracting will surface as we work through a contracting meeting in the next chapter. The list here, however, contains the crucial ones, which many of us have a hard time doing. The hard time we have is not really with the action itself, but with valuing the importance of these actions. Having direct discussions with the client—about control, vulnerability, your wants, the chance of success, and how the discussion is going—makes the difference between an average contracting meeting and an excellent one. The problem is that it is possible to have a contracting meeting in which none of these subjects are discussed directly. When this happens, the consultant and client are actually colluding with each other in not bringing up certain touchy subjects. The rationalization is, “Well, I’ll deal with these areas if it becomes necessary.” *It is always necessary to talk about control, vulnerability, your wants, and chances of success. If*



you are thinking as you read this that you always confront these areas with your clients, then you should feel good. You may already be operating more flawlessly than you think you are.

## **Elements of a Contract**

Up to this point, we have focused on the process of developing a contract. This section offers some suggestions about what the content of the contract should include. But first, a word about form.

People always ask whether the contract should be in writing. If you have the energy and the time, the answer is “yes.” The reason for putting it in writing is for clarity, not enforcement. If it is in writing and the client has new thoughts about the services wanted from you, you are going to have to renegotiate a new contract or stop the project. Having the original agreement in writing isn’t going to change that. If you are investing out-of-pocket dollars or billable time in the project, then a written contract will help your claim to be paid for the money and time invested should the project be terminated. For most internal consultants, the real value of a written contract is to clarify the understanding with the line manager before the project begins. It is a good test of whether you have a solid contract. Writing down the agreement forces you to be more explicit about what you are going to do.

The form of the written document should be brief, direct, and almost conversational. The purpose is to communicate, not to protect yourself in court.

The following elements should be covered in most of your contracts, especially when the contract signals the beginning of a significant project.

## ***The Boundaries of Your Analysis***

Begin with a statement of what problem or possibility you are going to focus on. If it was discussed in the contracting meeting, you can include a statement of what you are not going to become involved in:

### **Examples**

“The study will deal with the Brogan Reactor Furnace and its peripheral supporting network. We will not get into the problems existing in Power Plant B.”

“We will assess the effectiveness of the current Marketing organization structure and its interface with the Sales department.”



## ***Objectives of the Project***

This identifies the organizational improvements you expect if your consultation is successful. This is your best guess on the benefits the client can expect. Sometimes this statement is to help the client be realistic about the limitations of the project. You are not a magician and need to keep reminding the client of this.

You can expect to help the client in four general areas:

- *Solve a particular technical or business problem.* The client is willing to talk to you because there is some pain somewhere in the client's organization. The immediate goal is to reduce the pain, whether the pain is from currently unsatisfactory results or from the fact that opportunities to improve a situation are not being exploited.
- *Create a new possibility for the organization.* Sometimes the client is driven by a vision for a new future more than by the existence of a problem to be solved. The work is to give form and build support for this vision. This often entails looking at the strengths of the system and defining how to more fully expand them in pursuit of a new culture.
- *Teach the client how to solve the problem for themselves the next time it arises.* It is possible for you to develop a solution and merely hand it to the client. If there is the expectation that the client can do it alone when the problem occurs again, be clear about it. This will require a lot more involvement from the client during the life of the project if the problem-solving process you are using is going to be transferred to the client.
- *Improve how the organization manages its resources, uses its systems, and works internally.* Every business or technical problem has a component where the way the problem is being managed is part of the problem. This is sometimes called the politics of the situation. Many internal consultants are reluctant to get into this area, but the more you can include this as an objective of the project, the more long-range help you are likely to be. (See Chapters 16 through 18 for more about this.)

You should be clear in the beginning about what is part of your contract.

### **Examples**

#### **For Business Objectives**

"The objective of the study is to decrease defects in the printed circuit board fabrication process by 4%."



“Our goal is to increase the responsiveness of the marketing department to shifting consumer demand. We particularly expect to develop ways to reduce the time it takes to introduce a new product by six weeks.”

### **For Learning Objectives**

“A second objective is to teach the plant engineering group how to perform this kind of production analysis.”

“The marketing staff should become more effective in assessing its own market responsiveness and restructuring itself in the future.”

### **For Organizational Development Objectives**

“This project will help the plant manager develop ways to better manage the interface between plant engineering and plant operations.”

“A goal of the project is to increase cooperation between the market research group and the product directors.”

“The goal is to create a culture of strong commitment and accountability and be more proactive in pursuing new market opportunities.”

## ***The Kind of Information You Seek***

Access to people and information are the key wants of the consultant. The major ambivalence of the line organization is how far to let you into the bowels of their organization. They want to tell you what is really going on and, at the same time, are afraid of telling you what is really going on. *Come close, but not too close.*

Despite what the line manager says to you, there is always some desire for confirmation that the organization is doing the best that can be done under the circumstances. This desire at times can be stronger than the desire to solve the problem. One way to hedge against this ambivalence is to be explicit from the start about the kind of information you need. Some of the kinds of information you may want to specify in the contract are technical data, figures, and work flow; attitudes of people toward the problem; and roles and responsibilities.

### **Examples**

#### **For Technical Data, Figures, and Work Flow**

“To complete the project, we will require daily production figures for the etching process and the work schedules and procedures in effect now.”



“We will want to see the planned and actual schedules for the last six product improvement introductions after we get into the project.”

**For People’s Attitudes**

“We want to interview at least 15 people to identify how they currently view the marketing function.”

“We want to talk with the people in single-sided and multilayer etching, and in testing and validation to uncover their perceptions of the way the supervisory group rewards good and poor performance. We also plan to ask the same questions of the supervisors.”

**For Roles and Responsibilities**

“The marketing organization will provide a definition of who is responsible for major decisions on new products at each stage of the process.”

“We will obtain information from all supervisors on their view of their jobs and the authority they have to manage their sections of the PCB fabrication process.”

***Your Role in the Project***

This is the place to state how you want to work with the client. If you want a collaborative relationship, say so. Make it a statement of both intent and spirit. It doesn’t pay to spell out all the ways you are going to work together. It is hard to predict at the beginning what is going to come up. You can make some statements about the desire for a 50/50 sharing of responsibility for identifying problems, interpreting the findings, and developing recommendations and action plans:

**Example**

“Our primary role is to give you a clear and understandable picture of how your plant is currently performing the etching and testing/validation processes in PCB fabrication. While we have expertise on equipment design and operation as well as state-of-the-art testing and validation procedures in the industry, your group has a great deal of knowledge of day-to-day operations. We would expect to present our analysis of the defects problem and then jointly develop recommendations with you on what changes should be made. A major part of our role is to help you solve this problem for yourself next time. This requires that the plant supervisors have some involvement at each step of the study. We are committed to develop specific solutions to the present concerns and to play an important educational role with you and your supervisors.”



## ***The Product You Will Deliver***

Here, it is important to be specific about what you are offering. Will your feedback be an oral or written report? How long will it be—5 pages or 50? How much detail will the client receive? How far into specific recommendations will you get? Will you give some general suggestions for improvements, or will you give a list of steps that can be implemented right away? Will you present actual solutions or steps that can be taken that will eventually lead to solutions?

Of course, you can't predict all of these in the beginning, but you do know from your own experience how specific you will be. This dimension of a consulting relationship—the specificity and nature of recommendations—is a major cause of client disappointment in the consulting services they have received. This doesn't mean that recommendations should always be specific or should always be general; that depends on the task the consultant is engaged in. It does mean there ought to be a clear understanding with the client on what your product will look like.

### **Examples**

Here is a promise for specific recommendations:

“The outcome of this project will be a detailed written description of our findings running somewhere between 5 and 15 pages. For each major finding, we will offer specific recommendations that you can act on.”

And this is a promise for general recommendations:

“The outcome of this inquiry will be roughly a one-page outline of our major conclusions. These will identify only the critical areas to be considered. Actual recommendations will be developed jointly with you after the outline of issues has been discussed. These recommendations will be developed in the half-day feedback meeting we have scheduled at the end of the project.”

In promising results to the client, remember that you will be turning the action over to the client at some point. It is the client, not you, who is going to actually deliver continuing results. You can guarantee a solution to a problem, but you can't guarantee that the solution will be followed. To take the solution totally on your shoulders may feel comfortable to you, but it can deprive clients of responsibility for the solution that is rightfully theirs.



## ***Support and Involvement from the Client***

This section is the heart of the contract for the consultant. This is where you specify what you want from the client to make this project successful. This list is what the client is offering to you. Include here the wants that were the subject of some discussion in the verbal contracting meeting. Writing down your wants ensures clear communication and that any identified sensitive points are resolved:

### **Example**

“You [the line manager] have agreed to communicate the existence and need for this project to your organization. We have also agreed to meet with the division vice president to get her view on the problem and to include her in the second feedback meeting. [Meeting with the vice president is an example of what might have been a sensitive topic of discussion.] In addition, two people from your staff will be made available to us for a maximum of seven days each to help with the data analysis and summary.”

## ***Time Schedule***

Include starting time, any intermediate mileposts, and completion date. If you want to give interim reports to the client before you tie the ribbon on the package, schedule them at the beginning. It is always easier to cancel a meeting than to set one up at the last minute:

### **Example**

“We can begin this work in 6 weeks and plan to complete it 10 weeks from when we start.”

## ***Confidentiality***

Since you are almost always dealing with a political situation as well as a technical one, who gets what report is a constant concern. It pays to be quite conservative on this and give the client control on the people they want to share the findings with. This is a luxury of being an outside consultant. If you are an inside consultant, you may not have any choice but to send a technical study or an audit report up the line. All you



can do is to acknowledge to the client who you are required to give copies of your report to. This gives clients a choice about how to protect themselves, if necessary.

**Examples**

Here is an example of an easy case when it comes to confidentiality:

“The results of this study will be given to the director of engineering [the client].

Any further reporting will be up to the director. Should the internal consultants be required to report any results to the larger organization, the director will be informed and invited to attend any meetings held on the subject.”

And here is an example of a more difficult case on confidentiality:

“The results of the audit will be reported to the management audit committee.

Before the report is released, the division controller [the client] will be able to review and comment on the audit findings and recommendations. The intent (and the common practice) is that the audit report goes to the committee with the support of both the division controller and the audit team. The final report also includes the list of corrective actions that the division plans to take.”

***Feedback to You Later***

An optional element of the contract is to ask the client to let you know the results of your work six months after you leave. If you want to know but usually don't find out, ask for it.

**Example**

“About six months after the project is completed, I will contact you for feedback on the impact of the project. This might take the form of having people complete a questionnaire, respond over the phone, or send some recent operating data to me.”

For a downloadable copy of Checklist #2, visit [www.flawlessconsulting.com](http://www.flawlessconsulting.com).



**CHECKLIST #2: ANALYZING ONE OF YOUR CONTRACTS**

Pick a complicated contract that you have negotiated. Write up the elements of that contract using the following headings:

1. The Boundaries of Your Analysis
2. Objectives of the Project
3. The Kind of Information You Seek
4. Your Role in the Project
5. The Product You Will Deliver
6. What Support and Involvement You Need from the Client
7. Time Schedule
8. Confidentiality
9. Feedback to You Later

**Ground Rules for Contracting**

A model for a contracting meeting is presented in the next chapter. Underlying the model is a set of ground rules for contracting, which have come primarily from my exposure to Gestalt psychology:★

1. The responsibility for every relationship is 50/50. There are two sides to every story. There must be symmetry or the relationship will collapse. The contract has to be 50/50.
2. The contract should be freely entered.
3. You can't get something for nothing. There must be consideration from both sides. Even in a boss-subordinate relationship.
4. All wants are legitimate. To want is a birthright. You can't say, "You shouldn't want that."
5. You can say "no" to what others want from you. Even clients.
6. You don't always get what you want. And you'll still keep breathing. You will still survive; you will still have more clients in the future.

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★I attended a Gestalt workshop run by Claire and Mike Reiker near New Hope, Pennsylvania, too many years ago. In it, they presented these ground rules in such a clear and powerful way that I have used them ever since.



7. You can contract for behavior. You can't contract for the other person to change their feelings.
8. You can't ask for something the other person doesn't have.
9. You can't promise something you don't have to deliver.
10. You can't contract with someone who's not in the room, such as clients' bosses and subordinates. You have to meet with them directly to know you have an agreement with them.
11. Write down contracts when you can. Most are broken out of neglect, not intent.
12. Social contracts are always renegotiable. If clients want to renegotiate a contract in midstream, be grateful that they are telling you and not just doing it without a word.
13. Contracts require specific time deadlines or duration.
14. Good contracts require good faith and often accidental good fortune.



## CHAPTER 6

# The Contracting Meeting

**THERE IS AN OLD DAVID STEINBERG JOKE** about the person showing up for his first meeting with his psychiatrist. He walks in the office and is faced with the choice of two chairs to sit in. He turns to the psychiatrist and asks, “Which chair should I sit in?” The psychiatrist says, “Either one.” The person sits in one. The psychiatrist jumps up, points an accusing finger at him, and shouts, “Aha! Everything counts!”

So it is with contracting. Everything counts, not as judgment—wrong chair—but that each step you take is a choice. In the face of a world that places you up against the wall, your decision on which chair you pick is a source of insight and connection. Almost every event and action carries with it a message about what this project and client are going to be like. This information is available in minutes, not months.

The point is that the personal interaction between the consultant and the client, you and the client, during the initial contracting meetings is an accurate predictor of how the project itself will proceed. If you can accept this concept, you will pay close attention to the process of those early meetings. In fact, the critical skill in contracting is being able to identify and discuss relational and process issues between you and the client as they occur. Not what they have in mind, but what you have in mind.

The contracting meeting is usually set up by a phone call or email or text or other thread of connectedness. In the midst of this early point of contact, there are certain things to find out to help prepare for how this relationship might evolve. Who requested the meeting? The answer will be the first indication of where the responsibility lies. If someone else suggested a meeting with you and the line manager, this is a warning flag that the manager may be feeling some pressure to proceed. Find out who will be at the meeting, what their roles will be, and how much time there is for the meeting. This gives an early indication of the importance of the project to the manager. You get



a different message if you hear, “We have half an hour,” than if you hear, “We have as much time as we need.”

Clarify what outcome is expected from the meeting. Is it a meeting to decide how to get started or whether to do anything at all? Is a proposal going to be required? Addressing these issues before the meeting gives you more data to prepare for it. It also signals to the client that this is likely to be a 50/50 proposition—that you are a responsible actor in the process, not just a service provider.

All this is easier, of course, when the client is initiating the meeting with you than when you are knocking on their door. (In Chapter 7, we focus on selling to clients who don’t know yet that they need your services.) When the client makes the request to meet with you, I recommend these questions, at a minimum, over the phone. Email if necessary, but this is a poor substitute for your voice.

What do you want to discuss?

What is your intent for the meeting?

Who is the client for this project?

Who else will be at the meeting? What are their roles?

How much time will we have?

Do you know that you want to begin some project, or are we going to discuss whether we do anything at all?

## **Who Is the Client?**

When you meet with the client to begin contracting, the key question is: Who is the client? Most projects have multiple clients. The line manager you are talking to is one client. There are others who may have a piece of the action too (see Chapter 9). One of the ground rules of contracting is that you cannot contract with someone who’s not in the room or on the call. If major actors are not present as you are setting up a project, you can’t assume that they support the project until you actually connect with them.

In general, the clients on a project are the people who:

Attend the initial planning meeting,

Set the objectives for the project,



Approve any action to be taken,  
Receive the report on the results of your work, and  
Are significantly impacted by the effort.

This means the client can be a person, a top management team, a whole department that you work with through a representative planning group, or even your own boss. Try to have at least one meeting with each person who is part of initiating this project, even if they are at a very high level of the organization. This will allow you to get your own information on what they want from you and whether what you are planning will satisfy them.

## **Navigating the Contracting Meeting**

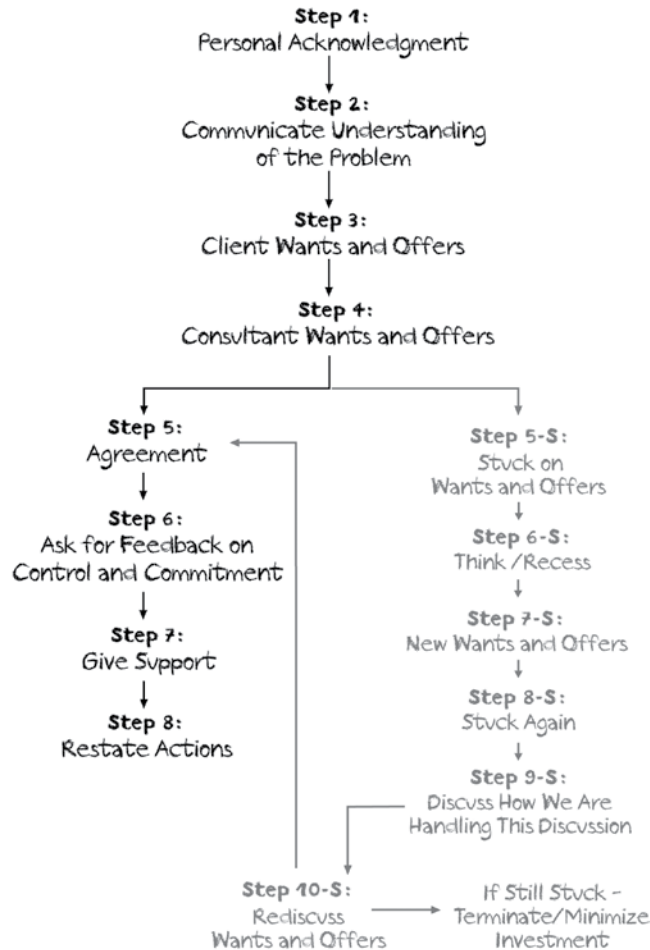
Reaching agreement on how you will work with a client can follow a logical sequence. Outlined in Figure 6.1 is a series of steps that lead to either an agreement to work together or an agreement not to work together. Using this model will ensure that you are adequately completing the business of the contracting phase. In describing the sequence of the following steps, I give you both a clear statement of each task to be accomplished and also what an authentic way of accomplishing the task would look like.

The objective we are focusing on here is to develop a stable, balanced, and workable contract between you and your client. Or line manager. Or whomever the world puts in front of you.

### ***Step 1: Personal Acknowledgment***

No matter how motivated a manager is to seek your assistance, it is a difficult thing in organizations to ask for help. Even for experienced consultants and managers, when we engage a consultant to help with a problem, there is some uneasiness. So the first item on the agenda of the contracting meeting is to do something that will help to increase the personal comfort level between the consultant and the client. Some people try to do this by discussing the ball scores or the weather. What has more impact is to make personal statements of your feelings about being in this meeting with the client today. Say why this matters to you. Ask them for the same.





**Figure 6.1** Navigating the Contracting Meeting

### Some Examples

- “This is one of the few groups or plants I have never worked with before; I’m glad you called.”
- “I was surprised that you were interested in what we are doing. I hope we can work something out.”
- “We have a mixed history of working with your group. Thank you for being open to this project.”
- “Our history with your group has been bumpy in the past. I am concerned about that and also glad to rewrite that history.”



“It looks like things are hectic for you. I hope this is a good time for us to get together.”  
“Any thoughts or concerns or doubts you have about working with me on this project?”

## ***Step 2: Communicate Understanding of the Problem***

Clients are usually eager to tell you about the problem or the general situation. Behind the eagerness is often the line manager’s belief that this situation is unique in some aspects and this organization is really very special. Managers can also feel that their situations are so special and unique that no one could possibly understand them without living there for a year.

The client’s declaration of uniqueness, often accompanied by doubt that the consultant can understand the situation, sometimes gets expressed in very roundabout ways. Clients ask about work you are doing elsewhere in the organization or the industry, about whom you report to if they don’t know, about how long you have been doing this kind of work, and whether you can be of any help anyway. Underneath all the statements and questions is the concern about whether they can be helped and the problem can be solved. After all, before the consultant comes on the scene, clients have made their best efforts to solve the problem themselves. It is understandable that they are frustrated by the lack of a solution and somewhat skeptical about your possible contribution.

The following basic client concerns require a direct response early in the contracting meeting:

“My situation is exquisitely unique.”

“The problem is complicated and defies an obvious solution.”

“So how could you, a consultant or staff person, an insider or outsider, offer significant help in a short period of time?”

You need to communicate an understanding of the problem in ways that acknowledge the unique aspects of the situation, respond to the seeming complexity of the situation, and speak to the client’s fear about being beyond help. Here’s how you do it.

“Stimulating reflection rather than prescription gives people the power to name the world. Prescription is the key element between oppressed and oppressor. Act of naming is the right of every person.”

— Paolo Friere



**Acknowledge the Unique Aspects of the Situation** Because each client has different people and operates in a singular environment, the line manager's claim of uniqueness has some validity. From the consultant's vantage point, we tend to be more aware of what is similar between this client and other clients we have worked with. Initially, though, it is important to put into words what is different about this project:

### **Examples**

"There are two unique aspects to your situation: the pressure being placed on you from above and the desert climate of this location."

"Your situation has several unique things that make it both interesting and challenging."

**Restate, in Your Own Words, Your Perception of the Problem** Here, you express the thought that even though the problem is indeed complicated, you can already begin to understand it. This is an act of reassurance, designed to make the client feel understood and supported. At this point, you don't know what the real problem is, for the real problem is often quite different from the client's opening problem statement. What you are accomplishing is letting the client know that you are listening and have enough technical expertise to grasp the situation quickly.

Most line managers have been listened to so little by experts that they are surprised by our perceptiveness. If the manager says, "The design engineering and the plant engineering groups are always blaming each other for plant failures," I respond by saying, "I bet when they get together, they have trouble coming up with a single plan of action they can support." The manager says, "That's right. How did you know that? You're perceptive." It's not perceptiveness; it is just listening to and restating what the manager said.

### **Examples**

"You have mentioned in great detail your concerns about expense vouchering, petty cash, and accounts payable, but what you really sound concerned about is the lack of specific controls in certain areas and people's commitment to live within them."

"I can see you are concerned about the slowdown, the breakdown in security, the pain of your customer being offline for an hour. In the extreme, there's the fact that someone glued and soldered every moving piece of equipment over the weekend. But what I really hear you're concerned about is that people just don't appreciate working here."



**Reassure the Manager That There Are Solutions to This Unique and Complicated Problem and That You Can Be of Help**

Your reassurance has to be genuine. You are stating that you can help find a solution, not that you know the solution right now. Your expertise is knowing the steps that have to be followed to find a solution. This is what you have to offer. The client at this stage is wondering: *Is this person someone I can lean on and trust to help me with this problem?* Your answer is a tentative “yes”—tentative at this early stage because you don’t know specifically what the client wants from you or what support the client is willing to offer you. Until you know specific wants and offers from the client, you don’t know whether this is a project on which you can succeed.

**Examples**

“Despite the frustration you are feeling, I can understand what you are up against.

It’s the kind of thing we have worked with a lot lately.”

“This is the kind of situation that might open options to you that have not been clear before.”

In communicating your understanding of the problem, without judgment or early advice, it helps to use short, simple sentences. Many of us have a tendency to get a little carried away, getting too deeply into an analysis of the problem at this early stage. The task here is to respond to the underlying concerns of uniqueness, complexity, and whether the client can be helped, not to analyze the nature of the problem (this comes later). Responding to the client’s emotional concerns is done better with short sentences than with long sentences, short words are better than long words, and direct statements are better than inferences. Make simple statements expressing understanding and support without being overly protective or falsely reassuring. Also, don’t sell. Just make a simple statement that the situation seems workable. The next step is to get into the specifics of what you and the client really expect from each other.

**Step 3: Client Wants and Offers**

After saying hello and hearing an initial statement of what the line manager is concerned about, you look the manager in the eye and say, “So, what do you want from me?” The answer is the heart of the contracting process, and the question must be asked directly. It is the key qualifying question to determine whether and how you can succeed on this project.



There is a difference between what the client wants from the project and what the client wants from you. The client can be very clear about what is wanted from the project—for example, better cost control, reduced overhead charges, fewer equipment failures, better morale from the troops, more skilled first-line supervisors, an automated sales reporting system—and still not express what is expected from you, the consultant.

Some common things clients want from their consultants are:

A study of a specific business problem,  
Recommendations on how to solve a problem,  
A training program designed and conducted,  
Personal advice and support,  
An evaluation of key line personnel,  
A design for a cheaper process, and  
How to restructure and reduce labor costs.

These are generally pretty straightforward requests for your services. It becomes more complex as you begin to understand how they would like you to work. To understand this, you ask the client whether there are any specific notions about how you should proceed or what the constraints on this project are.

Asking about constraints helps you find out early that:

You have two weeks to do a four-week job.  
You shouldn't talk to certain people.  
Nobody else knows the real reasons for this study, and you shouldn't tell them.  
You shouldn't upset anybody or open Pandora's box.  
The project has a budget of \$1.85.  
After this meeting, the client won't have any more time to spend with you.

Constraints on how you proceed are, of course, vital for you to know now. How you proceed is often the most difficult part of the contract to negotiate. The skill in surfacing constraints is to ask clients directly for any thoughts they have on how you should work with them and what constraints exist on the way this project will be conducted. For example, the discovery method, who is involved, who hears the results, the schedule, and cost.

After hearing what the client wants from you, you next want to ask what support the client can offer you on the project. If the client is going to pay directly for your



services (you are not part of the client's overhead), you want to know the budget for this project. As an internal consultant, the other two offers the client can make to you are the time of their people and access to information. Explore these areas in detail when you get around to expressing your wants.

Most people doing consulting are, in fact, quite good at this stage of the contracting process. Support people especially seem to be oriented to client needs and are skillful in identifying what the client wants. Internal consultants have a much harder time with the next step: identifying and expressing their own wants and needs.

#### ***Step 4: Consultant Wants and Offers***

One of the most critical skills in flawless consultation is to put directly into words what you, the consultant, want from the client to make a project successful.

When I tell internal consultants they should make clear what they want from the client, they often say, "We are in a service role, and our job is to satisfy the line manager's needs and wants. If we do this successfully, our job is done. We are not in a position to make demands on the people we serve." This pure service orientation can be self-defeating. Making clear what the consultant wants from the client is in the interest of making sure the project is successful; it is not to satisfy the consultant's own personal whims and wishes.

The consultant wants we are talking about here include such things as enough time to do the job right, access to the right people and information, support from the client at difficult moments, people from the client organization to work on the project, agreements on confidentiality, follow-up to the recommendations, and uninterrupted time from the line manager. Plus, a willingness to consider what role the manager and the involved team need to play to bring about the desired changes and the role the manager might play in sustaining the problem being faced. *These wants have to be expressed in the contracting phase.* The risk of not expressing your wants is that the project will not succeed, and an unsuccessful project is worse than no project at all.

Some things we want from clients are more important than others. In planning a contracting meeting, it's helpful for you to break your wants into two kinds: essential wants and desirable wants.

**Essential Wants** *Essential wants* are the things you must have as a minimum. Some people call them *needs* or *must wants*. If you do not get an essential want from a client,



then you would do better not to proceed with the project. Essentials vary from situation to situation; here are some examples:

Access to the key people who have a part in the problem you are being asked to solve,  
Enough time to do the job professionally,  
An agreement that you will not be asked to individually evaluate the performance of  
    people you work with on this project,  
Money,  
Access to certain records and documents,  
The commitment of the top person in the organization to proceed with the project, and  
Response to my phone calls and emails within 24 hours.

Knowing what is essential comes with experience and from getting burned a few times. We never get all that we want on a project, so in the beginning, we tend to pressure ourselves to give in a little and get on with the project. If we give in on an essential—whether from hunger for a client or pressure from our boss to “get that client into the fold”—we will be sorry. Giving in on an essential means the project will be on shaky grounds, and we risk failure.

If you are in the middle of a contracting session and the suggestions from you and the client keep shifting around and suddenly you have to decide whether to agree to something or not, stop the process and give yourself a recess. You can break for coffee, go to the restroom, drop some marbles on the floor and think while you search for them, return some emails on your phone, or do whatever else you do to give yourself space to think. During the recess, which doesn’t need to be any longer than three or four minutes, ask yourself only one question: Does the suggestion on the table violate in any way what I consider essential for me on this project? If the answer is “yes,” then return to the meeting and say, “What you are suggesting makes great sense, but it does not give me what I consider to be essential for the success of this project.” Then continue the search for agreement.

There is no better thing you can do for yourself when beginning a project than to realistically define the essentials for you on a project. If you have done this honestly—with neither greed nor self-sacrifice—then little else can happen to you during the contracting to really hurt you. A lot can happen to make you miserable, but if your essentials are met, the project can succeed. If they are not met, the project can only fail.



**Desirable Wants** *Desirable wants* are the things you would like to have from the client but you can live without. These are not casual or capricious wants: they will help make the project more effective, but you know you can succeed without them. Here are some examples:

Someone from the client organization to work with you on the project,  
The manager to meet with all the other people involved in the project to explain it  
and personally seek their support,  
The top management of the group to get deeply involved in your project,  
An adequate time schedule,  
A large group meeting of people at all levels of the organization, and  
Agreement that the client will spread the word to others in the organization if you do  
well on the project.

Sometimes internal consultants are so oriented to meeting their client's needs that they have a hard time identifying what they want in return from their clients. Here is a list of what some internal consultants have said they wanted from their clients:

Work the problem together,  
Commitment to the project,  
No bias about the outcome,  
Take care of physical needs to accomplish the job (in one case—they were a car, driver,  
and translator),  
Openness to feedback during the project,  
Feedback on what happened after I left,  
Feedback to my boss,  
Accept that certain things just can't be done, and  
Forgiveness.

**Putting Wants into Words** Identifying what you want from the client is the first step. The next step is to act on those wants. This corresponds to the two requirements of consulting flawlessly: attending to the business of each phase and acting authentically. The business at this point is identifying what you want; acting authentically means putting those wants into words as simply and directly as possible.



Sometimes there is a tendency to complicate asking for what you want. We think we need elaborate explanations and justifications. We introduce a want with a paragraph about other experiences or the unique requirements of this organization, and we make the want rather vague and general. Sometimes we ask for what we want with a question. All this does is fog and undermine the expression.

Here is an example of a fogged expression of wants:

### **The Want**

A manager of training is talking to a division director about sending her subordinate to a course on handling difficult conversations. The want is for the division director to become directly involved in the project by also attending the course.

### **Fogged Expression of Wants**

*Training manager:* “We have found from prior experience that the learning in a training course tends to be retained longer if there is some visible evidence of positive reinforcement back on the job. This allows for better utilization of the newly acquired skills, and in your case, the course is introducing a totally different approach to the important and productive counseling of employees. If this positive reinforcement does not take place, then you can expect a decay of the learning, and the cost-benefit ratio of your investment is significantly diminished. Have you ever attended a course on performance appraisal?”

*Comment:* The points the training manager is making here are all true, and there are good reasons for the division director to attend the course. The problem is that the want is being buried in the justification. The question at the end may eventually lead to the suggestion that the division director take the course, but this path is indirect and unnecessary.

### **Authentic Expression of Wants**

Here is an alternative—this one an authentic expression of wants:

*Training manager:* “I would like for you also to attend the course on handling difficult conversations.”



*Comment:* This may seem too simple a statement, but it's not. The power of the statement is that it is simple and in everyday street language. The goal of flawless consulting is to maximize your leverage and impact on the client so that your expertise gets used. Acting authentically is the most powerful thing you can do at every stage of the process.

When we identify what we want from the client, the want comes first, the justification afterward. We know that we want the manager to attend the course. Then we start to think of how we can justify it to the client. We start worrying about how to phrase it, how to explain it in bottom-line terms, to find words that the client will understand. All this effort is not only overdone, but it can act as a fog and obstacle to getting what we want.

The skill is to:

1. State the want first in simple street language.
2. Be quiet and let the client react.
3. If the client has questions, give a two-sentence answer and restate the want.
4. Be quiet and listen for a "yes" or "no."

You will not always get a "yes" answer. Life is like that. If you state the want simply, use silence to get the client to talk about their feelings, and offer short explanations, you have done all you can. The long paragraphs may make you feel better, but they get in your way. Making simple authentic statements gives you your best chance to get what you want and to know where you stand with the client on that issue.

**Your Chance** Here is a useful exercise for you. Get out your laptop, or a pencil and a piece of paper, and make two columns: essential wants and desirable wants. Think of a client you are concerned about, and record your list of essential and desirable wants from that client. Don't worry about whether you would ever ask for these things from a client; just write them in as uncensored a way as possible.

### ***Step 4 continued: Consultant Offers***

In addition to stating wants to the client, state what you have to offer. This requires you to be realistic about the limit of what you can promise.

Most often, the consultant's promise is a clear picture of what is happening in the client organization plus recommendations on how to improve things. The consultant can



promise actual improvements only if line management takes its 50% of the responsibility. Operating improvements must be a joint promise between consultant and client, not a unilateral consultant promise. If I offer results as an outcome of simply my own efforts as a consultant, I am presenting myself as a magician. I can't offer something that I can't control. I can't control the client's behavior or actions. If I let my enthusiasm lead me into promising specific results that are really the client's to achieve, I am colluding with the client's secret wish to sit back and watch the consultant perform miracles.

Here is an example of the choice:

*Client:* "How soon can I expect results from you?"

*Magical consultant offer:* "We'll have the breakdown back onstream in three days, and you won't have any trouble with it after that."

*Realistic consultant offer:* "We'll have the breakdown back onstream in three days. After that, it is up to you to keep it running well."

For most of us doing consulting, there are two things we need to constantly work on:

1. Stating clearly, sometimes running the risk of overstatement, what we need and want from the client to make this project work.
2. Being cautious, sometimes running the risk of understatement, about the results we alone will deliver on this project.

### ***Step 5: Reach Agreement***

After exchanging wants with the client, either you reach agreement or you get stuck. (In Chapter 8, I address what to do when you get stuck.) If, as in most cases, you can reach agreement, you should pause for a moment and just feel good about it. If you are feeling expansive, you can even say to the client, "It looks as if we agree on how to proceed. I am really happy about that." It also helps to restate what the agreement is.

Consultants often act as if the contracting meeting is over when agreement has been reached. It is not. There are still three important steps before a stable, balanced contract is assured.

"The enemy of truth is not error. The enemy of truth is certainty."

— Bruce Gregory



### ***Step 6: Ask for Feedback on Control and Commitment***

This is an insurance step. Most weak contracts are faulty for one of two reasons:

1. The client entered the agreement under some kind of coercion, however subtle and indirect.
2. The client agreed to the project but increasingly felt there was inadequate control over what was happening.

So at the beginning of any project, be compulsive about testing for the existence of each of these flaws.

**Testing for Client Commitment** Ask the client directly, “Is this project something that you really want to see happen? Are you satisfied with the way we have agreed to set it up?” There are many ways the line manager can feel coerced into the project. Top management may have suggested this project. It may be the latest organizational fad to begin projects like this. The manager may feel that it would be politically unwise to say no to you.

Asking the question about client commitment does not mean that you will withdraw from the project if the client is not that committed. You ask the question so that you know what you are up against from the beginning. If the client is acting out of coercion, you want to know it now. It is important to be realistic about this so that you don’t overinvest or pretend that the contract is strong when it is not.

Asking clients about their commitment has one additional benefit: it forces them to take responsibility for the fact that they too are beginning a project without supporting it fully. Sometimes the act of clients’ acknowledging they are acting under some coercion can actually serve to increase their commitment to a project.

Having the conversation about commitment to the project near the end of the contracting meeting is important. Do it.

**Testing for Control and Vulnerability** After discussing client commitment to the project, ask: “Do you feel you have enough control over how this project is going to proceed?” Plus a second question: “Are there ways you feel vulnerable with respect to this work?”

Line managers (as well as the rest of us) tend to value control above all else. If the client begins to feel that control of the situation is slipping away, the contract and the



project will be threatened. As with your questions about commitment, you want to know now about any client uneasiness. Giving up control is a major cause of organizational uneasiness. Each time clients bring in a consultant, they give up a little bit of control, so as a consultant, you should find out the extent of the uneasiness.

When I suggest to internal consultants that they ask these questions about commitment, vulnerability, and control, they ask in return: “Yeah, but how do we know we will get an honest answer? Will the client be truthful with us?” If you ask about control and commitment in a way that shows genuine interest in the answer, the client will give you a straight answer. If you ask the questions with a persuasive or pleading tone, honest answers are less likely. The purpose of the questions is to help managers express any reservations they are having. The questions are not indirect selling techniques.

Even if you ask the questions sincerely, sometimes you won’t get a direct answer. It is still worthwhile to have asked them. Questions work on us long after the moment has passed. Plus, in asking the questions, you are opening space for these kind of conversations as the work proceeds.

### ***Step 7: Give Support***

Make supportive statements to the client about their willingness to begin this project with you. It takes some courage to invite or allow people into your organization to make recommendations about how you should shape up. Even if the client is seven feet tall, has scales, and breathes fire, I always assume there is a wish for support and I am happy to fulfill that wish.

Plus, we serve our clients as much by declaring their gifts and what they are doing well as by pointing to areas for improvement.

You also might tell the client what they did in this meeting that was useful. If you do not say what it was, the client will never know. The support needs to be genuine and specific. Here are some examples:

“Starting a project like this takes some risk on your part, and I appreciate your willingness to take that risk with me.”

“You have lived with this situation for a long time. It’s terrific that you are now in a position to do something about it.”

“You were very clear about your doubts and reservations.”

“You told me a lot about some very personal challenges. Thank you for trusting me in that way.”



“You are very perceptive about the nature of these kinds of problems. That is going to help a lot on this project.”

“I know at first you were very skeptical about whether to let me in the door. I am glad we got past that.”

### ***Step 8: Restate Actions***

As a final insurance step, make sure you and the client know what each of you is going to do next. Simple statements are enough:

“You are going to send a memo to your people about the project.”

“I am going to arrive on March 4 to begin interviewing people.”

“Starting tomorrow, I will review the records with George. You and I will meet at 4:00 p.m. on Friday.”



After agreeing on next steps, the contracting meeting is complete. No social contract will last forever; in fact, the contract usually is renegotiated often during the life of the project. If, however, you have gone through the preceding eight steps, you have done what you can at this stage. The next two chapters explore some of the twists and turns the contracting process can take.







## CHAPTER 7

# Some Nuances of Contracting

**W**HEN WE WORK WITH CLIENTS, there are three ways that we get work:

1. **We're asked in.** The client reaches out to us and asks us to work with them.
2. **We want in.** We take the initiative and want to help the client or implement a program.
3. **We're sent in.** Our boss, or leadership in general, sends us in to fix something or implement a program, process, initiative.

Whether we are asked in by our clients, sent in by someone else, or want in because we have a program to implement or some expertise to offer, the challenge is to build trust up front with an authentic personal acknowledgment and sharing a common understanding of the problem/situation. The order and particulars in the first few steps will vary, but the goal of contracting remains the same: to gain mutual agreement of what work we are going to do and how we will work together, or to agree on what work we are not going to do.

The flawless consulting contracting model described in Chapter 6 is set up for the “asked in” scenario. The sequence and roles in each step support situations when the client invites us to help them with a situation/problem. With some minor modifications, the model is also useful when we want in or when we are sent in. It takes a just few tweaks to the order and tasks of the steps. In fact, it is only the top half of the model that needs to be modified. Here are some thoughts on how to go about it.



## Sent In

This scenario occurs when someone has sent us to the client's organization to fix something or someone. You are an intervention. A second form is when you have an institutional mandate to implement a process or strategy, or to initiate some other type of change effort. The best way to approach this contracting conversation is to call out the elephant in the room and do it up front with the personal acknowledgement. Share with the client why you're there and how you feel about it, and ask the client to share the same thing. In "sent in" situations, clients may have no idea why you are meeting, and they may know why you are there and don't like the idea of having someone sent to fix them. You can frame it as sweetly as you can, but people always, always know what is going on.

Once you share your personal acknowledgment of how you feel about working together, share your understanding of what you are being asked to do. The client may want to circle back to their leadership to get more clarity, or you and the client may agree on what you need to do together. Once you agree on the presenting problem/situation, then move on to exchanging wants and offers with each other and progress through the rest of the model.

**Example** Beverly's boss and the Chief Nursing Officer (CNO) have decided that Barb, a nursing director, needs coaching because she is struggling to get her nurse managers to make decisions and take action. Beverly has coached the CNO in the past, and the CNO found it to be valuable. A meeting has been scheduled for Beverly to meet with Barb to begin the process.

*Beverly:* "Hi, Barb. My boss asked me to meet with you. She met with your boss and they decided I should work with you. I'm not sure what I am being asked to do and I'm feeling cautious about this meeting. I don't want to make any assumptions. How are you feeling about this meeting?"

*Barb:* "To be honest, Beverly, I'm not sure why you're here. My boss set up this meeting and said you were going to help me with my team."

*Beverly:* "Thanks, Barb. I appreciate your honesty. I was told that you could use some help getting your managers to make more decisions."

*Barb:* "I definitely get frustrated with them. But how can you help me?"

*Beverly:* "I don't know. Maybe I can't. I'd like to hear more about your frustrations and then we can both decide whether you think I might be able to help. I have helped other nurse leaders deal with their teams, but each situation is unique and I want to hear more from you before we decide what we might do together. What do you want from me at this point?"



Now, after listening, you would proceed to Steps 3 and 4: Wants and Offers and the rest of the contracting conversation flows through the model.

## **Want In**

This scenario occurs when we see something going on with our client's organization that we feel our expertise would be useful to them. Or we might be committed to implement a program with the support of top management. In either case, we are in the mode of selling our expertise or a solution. We begin the conversation with our personal acknowledgment. We put into words what we are experiencing and ask the client how they feel about working with us.

Since you are initiating the conversation, the prospective client may not have much to say about how they feel about working with you. Ask anyway! Once you have shared your personal acknowledgment, take the lead to share how you see the problem/situation the client is facing. It is best if you have some idea of what they are facing before you try to "sell" your expertise or the program.

## ***Good Selling Is Good Contracting***

Basically, the skills for selling your services are the same as those described for regular contracting. But here are a couple of additional concepts about the selling situation that might be helpful.

## ***Reverse the Expression of Wants***

When the client calls you, you begin the discussion of wants by asking what the client wants from you. When you initiate the contact, you need to say straight out what you want from the client. Figure 7.1 shows the reversed sequence.

You must have a reason for choosing to talk to this client, and you explain that by defining the problem that you think the prospective client faces. Before going on to wants, stop and ask the client if the problem you have defined is indeed the problem. If it isn't, give it another try; then consider a quiet retreat.

After defining the need, state what you want from the client. Acknowledge that you are making a sales call. Support people feel successful by getting line managers to use their services. Everybody knows this, even line managers. One thing the internal consultant wants from the meeting is to have the line manager as a client—so acknowledge it. To say you only want to be helpful is just half the story.





**Figure 7.1** Beginning Contracting Steps When You Are Selling

**Example** Jeff’s client, Tom, has been working with the plant managers in his group to roll out the new goals for the coming year. Jeff has heard from both Tom and the plant managers that this process has not worked well in the past. Jeff has expertise in convening groups in a way that supports co-creation and ownership. His process also helps teams get away from the “waterfall” approach, where communication is one-way from the top and results in everyone getting all wet! Jeff wants to offer his expertise to Tom and sets up a meeting for this contracting conversation. Jeff’s first step in the meeting is personal acknowledgment.

*Jeff:* “Hi, Tom. Thanks for taking the time to meet with me today. I am excited to share my ideas to help your team with goals and I am feeling a bit cautious because I haven’t worked with you on this process in the past.”

*Tom:* “Thanks, Jeff. I look forward to hearing your ideas, but I’m not sure how you can help me.”

*Jeff:* “I appreciate that. Any concerns you have about us working with you? Any past experience with our group that it would be good to know about?”

Just listen to what the client has to say, then communicate understanding of the problem.

*Jeff:* “My understanding is that you are developing and rolling out your goals for next year with your plant managers. I’ve also heard from you and your team that it hasn’t gone well in the past.”

*Tom:* “I know I was frustrated last year. I didn’t realize they were as well.”

*Jeff:* “Can you say more about your frustration?”

Again, Jeff just listens, then Jeff and Tom exchange wants and offers.



- Jeff:* “I want your agreement to have us work with you and your team to utilize a process to improve your goal alignment and shared ownership of the results. This would require time with you and your group, beginning with you inviting them to a meeting to launch the effort and have each meet with us to give shape to it.”
- Tom:* “I want to hear what you have to offer. I also want to make sure we get this done by the end of the month.”

In its simplest expression, the rest of the contracting conversation flows per the basic model.

### ***Selling Is Removing Obstacles More Than Lighting Fires***

We have all grown up with the image that a good salesperson is energetic, dynamic, quick with the words and phrases, and sincerely inspirational. They are good at “overcoming resistance.” This probably has some truth to it. But good salespeople are also people who are quiet, slow moving, struggle to find the right words, and come across as nicely average. Both kinds are successful, but there is great overemphasis on personality as the key to selling. So people who come to our consulting workshops tend to think that good consultants have to have charisma and presence.

Charisma and presence are, in fact, two mythical virtues that are highly overrated. I must admit that I have a vested interest in downplaying charisma and presence. I am quiet, slow moving, a struggler for words, and come across as nicely average. Workshop participants ask me if I have always been this way. I say, “What do you mean, ‘this way’?” They say, “Well, so low-keyed and half-asleep.” Then they back off and think that my style is all by plan and design—that I am cooling it for the sake of their learning experience and that when I am out with clients, I release the Mack truck idling underneath the surface. Of course, this is not true. We are the way we are. Their underlying concern is that there is a certain right kind of personality to do consulting, and this concern is heightened when it comes to selling. I don’t believe it, and here is why.

If I have a service that responds to a real need in the client’s organization, then I assume that in some sense, the client would like to say yes to my proposition. In a way, we consultants are looking for people looking for us. If I have assessed the need accurately, and the client is denying the need or questioning that my services can help the situation, then I ask myself: *What obstacles are in the way of the client’s trusting in what*



*I offer?* For clients who are pulling away, I try to understand the nature of the resistance, which usually is something like:

They don't trust the competence or confidentiality of the department or firm I represent.  
They feel they will lose control if they say "yes."

They feel they will become too vulnerable if they say "yes."

They don't trust or respect me as a person.

They have had bad experiences in the past with something similar.

When I am advocating a program and the client is resisting, the client's feelings give fire to the resistance. If I duck into a phone booth and step out magically equipped with my charisma and presence and really start "selling," I am just adding fuel to the fire. The client's resistance increases. My personality, high-keyed or low-keyed, is not the problem. The problem is that the client is not buying because their intuition is saying not to trust me and what I am saying. The way out of the resistance is to help the client express directly, in words, the distrust, the negative feelings. The more the client can express the feelings of doubt and distrust, the freer the client will be to really consider my offer on its merits. The more authentic I am, the more the client trusts me and the more quickly the resistance disappears.

Here are some tips on what to do when you are selling your services:

Don't be any different when you are selling than when the client called you in.

Don't try to overcome the resistance with more explanations and pleas for the good of the organization. When you are saying the same thing for the second time, shut it down.

Do help the client express the reservations about you and your product.

Do admit you are there to sell and want the client to buy.

Do be authentic and follow the contracting sequence.

After walking through these steps, it may be that the client simply does not want what you have to offer. This is choice, not resistance.

If you do all of this—and the reservations are expressed and there is trust in the relationship—and still get a "no," then back off and reassess whether you have identified a real need and whether you are offering the right service or program. It is much better to lose the sale or yield the moment and maintain a solid relationship with the client than to keep pushing a sale that won't pan out.



## ***A Comment on Time and Money***

For internal and external consultants, clients often refuse a contract on the grounds that they do not have the money to go ahead with the project or the organization does not have the time to invest. Both of these are indirect reasons not to do something, and I never take them at face value. These excuses are almost always a mask for the fact that the manager doesn't want to do the project. It is always about commitment, never about budget.

The problem here is one of motivation, not time or money. Managers spend their own and their organization's time on things they want to do. They also spend money on things they want to do. They are managers, and they have control, and they pretty much do what they want regardless of time and money. If they wanted to do your project, they would find a way. If you agree with them that time or money is the problem, you are just colluding with them in avoiding the real reason. Don't collude. Get to the real reason, and you will have a better chance.

## **The Meeting as a Model of How You Work**

Consulting is primarily an educational process. When we are at our best, line managers learn something about how to manage their organization, or solve a technical or business problem as a result of their contact with you. Even if you are brought in on a highly technical problem, the manager can learn about approaching these kinds of problems from watching their experience with you. In fact, managers probably learn more from watching consultants than from listening to them. This is why authentic behavior is an integral part of consulting flawlessly.

You can use the contracting meeting as an example of how you work with clients. In this meeting, you are collecting information on the problem, creating space for doubts, testing out some of your own theories, sharing your intuition about what is occurring, exchanging wants, and giving feedback to the manager on your reaction to it all. You are also jointly defining the problem and making plans. When clients ask you how you would plan to work with their organizations, you can use the contracting meeting as a mini-example of your approach, pointing out that the whole project will follow these steps in a more elaborate way.

The clearer you are about naming the content and the relationship dimensions to your process, the more you help reduce client fears about loss of control and vulnerability. In cases where a manager is really having a hard time understanding how I could



help—even after I’ve gone through the contracting meeting as an example of how I work—I suggest that we engage in a very brief demonstration of what I do. The manager and I agree on a 20-minute consultation right then and there, and for the next 20 minutes, I act as the manager’s consultant on some problem of their choosing. At the end of 20 minutes, we stop the mini-consultation and talk about the process we just went through. This method helps me explain and demonstrate how I work, and it helps the manager decide how it would feel to work with me and whether my orientation is what they are looking for.

A sample consultation like this is especially useful when the project is rather broad and ambiguous, and the manager is worried about losing control over it. During your brief consultation, the manager has the opportunity to experience you as someone who is responsive and collaborative, yet still has some different ways of looking at the world.

## **Closing the Contracting Meeting**

### ***How to Measure Success***

In closing the contracting meeting, ask how you and the client will know whether you are successful. It may be an unanswerable question, but at worst, it will clarify the manager’s expectations. At best, it will give good guidance on how to structure the project. This is most often a qualitative measure. Still useful.

### ***20 Minutes before the End of the Meeting***

No contracting meeting should end without your asking about how the manager feels about the project, the meeting, and working together. Ask: “How do you feel about this meeting? Any reservations?” and “How do you feel about what I have said and my approach to this? Anything you want to mention?” We do this to provide a sample of how the client might engage their own team. They will get this without you pointing it out. And they will get both what working with you will be like and what residue will remain after you are gone. Remember the purpose of the meeting is to help you both make a good decision about proceeding.

Leave 20 minutes to discuss these questions. It may only take two minutes, but if the questions uncover new issues, it’s best to discuss them now. And discussing them means you are being terminally curious. Plus, never wait until the end of a meeting to ask how it went. If it had some bumps, it is too late to recover.



## **To Sum It Up**

The point is that guiding and shaping this kind of conversation is our early best shot at ensuring that our expertise and recommendations will be acted on later by the client. It is foundation building. The quality of trust in each other is in the best interests of both of you. These steps, including their discomfort, are an insurance policy you are enacting. It is affirming that your relationship with the client is fundamental to solving the problem. A radical thought that has impact without having to be named.

We commit to acting out the path we want to walk on. That is different from explaining it. We do not say to the client, “I would like to create a trusting relationship with you. This is our best way of maximizing the outcome that we are discussing. We need to be open and honest with each other!” Explanations have no power. They create distance and declare we are the knowing one. In these small steps, we become a partner with another. We are equally vulnerable and curious. It is not that anything always works in a particular situation; it is that we choose to act on our intention of how we want to serve ourselves and our client. This way of working is detailed, deliberate, and an expression of the way to have influence when we don’t have control.







## CHAPTER 8

# Some Agonies of Contracting

**SOME PARTICULARLY ROUGH SPOTS** in contracting are worth highlighting. The first is what to do when you get stuck at Step 5: Agreement. Another is the difficult situation in which the client is willing to go ahead with a project, but you know the client's motivation toward the project is low.

There are ways to move forward through either difficulty.

### When You Get Stuck

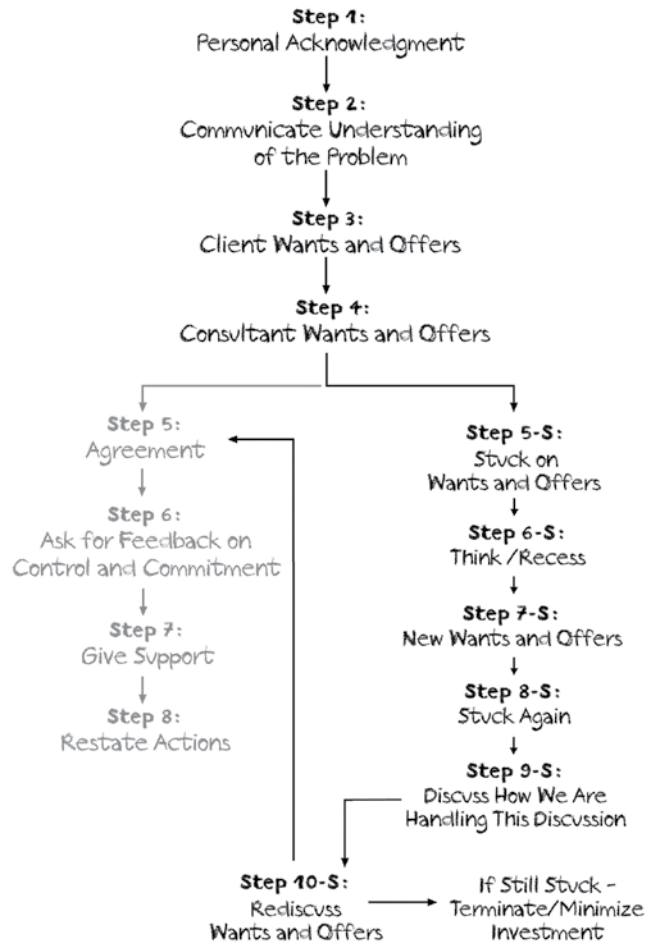
So, what happens if agreement is difficult? In Figure 8.1, this is called Step 5-S (*S* for *stuck*).

#### *Step 5-S: Stuck on Wants and Offers*

There are two phases to dealing with being stuck. First, you have to know that you are stuck. Second, you have to do something about it.

**Knowing When You Are Stuck** It is possible to feel that you are just having a reasonable discussion with the client about the pros and cons of the project and not realize that you are at an impasse. However, there are several clear operational signals that you are stuck:





**Figure 8.1** Navigating the Contracting Meeting When You Are Stuck

1. *You are stuck when you hear yourself re-explaining something for the third time.* The first time you explained why you want something, you might have not quite been clear enough. Jargon or clumsy language might have been in play. The second time you explained, you might have felt the client wasn't really listening. When you are struggling for the third time to express something in different, clearer words, you should admit to yourself that you are stuck.



Much of organizational communication is in code:

When People Mean	They Express It by Saying
I don't like it.	"I don't understand it."
I don't want to do it.	"Let's get more data." or "Where else has this worked?" or "I'll get back to you." or "Let me talk it over with my staff."
I don't understand a word you are saying.	Nothing. Eye contact unlikely.
I will decide each step.	"Why don't you think it over and get back to me?"
I wouldn't let your group even get close to my organization. Lip service is on the table.	"We want to talk to some other people about alternative approaches to this problem and we'll let you know."

You need to learn and trust this code because it is an early warning signal when you are getting stuck with the client. When you are thinking: *The client really doesn't understand what I am talking about*, the truth is that the client really does understand what you are talking about and does not agree. When this happens, don't explain for the fourth and fifth time. Instead, acknowledge that you are stuck.

2. *You are stuck when you notice the client diving into the third explanation of the same idea.* When the client thinks that you still don't understand, you will hear something like, "Let me see if I can put it another way." The re-explaining process assumes that lack of clarity is the problem. By the third try, it is not lack of clarity; it is lack of agreement. You are stuck. Acknowledge it.
3. *Your body will give you clear messages that you are getting stuck.* When you start suppressing yawns, take it as a signal that the meeting is not going your way. Boredom and fatigue are usually indirect expressions of irritation. You start to get subtly irritated with the resistance you are getting from the client. Perhaps it is the lack of enthusiasm you are getting from the client. As you get irritated, you say to yourself that you shouldn't be irritated, so you start holding back the irritation. The strain of holding



back what you feel, especially if it happens unconsciously, is tiring, and your shoulders and neck start to ache. You start to yawn, but turn it into a laugh at the last minute. You start looking at your watch and think about the tennis game you played yesterday. Or you notice the client also looking very tired, turning yawns into laughs, staring out the window, or secretly napping as you talk.

All of these are signs that the conversation is not going well. Stuck. If you were making progress and moving toward agreement, your energy would be increasing. If your energy is decreasing and you start feeling irritated, then it simply means that you aren't getting what you want and you are stuck.

4. *Your eyes give you the best cues that the contracting process has bogged down.* Trust what you see. Believe nonverbal messages. There is a lot written about body language—how to interpret different positions and how to posture yourself to communicate or conceal certain messages. Using body language or nonverbal behavior to either manipulate a situation or present yourself in a certain way is a mistake. When you force your body into a position that hides how you are feeling, you look to others like someone who is forcing your body into a position to hide how you are really feeling. Noticing that you are trying to do something with your nonverbal behavior or are being psychological about others' nonverbal behavior can be a valuable source of information to you.

If you are looking for nonverbal cues during the contracting process, you will notice the client moving forward into the discussion or moving back away from the discussion. You will notice the client's hands—gestures of pushing you away, grabbing you like a fist, pointing at you like a gun, or opening wide, palms up, saying, "I am here by accident, a helpless victim of fate. What can any of us mere mortals do about this situation?" These gestures can be accurately interpreted only at the grossest level: Are they acts of support or rejection? Does the client want into this project or out of it? Is the conversation going well or poorly?

The client's physical behavior and your own movements are only cues to help you know when you are stuck. They don't tell you why you are stuck. Resist the mind game of interpreting specific gestures. Do trust the general messages and the headlines.

There is often a sharp contrast between what clients are saying and their nonverbal behavior. They are saying that they are really interested in this project, and they are also backed against the wall with their arms folded over their heads in bomb shelter fashion. If I am forced to choose between believing the words and believing the body, I believe



the body. We all have sophisticated verbal defenses, but nonverbal defenses are much less sophisticated, so trust what you see. But use it only as a signal. Don't comment directly on a client's behavior and resist the temptation to say, "Each time I suggest interviewing your subordinates, you back up your chair to the wall, put your head into your arms, and hold your breath until your face turns pink. Why? Are you uncomfortable with what I am suggesting?"

The act of inferring the motives for another person's behavior is a mixture of guesswork and projection. Both mild acts of aggression when, if spoken, inevitably lead to defensiveness. Your objective is to help the client express the reservations more directly. You want to get a single message from the client so you know where things stand. When you get a double message because the body language doesn't match the words, ask an open-ended question about how the client feels about what you are discussing. "What's your reaction to what we've been discussing?" Again, the purpose of focusing on nonverbal behavior is to set up an early warning system and gather a more accurate set of cues, so you have a more realistic view of how the client is reacting to what you are saying.

Your own body is also an indication of how you are feeling about the contracting meeting. If the conversation seems to be going well on the surface, and you also find yourself low on energy and slumping in the chair, you should begin to wonder whether your body is picking up some caution flags that your mind is choosing to ignore. If the conversation is going well and you are slumping in the chair, you might just be tired. And that's okay too.

So, what to do when you notice you're stuck?

### ***Step 6-S: Think/Recess***

I think the most difficult part of dealing with being stuck is admitting to yourself that you have reached an impasse. When you do acknowledge to yourself that you are stuck, mentally pull back from the conversation and become an observer to the contracting meeting you are engaged in. You can continue talking and listening, yet at the same time be thinking whether you can change your position in some way. Are there different wants you can ask for and still meet your objectives?

Sometimes it is wise to adjourn the meeting. Or take a pause. Say, "We seem to be hung up on this point, and I would like some time to think about it more." Call a break. Go to the restroom. Not very sophisticated, but useful. This gives you an



opportunity to reevaluate whether there is really an unresolvable difference between you and the client or whether the difficulty is due to some misunderstanding growing from the way the meeting itself has progressed. When you mentally or physically withdraw from the firing line, you give yourself time to identify a different way to approach the project or a different way to seal the agreement.

### ***Step 7-S: New Wants and Offers***

If you think the differences between you and the client are negotiable, present any new ideas on what you want from the client or what you have to offer. We often get stuck in the contracting meeting over schedule. The client wants the job in 30 days, and we think we need 60 days. Both of us have good reasons, and so we get stuck.

You may decide after the thinking and reconfiguring step that you could complete the project in 30 days if the client provides 2 people to work with you and agrees that your final report can be in outline form instead of elaborate prose. Here's what you say:

*Changing your offer:* "The job will be done in 30 days instead of 60 days."

*Changing your wants:* "I can get the job done in 30 days if you give me 2 people to work with and accept a shorter final report."

Developing different wants and offers is always worth at least one try. Sometimes it still doesn't help.

### ***Step 8-S: Stuck Again***

If you realize that changing the wants and offers has just led to another impasse, then it is time to really shift gears. You have made two passes at reaching agreement that aren't working, so you should ask yourself whether the way you are working with the client and the relationship between you and the client might not be the real problem.

Line managers make decisions on projects based on their feelings about the people involved. Does the manager trust you as the consultant or your department or company? Consultants also make agreements with line managers based on whether they trust the manager. When consultant and client get stuck on how or whether to proceed, a different kind of discussion is needed.



### ***Step 9-S: Process How We Are Handling This Discussion***

When you're stuck again, the conversation needs to shift to how the meeting is going. For the moment, put aside the actual project under consideration. There are many ways of processing how a discussion is being handled, and they are covered in more detail in Chapters 10 and 11, which address resistance and how to deal with it.

Here are a couple of ways of shifting the focus of discussion to the process of the meeting:

1. *Say, "I think we are stuck."* This simple declarative statement of fact—the meeting isn't going anywhere—is probably the most powerful thing you can do. Of course, you will use your own language and style, but the key is to put directly into words the fact that you are traveling in circles. If the client keeps talking about the project, restate that we are stuck and encourage a discussion of why we seem to be stuck. Don't get wedded to your thinking about why we are stuck, just let that talking about being stuck be the focus for the moment.
2. *Ask an open-ended question about how the client feels the meeting is going.* You don't have to be subtle. Say, "How do you feel we are doing in reaching agreement on how to proceed?" If you stick with the question, you will soon find out how the line manager is reacting to working with you. The manager may be worried about:
  - Keeping control of the project,
  - How stubborn you seem to be,
  - How misunderstood they feel,
  - The reputation your group has in the organization,
  - How vague the benefits of this project seem,
  - The jargon and motherhood statements you use,
  - Choosing a safe path, or
  - Having a corporate program forced on them.

Most cases of stuck contracting stem from these kinds of concerns, not from the specifics of how to set up the project. You and the client need to talk directly about your concerns and feelings. When these concerns are expressed, the specifics become much easier. So just ask the question.



### ***Step 10-S: Re-Discuss Wants and Offers***

The discussion of how the meeting is going will usually unclog the impasse. You can go back to the specifics of the project and usually reach some agreement that puts you back on the original track (Step 5: Reach Agreement) and allows you to continue on to close the meeting.

Sometimes, despite all your skills, after following all these suggestions perfectly and consulting flawlessly, you remain stuck.

### ***Step 11-S: If Still Stuck—Terminate or Minimize Your Investment***

Despite their importance to you, all projects were not meant to be. It is vital to accept this now, early in the project, and not count on later miracles to save the day.

When you are irreparably stuck with the client, you need to say: “We are having a hard time reaching agreement. Perhaps now is not a good time to do this work,” or “I suggest that we not begin this project, since we can’t seem to agree on how to proceed.” Using your own style and own words, end the contracting process and cut your losses.

## **The Problem with Saying “No”**

Internal consultants especially feel they are taking tremendous risks if they tell line managers that they would be better off terminating a project. Despite the risk, it is in your and the client’s best interests to refuse projects that do not have a reasonable chance for success. When you are stuck in contracting with a client, it is because both of you feel that if you don’t get your way, the project will not succeed. If you go ahead with a project you don’t believe in, you run the risk of failure. The reason to terminate projects is not because of consultant petulance or pickiness or the desire to engage only in exotic and professionally stimulating work. The reason to say “no” is to avoid failure and the waste of your resources and your future credibility with other opportunities.

Another reason to stay open to the possibility of saying “no” to a client is that you are trying to manage the relationship with the client in a way that you would wish the client to manage relationships with people in their organization. Saying “no” says that we have limits, that we have a right to declare boundaries and decide on our own what we commit to. If we cannot say “no,” then “yes” loses its meaning, and commitment also is taken off the table. We become programmed to say “yes” and after a while do not know when the “yes” is sincerely felt or simply born of institutionalized habit.



If you can't usually say "no" to a client, there are still some choices for you. For example, you can minimize your investment of time and hope to keep your potential losses down. The easiest way to do this is to postpone the project. Say, "I am willing to go ahead with the project as you have requested, but I suggest that we begin it in eight months." By this time, this manager might have moved on to another job or you might have moved on to better things.

If you can't postpone the project, another choice is to minimize the scope of the job and the time it will require. Narrow the objectives of the project. Do what you can to reduce the visibility of the project and reduce the drain on your time and energy. The key is to be honest with yourself about the limitations of the project.

So be realistic about unattractive projects. Be clear with your boss and others that the project is beginning on shaky ground and that you would rather not proceed, but that you feel you have no choice because you can't afford to say "no" to this client. Or the corporate program is in your hands. Then do the project in a low-key way.

The critical point to consider is whether it is really in your best interest to go ahead with a project. It may be better to live without the project, and not having "converted" that client, than to begin a project that might fail. If you pull back from one client, perhaps that client will be angry with you and feel rejected. But you lost only one client. If you proceed with a project that you think might fail and, in fact, it doesn't go well, you are in bigger trouble. The client is going to tell five other managers how disappointing the project was and how it failed. Now you are in the hole with six managers instead of only one.

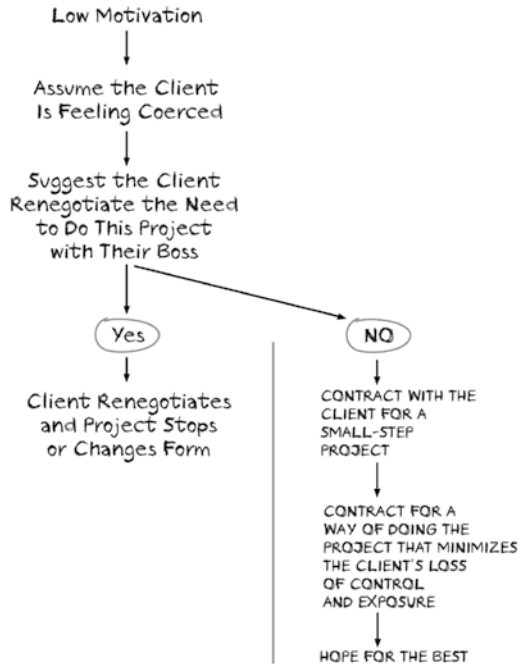
It is just not good for business to take on low-chance-of-success projects.

## **Dealing with Low Motivation**

Line managers also take an unnatural stance when they proceed with a project that they don't really want to do. When they agree to do a project they don't want to do, they have usually been coerced to say "yes" by their boss, their subordinates, or even by their difficulty in saying "no" to you, the consultant. You also may be acting out of pressure from your boss to go ahead with the project. A recent addition to the complications of contracting is the need to operate in a virtual world. While our growing dependence on technology influences all that we do in consulting, it is in the contracting phase where it puts us most at risk.



Here is some guidance on each of the steps in dealing with low motivation (see the model in Figure 8.2):



**Figure 8.2** Steps in Dealing with Low Motivation

1. If the client has low energy for the project, the first choice is to consider just not doing it.

If you or the client feel you must go ahead with the project anyway:

2. Acknowledge, at least to yourself, that the project is beginning with either pressure or indifference. Ask the client if he or she is feeling at all pressured to go ahead. Usually the client will own up to any feeling of pressure.

When the client does acknowledge pressure:

3. Suggest that the client go back to the person exerting the pressure and renegotiate whether the project has to be done. The client may either agree to stop the project or change the form it is taking so that it feels more comfortable. If you are in an auditing or policing role and are the source of the pressure yourself, acknowledge that you realize the client has no choice but to work with you: "Let's find a way to proceed together that makes the best of it for both of us."



If you must go ahead in the face of some pressure:

4. Contract with the client for a small-step project. Suggest that you work together on a small piece of the total project so that the client can decide whether the process is as bad as it is feared it would be. Usually if the client has a positive experience with you, concerns will go down. If you are there to audit or review, there are ways to proceed that keep trust intact.

Acknowledge to the client that you are proceeding despite the low motivation. Then:

5. Ask the client whether there is some way that you could proceed that would minimize any concerns. Clients' concerns are often about losing control or being vulnerable, so ask: "Is there some way we can set this up so that you don't feel you have given up too much control over the situation? Is there some way we can set it up so that your vulnerability is protected?" You can negotiate how to proceed on the project so that you still get what you need from it and the client doesn't feel like such a victim.

Then hope for the best. These are tough contracts to manage. People in the auditing role are up against it all the time. The best thing they can do is to acknowledge the pressure and give the client support for the situation they are in by helping the client translate feelings into words. There is not much more you can do except get on with it.

## **Ceaseless Negotiation: The Shifting Tide of Your Role**

Consulting projects take place out in the world, in the middle of very political organizations, where the people and the pressures are constantly changing. So do some of the pieces of your consulting projects. Another thing that can change is the way the client deals with you. Because the client both wants you on the project and at the same time wants you to be more distant, your role definition with the client becomes subject to the process of ceaseless negotiation. The essence of the work is based on a social contract. Maybe within a legal contract, but the social is always in play. And in some ways, it is decisive.

Sometimes a change in the project is obvious: a new manager arrives, the budget is cut, and findings in the middle of your inquiry have indicated new problems. More often, though, the changes are more subtle. Without your realizing it, the client has begun to treat you a little differently. You thought you were going to be invited to a meeting but weren't, or the scheduling the client does for one of your meetings got



fouled up. These cues are harder to read, but might indicate the need for some discussion or renegotiation.

Here's an example from my work with a large drug company. A large management development conference was planned for May. About 75 high-level managers would attend, and the purpose was to have them do some joint problem solving on three critical new product introductions planned for the following year. It was now January, and I was working with a planning committee in preparing for the May conference. The committee was made up of two line managers, Jim and Lou; a support person, Rich; and me, an outside consultant. Jim, Lou, and Rich were vice presidents reporting to the president. I was primarily responsible for the detailed design and structuring of the meeting. The president had originally suggested having the May conference, so the committee knew we had his support. The committee had met several times, and I felt included in their process, really a part of the committee.

The scene picks up on a bleary Tuesday morning in January in a meeting with Jim, Lou, Rich, and me.

Jim and Lou, the line executives, have been discussing how the top management group has been having a hard time getting its act together lately and that if they don't reach agreement on some things soon, they are going to look awfully foolish at the large meeting in May. Out of the discussion comes the fact that the president is part of the problem. He is very quiet, people don't know where they stand with him, and it's making everyone uncomfortable—and that discomfort is going to become obvious at the May meeting. Lou finally suggests that maybe we should postpone the May meeting until the management group is ready. Jim says maybe it would be good for the management group to stumble in the May meeting because then it would force them to work out things with the president. Rich, the support person, says maybe we are making too much of a thing about the management group: the problems aren't that great, and people might not notice.

Lou says to stop the May meeting, Jim says to hold the meeting, and Rich says, "What's the real problem here?" and our meeting goes around and around. I am strongly in favor of holding the meeting, but not with this cloud hanging over it. I finally suggest that we meet the next day with the president, identify the problem in a general way, and suggest he deal with the problem before the May meeting. I know that the president is quite unaware of the impact his quiet style is having on the group from other conversations I have had with him. There is a lot of discussion about my suggestion. Lou is worried he will be shot



as the carrier of bad news; Jim says, “Why not meet with him?”; and Rich says, “Well, if we could phrase it right and not make it too much of a problem, maybe it would be all right.” Finally, after considerable pressure from me, the group agrees to meet with the president the next afternoon at 4:00 to discuss the concern. I agree to present the idea and the others can chime in as they wish.

As we are leaving, Lou says to me, “It’s easy for you to push to confront the president because you don’t work for him like the rest of us do.” I agree with him that it is easier for me to do it, and that’s the reason I suggested it. I left the meeting tired and with the feeling that meeting now with the president was the only rational way to resolve the question and unblock the committee so it could complete its task of planning the May meeting.

On Wednesday, I arrive early for the 4:00 meeting with the president and sit down to talk with Rich. After a little smalltalk, he says, “By the way, the 4:00 meeting is canceled.” Jim, Lou, and Rich had met first thing that morning and reconsidered the decision to meet with the president. Lou had thought it over and felt that it was too risky. Jim and Rich went along with him. So they decided instead to meet at 4:00 to proceed with the planning of the May conference.

Surprised, disappointed, and a little angry, I meet with the committee at 4:00. I ask a lot of questions about why they canceled the meeting and what we are going to do about their original concerns for the May conference. Lou repeats his story about how risky it is to go to the president and what a vulnerable position that puts him in, reminding me once more that it was easy for me to urge a meeting with the president because I don’t work there—and besides the problem isn’t as big as we made it out to be. There is some truth about Lou’s concern about the risk. If he feels that vulnerable, he probably has reasons.

I figure I have done what I could, and after letting them humor me for a while, we move on to planning the May meeting. Rich makes a statement that one of these days, when the time is right, he will raise the subject of the management group’s relationship with the president and see what kind of response he gets. It’s a nice gesture, an offer we all know will never happen. The moment has passed.

I leave the meeting troubled about the whole thing and puzzled why I am troubled. I understand Lou’s concern about the risk: I don’t believe in taking blind risks. I know that the problem is not a crisis and business will go on as usual. An opportunity has been missed, but that happens every day.



After grouching around for a couple of hours, trying to pretend I'm really not upset, it starts to dawn on me what I'm really disturbed about. In the course of 24 hours, my role with that group has radically changed. When I left the meeting on Tuesday, I was a full-fledged member of the committee. I joined in the important decisions, and I had my share of influence (maybe more than my share). I was a part of where the action was. When I returned the next day, all that had changed. The others had made a major strategy decision without me: not to meet with the president. And they had implemented that decision without me: they canceled the 4:00 meeting.

My role had changed in one day from a person with full status as a committee member to someone who was merely informed of a decision and had to be appeased and cooled off. They hadn't called me to see whether I could make a morning meeting, they hadn't called me to discuss what to do over the phone, and they hadn't called me to explain their change in strategy before they implemented it. I had turned from being a committee member to a specialist in charge of structuring the specifics of the May meeting. It happened right before my eyes, and I didn't even realize that my role had changed until three hours after the meeting.

After getting clear on what happened, I met with Rich a couple of days later with the intent of renegotiating my role or contract with that group. We agreed I would be treated as a full member, and it pretty much stayed that way through the rest of the project.

What is important about this incident is how quickly and subtly the consultant's contract can shift, which means that sustaining and renegotiating the agreement is a ceaseless process.

The timing of your renegotiation is important. It has to take place as soon as you sense the client is treating you differently and that something has changed. If you let it slide for a while, it is much harder to sit down and discuss what happened, say, a month earlier. It was difficult to sit down with Rich and discuss what had happened just three days after the occurrence. His first response was to ask why I hadn't brought it up at the meeting—a question I couldn't answer. I wish I had brought it up at the meeting because then I could have renegotiated my role with the whole committee instead of just with Rich. The fact was that I was not really paying attention. And here I am still writing about it years later. So much for my ability to let go.

When your contract appears to be starting to change or the client is changing some of the ground rules, your leverage on the situation is highest right at the moment of the change. The longer you wait to raise the issue of the client's wanting more or less from you, the more difficult it is to renegotiate your contract. Still, no matter how



long the time lags, the discussion of a changed contract needs to take place. It helps a little when you know going into it that the contracting process takes place over and over through the life of the project. You are constantly recycling through different stages of the consultation, and negotiation really is ceaseless.

## **Some Other Specific Agonies**

The need for ceaseless negotiation is just one of the agonies of contracting. Other potential difficulties and setbacks exist at every step of the contracting phase. Here are some of them.

### ***The Flirtatious Client***

Sometimes you find out that you are the fourth person the manager has talked to about this project. Or the internal effort keeps getting delayed. You could respond to this knowledge by selling harder. Another option is to ask the manager why a decision is so difficult. Preoccupation with the consultant selection process or an elusive start date usually means the manager wants to start a project but does not really want anything to happen. Otherwise why control the process so meticulously? And, of course, this is likely the way that person manages their organization.

### ***Credentials? With Your Experience!***

Questions about your credentials will regularly come up over the course of your career: “What have you done elsewhere?” or “What are your credentials?” “Where else has this worked?” “What are the common industry practices?” There are two responses to this kind of grilling. One is to have your favorite war story well rehearsed and tell it. Maybe you have “evidence” on your side. Your best hope is that it will speak to the client’s situation. The second response, after the war story, is the question: “Are you concerned about whether I can really help you?” If the manager owns up to being concerned, don’t take it personally. Managers (no matter how confident) are likely to see themselves as beyond help or having tried everything. Or they think they can handle it without help; they just need a little more time. They need reassurance that improvement is possible, so give it to them. Don’t get into a defensive recital of your experience, other managers who support you, or guarantees of positive outcomes. It is too easy to let other people’s doubts about your work trigger your own. There is no way for us to sell our way into removing doubts.



## ***Go-Betweens***

Sometimes there is a go-between between the consultant and the manager—someone on the manager's staff or from another department. A go-between who is too active or protective can build up a screen between you and the manager, and then it will be hard for you to find out where things really stand. Try to have direct contact with the real client as early and often as possible. Urge the manager's attendance at meetings with you to discuss the project.

## ***Defining the Problem to Death: A Common Mistake***

In conducting consulting skills workshops and watching hundreds of consultants try to deal with a resistant client, one mistake stands out clearly: we consultants spend too much time in the contracting meeting trying to define the problem.

If we have a 1-hour meeting, we will spend 50 minutes understanding the problem and leave only 10 minutes to conduct the real business of the meeting—negotiating wants and dealing with concerns of control and exposure. This happens because during the meeting, we can take on the confusion or obstinacy of the client. We aren't sure what to do next, so we keep asking questions about the problem. It provides a nice relief for us and the client.

Don't spend so much time figuring out the problem. You will have the whole consultation to do that. Plus, what you are hearing is the presenting problem, not the underlying issue. If you don't know what to do next or if the meeting is going nowhere, you have two choices:

Look at the client and say, "Let's stop talking about the problem for a moment. Tell me what you want from me."

Look at the client and start making statements. Anything will do; it will lead you to where you ought to be going. Say, "You seem confused about the nature of this problem"; then, "Here is what I would like from you to help us take the next step." Then move into the exchange of wants.

Keep the discussion of the problem to no more than 35% of the total time for the meeting. If you really don't understand what the client sees as a problem, then negotiate a small contract to find out more. If you can't get clear after 20 minutes of meeting, you aren't going to get clear in the meeting no matter how many questions you ask.



## Contracting Checkpoint

At this point, you have all the information you need to conduct a contracting meeting flawlessly.

The sequence of steps covers the business of the contracting meeting. There are four major sections to the meeting: (1) understanding the problem and exchanging wants, (2) closing the meeting by checking on client concerns and commitment, (3) getting unstuck when agreement is difficult, and (4) putting into words what the client is or has been doing right, including actions in this meeting. Each step is essential and should never be skipped. If you cover the steps and still don't get the contract you wanted, you have done all you can and consulted flawlessly.

Use Checklist 3 to help you prepare for a contracting meeting. Answer the questions before each contracting meeting and you are ready.

Although some of the questions in Checklist 3 may be unanswerable at this early stage, trying to answer them helps you focus on the essence of the meeting. If you are part of a consulting team, the checklist gives you a vehicle to get your act together. Mostly, the questions keep you centered on what you need from the meeting so that you don't get swept away with over-responding to the client's view of the world.

For a downloadable copy of Checklist # 3, visit [www.flawlessconsulting.com](http://www.flawlessconsulting.com).

### CHECKLIST #3: PLANNING A CONTRACTING MEETING

Answer these questions when you are planning a contracting meeting.

1. What imbalance do you expect in the responsibility for this project? Do you think the client will want to treat you as the expert and give you 80% of the responsibility? Or will the client treat you as a pair of hands and keep 80% of the responsibility?
2. What do you want from the client?
  - What are your essential wants?
  - What are your desirable wants?
3. What are you offering the client?
  - Technically?
  - Personally?
  - Facilitation in improving how they work together?

(continued)



(continued)

4. What do you think the client might want? List all possibilities.
  - Technically?
  - Personally?
5. Are the key clients going to be in the room/in the gathering?
  - Who can make a decision on proceeding with this project?
  - Who will be strongly affected by this project?
  - Who is missing from the meeting?
  - What are their roles? For example, to get some action on the problem started or implement the outcome of your consultation or because they have the best information on the problem?
6. What resistance do you anticipate?
7. What are the conditions under which it would be best not to proceed?

After the Contracting Meeting

Checklist #4 contains some questions you can ask after the meeting to get clear on how the interaction went with the client. The contracting meeting is a leading indicator of how the rest of the project is going to go. Examining your answers to these questions will give you an idea of what problems you are going to have to deal with on the project.

For a downloadable copy of Checklist # 4, visit [www.flawlessconsulting.com](http://www.flawlessconsulting.com).

CHECKLIST #4: REVIEWING THE CONTRACTING MEETING

1. How would you rate?

Client	Consultant		
Balance of participation	100% _____	50/50 _____	100% _____
Who initiated	100% _____	50/50 _____	100% _____
Who had control	100% _____	50/50 _____	100% _____

(continued)



(continued)

2. What resistance or reservations did the client express?
  - Which did you explore directly, in words, with the client?
  - Which did you not really explore?
3. What reservations do you have about the contract?
  - Which did you put into words with the client?
  - Which did you express indirectly or not at all?
4. How did you give support to the client?
5. How were the client's concerns expressed?
  - Silence
  - Compliance
  - Attack
  - Questions
  - Giving answers
  - Directly, in words
6. What facial and body language did you observe?
7. How would you rate the client's motivation to proceed?
8. How would you rate your own motivation to proceed?
9. What didn't you express to the client?
10. Review "Navigating the Contracting Meeting." Did you skip any steps?
  - Which ones?
11. What did you learn from this experience? What did you do right in this meeting?

Go to [www.flawlessconsulting.com](http://www.flawlessconsulting.com) for the Bonner case, a scenario of a small consulting project that illustrates some of the essentials of the consulting skills covered so far: the phases of consulting, the steps in the contracting process and its recycling nature, plus the objective of maintaining a 50/50 balance in taking responsibility for the consulting action.







## CHAPTER 9

# The Internal Consultant's Dilemma

**M**OST OF THE WORKSHOPS WE CONDUCT ON CONSULTING SKILLS are for internal consultants, and the participants sit patiently and listen to us talk about “Saying ‘No’ to a Manager,” “Confront Problems with the Manager as They Happen,” “Make Your Own Wants and Demands Clear,” and “Deal Directly with the Politics of the Situation.” Eventually, someone in the back of the room raises a hand and says, “That’s easy for you to say. You’re an outside consultant. You don’t have to live inside the organization you are consulting to. We are internal consultants. If a line manager gets mad at us, we are in trouble. You just don’t understand what it’s like.”

I used to resist. I would say the issues are the same. They have to do the same things I do with clients, and on and on and on. The group would then lean back, I would announce a coffee break, and they would talk excitedly to each other and ignore me. I don’t resist anymore.

Here are some ideas about how internal and external consulting are in some important ways different.

## Distinctions between Internal and External Consultants

As an internal consultant, you are at every moment embedded in some part of the culture and hierarchy of the organization. You have a boss you must satisfy (at least to some extent). Your own department has certain goals it must achieve. Technical departments have a new process they want to introduce to the operating units. Financial groups want new control procedures adopted.



How does having a boss and having departmental objectives affect the way internal consultants work and contract with line managers?

It is often not possible to respond just to the line manager's own wants and needs. You have procedures that you want the line manager to adopt that may be in conflict with what the manager's own philosophy and style are.

You may get evaluated on how many managers adopt the support group's programs. You are often asked to sell your own department's approach, and the pressure to do this can be immense. It is as if you are operating in a free-market situation.

You are often expected to convert an adversary. A certain line manager may have rejected your department's services for years, but it is up to you to bring that manager into the fold.

Having one key manager angry at you can be a disaster. The potential number of clients is limited to the managers in one organization. If you blow one or two projects, even though no fault of your own, word can get around fast, and the demand for your services can disappear quickly. If this happens, you are out of a job, even if they keep you on the payroll.

You have a status and job level that is known to most people in the organization. This can limit your access to key high-level people you should be contacting directly. An external consultant's status and level are more ambiguous, so they can bounce around from level to level more easily.

The difficulty of being a prophet in your own land is overplayed and can be used as a defense, but there is some truth in it. Because you work for the same organization, line managers can see you as being captured by the same forces and madness that impinge on them. Thus, they may be a little slower to trust you and recognize that you have something special to offer them.

What this means is that internal consultants need to operate by both mandate and choice. This makes internal consulting a high-risk proposition. In the end, all the internal consultant can do is make explicit to management the limitations and costs of mandated change. Just because you do not have the final decision is not a reason to avoid questioning the process.

External consultants face most of these issues too, but not with the same intensity. Being outside the organization, there is a potentially wider market for their services, and as long as their clients are happy, their own consulting organization is unlikely to complain.



The difference in intensity and setting for these issues makes the internal consultant's position more delicate and more vulnerable. This creates constraints on how internal consultants contract with clients and how much risk they feel willing to take in giving honest feedback. If the constraints lead to cautious behavior in the long run, the internal consultant can come to be used only as a pair of hands. If they ignore the constraints altogether, they may be seen as naïve and, in the extreme, disloyal. Charged with “not being sensitive to how we operate around here.”

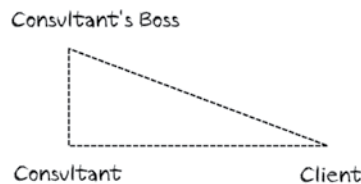
The consulting approach described in this book is a way for internal consultants to operate in the realm of higher risk and higher payoff and still maintain the respect and appreciation of clients. After all, all you have to do is consult flawlessly. The rest of this chapter describes a few things to be especially careful about if you are an internal consultant.

## Triangles and Rectangles

The meeting with a line manager as a client is only one element of the contracting process. At a minimum, internal consultants must also contract with their own supervisors.

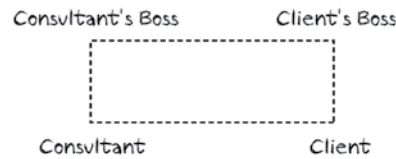
Each internal consulting group—whether it is a technical engineering group, a financial auditing group, a personnel group, a corporate support group—has its own priority projects it is pushing, and it has a set of beliefs about how directive or participative they want to be with their clients. Technical organizations have certain innovative processes they want their technical consultants to sell to the operating units. Marketing groups have certain positioning and pricing strategies to be sold to their clients.

Each support group has agreed to meet some objectives that its internal consultants will have to advocate to its client line managers. Thus, often consultants must both serve the needs of the client and fulfill a contract with their own management to implement these priorities. This forces the boss into the contracting process and means internal consultants are always in at least a triangular contract (Figure 9.1).



**Figure 9.1** A Triangular Contract





**Figure 9.2** A Rectangular Contract

Sometimes the contract is a rectangle (Figure 9.2). It might even be a pentagon or an octagon.

The rectangular contract can begin with a general understanding between the consultant's boss and the client's boss. This means the consultant is showing up for work with the client in a situation in which neither of them has particularly chosen the consultation and yet they have a given commitment to begin. The effect of this situation is to prolong the contracting phase. It is desirable for the consultant to meet with each party of the contract to clarify expectations. Sometimes this may not be possible, but at a minimum you can know what you are up against and not treat the contracting as a simple process. Each side of the rectangle or triangle needs to be explored before the discovery process begins.

### ***Your Boss's Expectations***

As it turns out, when you include all parties in the contracting framework, many apparent problems between internal consultants and their clients are merely symptoms of problems between internal consultants and their own bosses. The boss can have expectations of you as a consultant that you cannot fulfill. You may feel that you can never say "no" or that you have to convert very difficult clients.

I once asked a group of engineering consultants what messages their own organization sends about how to conduct their business. Their answers form a set of norms around internal consulting:

"No matter what, get the job done."

"If the technical issue is that important, don't worry about the sensitivities of the client. Bedside manner is overrated."

"Don't upset or antagonize the client."

"Stay long enough to do the job, but don't stay too long."



- “Convince the client to do what you recommend.”
- “Sell the company way.”
- “Every problem can be solved.”
- “Every client can be reached.”
- “Be loyal to your own organization.”
- “Don’t wash dirty linen in public.”
- “Don’t evaluate people or bad-mouth anyone.”
- “Never admit a mistake to a client.”
- “Contracts with clients should be very, very flexible.”
- “Don’t make any commitments for future work.”
- “Keep personalities out of it.”
- “Always stay low-key and smooth. No emotion.”
- “Have suitcase, will travel.”
- “Act with dignity, tact, confidence, and decorum.”

This list of expectations, of course, represents unrealistic pressures that consultants can feel; they are not all the spoken words of any one supervisor. They do represent the quandary that internal consultants are in when the contract with their boss is not clear and explicit. Even when it is clear and explicit.

### ***Contracts with Your Boss***

Given these unfulfillable cultural norms about internal consultants, let us look at their contracts with their supervisors. The first step in contracting is to identify what you want, so we asked a group of internal consultants what they wanted from their bosses in order to deal with the pressures they were under. Here is what they said:

- “A clear definition of the job before I am sent out on a project.”
- “Access to the boss.”
- “Assistance on the nontechnical and political elements of the project.”
- “Don’t overcommit me all the time.”
- “Freedom to negotiate contracts based on the particulars of the situation.”
- “Minimum bias on how the project should turn out, what the recommendations should look like.”



The same group of consultants identified what they wanted from their clients. Notice how similar the lists are:

“A clear definition of the job.”

“Access to the person who really represents the client organization; also access to data.”

“Work the problem together—cooperation.”

“Commitment to the project.”

“Share the blame and glory.”

“To be wanted, to feel useful.”

“No bias about the outcome.”

“Take care of physical needs to accomplish the job.”

“Openness and feedback.”

“Feedback on what happened after I left.”

The clarity of understanding and agreement with your boss greatly affects your ability to respond appropriately and flawlessly with your clients. If you are unclear about the contract with your boss, you will tend to get involved in soft contracts with clients. There will be a tendency to give in to clients too easily, to be unwilling to back away from projects that have a low chance of success. You also may find yourself pressuring for your own support organization's priorities past the point of reasonableness, and this will distance you from your clients.

***Try This Exercise*** First, list the key wants you have of your boss. Then ask your boss to make a list of the key wants they have of you. Then exchange lists and meet together to see whether you can agree on a contract that represents a reasonable balance between what your group or department requires to meet its commitments to the overall organization, and what you need to be responsive to the needs and priorities of your clients.

### ***Contracts with Peers***

To add another layer of complexity, there are often peers in our unit or department who are also working with a particular line organization. In the best case, we are clear that we are a consulting team. In a virtual and long-distance world, this may not be given adequate time or attention. For example, different parts of human resources may



be working with the same client organization. Conflict can exist between them when this collection of consultants doesn't contract with one another before they contract with the client. It creates confusion, lack of role clarity, and clients are very good at finding the path of least resistance and the weakest link to get what they want.

The peer relationships within the client organization also need to be part our contracting and part of how we can help the client organization act cooperatively in acting on our recommendations. More about this later.

### ***Invitation Is First Choice***

A key question for internal consultants to ask bosses and consulting team members is: "What is the invitation you can make that encourages people to participate by choice and be a partner in owning the relationships, tasks, and process that lead to success?" The intent is to open the possibility of having conversations that confront ourselves and our clients with the fact that they have choices at the moment when we and they act as if they have no choice. Choice comes from invitation, not mandate. This calls for conversations in which people are listening to understand and speaking authentically about what is important to them and what challenges they face. These conversations can be difficult because they are unpredictable; they are not the ones we are used to having.

Invitation is not only a step in bringing people together, it also manifests the willingness to work in a collaborative way. This means that a future can be created without having to force it or sell it or barter for it. When we believe that barter or subtle coercion is necessary, we are operating out of a context of scarcity. Barter or coercion seems necessary when we have little faith in people's desire and capacity to operate out of idealism. The choice for idealism or cynicism is a spiritual stance about the nature of human beings. Cynicism gets justified by naming itself "reality."

A commitment to invitation is a core strategy for idealism and determines the context within which people show up. For all the agony of a volunteer effort, you are rewarded by being in the room with people who are up to something larger than their immediate short-term outcome desires. You are constantly in the room with people who want to be there, even if their numbers are few. The concern we have about the turnout is simply an expression of our own doubts about the possibility that, given a free choice, people will choose not to create a future distinct from the past.



Invitation is a language act. “I invite you.” Period. This is a powerful conversation because at the moment of inviting, hospitality and choice are created in the world. In your next conversation with your boss, and your boss’s boss, and your team, try asking: “What is the invitation you can make that encourages people to participate and own the relationships, tasks, and process that lead to success?”

If the conversation does not go well, you are ready for the next two chapters—on understanding and dealing with resistance.



## PART 3

# More Fundamentals









# Understanding Resistance

**T**HE HARDEST PART of consulting is successfully navigating resistance from the client and those around us. As we consult, it is natural for us to feel that if we can present our ideas clearly and logically, and if we have the best interests of others at heart, they will accept our expertise and follow our suggestions. We soon discover that no matter how reasonably we present data and recommendations, clients present us with resistance. We learn that being right, clear, and evidence-based is often not enough.

Resistance doesn't always happen, but when it does, it is puzzling and frustrating. In the face of resistance, we begin to view the client as stubborn and irrational, and we usually end up simply presenting the data and justifying the recommendations more clearly, repeatedly, and forcibly—"Let's go back to the PowerPoint."

The key to understanding the nature of resistance is to realize that it is a reaction to an emotional process taking place within the client. It is not a reflection of the conversation we are having with the client on an objective, logical, rational level. Resistance is a predictable, natural reaction against the process of being helped and against the process of having to face up to difficult organizational problems.

Resistance, then, is not only predictable and natural; it is a necessary part of the learning process. When, as consultants, we wish resistance would never appear or would just go away, we are, by that attitude, posing an obstacle to the client's integrating and learning from our expertise. For a client to learn something important about how to handle a difficult problem, the feelings of resistance need to find their voice and be expressed directly before the client is ready to genuinely accept and use what we have to offer.



The skill in dealing with resistance is to:

- Be able to identify when resistance is taking place;
- View resistance as a natural process and a sign that you are on target;
- Support the client in expressing the resistance directly;
- Respond by saying, “Good point”; and
- Not take the expression of the resistance personally or as an attack on you or your competence.

Dealing with resistance is hard to do and is what this chapter and the next are all about.

## **The Faces of Resistance**

Resistance takes many forms, some of them very subtle and elusive. In the course of a single meeting, you may encounter a variety of forms. As you begin to deal with it in one form, sometimes it will fade and reappear in a different body.

For technically oriented consultants—such as engineers, accountants, and computer, systems, and data science people—resistance can be hard to identify. Our technical backgrounds so orient us to data, facts, and logic that when we are asked to perceive an emotional or interpersonal process, it is like trying to see the picture on a badly out-of-focus photograph.

The following exploration of common forms of resistance is intended to help bring the picture into focus.

### ***Give Me More Detail***

The client keeps asking for finer and finer bits of information: “What do people who work the eleven-to-seven shift think?” “When you put the numbers together, what worksheets did you use? And were the numbers put in red or blue type?” The client seems to have an insatiable appetite to know everything about what is happening. No matter how much information you give the client, it is never enough. Each conversation leaves you feeling that the next time you meet, you should bring even more backup data with you. You also get the feeling that a huge amount of time is spent gathering information, and too little time is spent deciding and acting on what we and they are going to do.



Some questions from the client are reasonable; clients, after all, need to know what is going on. When you start to get impatient with the questions, even though you are able to answer them, that is the moment to start suspecting the request for detail is a form of resistance rather than a simple quest for information.

### ***Flooding You with Detail***

A corollary to the request for detail is to be given too much detail. It is a subtle form that wants to seduce you into thinking more information will be helpful.

You ask a client how this problem got started and the response is, “Well, it all got started 10 years ago on a Thursday afternoon in September. I think I was wearing a blue shirt, and the weather outside was overcast and threatening rain. I hope I am not boring you, but I think it is important for you to understand the background of the situation.” The client keeps giving you more and more information, which you understand less and less.

The moment you start to get bored or confused about what all this has to do with the problem at hand, you should begin to suspect that what you are getting is resistance and not just an effusive attempt to give you all the facts.

### ***Time***

The client says he or she would really like to go ahead with your project but the timing is just a little off. You are kept on the string, and the client keeps impressing you with how busy things are right now. In fact, the client barely has time to meet with you. Sometimes this form of resistance gets expressed by constant interruptions during your meetings. The client starts taking phone calls or keeps glancing at their phone. They are multitasking on a virtual call. Or someone calls and they turn to me and say, “Excuse me just a minute, Peter, but I have to settle this one issue with Ann.” And the client starts talking to Ann while I sit there.

The message the client seems to be giving in all these examples?

This organization is such an exciting place to work in, something is going on all the time. My organization has so little time.

I have so little time.

I want you to think I am refusing you because of the lack of time, not because your proposal gives me feelings of great discomfort.



The whole time issue, which we all face every day, is most often resistance against telling you what the client really feels about your project. When you find in December that the client would really like to do the project but can't get started until the third quarter of next year, you should begin to suspect you are encountering resistance.

### ***Impracticality***

The client keeps reminding you that this is the "real world and we are facing real-world problems." I must have heard about the "real world" a thousand times. Makes me wonder whether clients think we consultants live in a fantasy world. This form of resistance from the client accuses us of being impractical and academic, or even idealistic, the ultimate sin.

As with many other forms of resistance, there may be some truth in the client's "real-world" statement, but then there is some truth in almost any statement. It is the intensity of the emphasis on "practicality" that leads you to suspect you are up against an emotional issue.

### ***I'm Not Surprised***

It is always amazing to me how important it is for people not to be surprised. It seems that whatever happens in the world is okay as long as they are not surprised. When you have completed a study, you can tell a manager that the building has collapsed, the workers have just walked out, the third consecutive chief financial officer has taken a better job, 30% of new hires are gone in a year, the IRS is knocking on the door, and the manager's first response is, "I'm not surprised." It's as if being surprised is the worst thing in the world that could happen.

The manager's fear of surprise is really the desire to always be in control. When we run into it, it is deflating. It carries the message to us that what we have developed is really not that important or unique. It downplays our contribution. See the client's desire not to be surprised for what it is: a form of resistance rather than a reflection on our work.

### ***Attack***

The most blatant form of resistance is when the client attacks us. Angry words, a red face, finger pointing in your face, punctuating the end of every sentence. It leaves us feeling like a bumbling child who not only has done poor work, but also has somehow



violated a line of morality that should never be crossed. Our response to attack is often either to withdraw or to respond in kind. Both responses mean that we are beginning to take the attack personally and not seeing it as one other form that the resistance is taking. When people are angry with you, it has nothing, nothing, nothing to do with you. Unless you let it.

## ***Confusion***

A client who comes to us for help is experiencing some legitimate confusion. This may not be resistance, but just a desire for clarity. After things become clear to you, however, and you explain it two or three times and the client keeps claiming to be confused or does not understand, start to think that confusion may be the client's difficulty in saying "no" to you.

## ***Silence***

This is the toughest of all. We keep making overtures to the client and get little response in return. The client is passive. A client may present no particular reaction to what you are proposing. When you ask for a reaction, the client says, "Keep on going. I don't have any problems with what you are saying. If I do, I'll speak up." Don't you believe it. Silence rarely means consent. If you are dealing with something important to the organization, it is not natural for the client to have no reaction.

Silence usually means that the reaction is being blocked. For some people, silence or withholding reactions is really a fight style. They are saying by their actions, "I am holding on so tightly to my position and my feelings that I won't even give you words." Beware the silent client. If you think a meeting went smoothly because the manager didn't raise any objections, don't trust it. Ask yourself whether the client gave you any real support or showed any real enthusiasm or got personally involved in the action. If there were few signs of life, begin to wonder whether silence was the form the client's resistance was taking.

## ***Intellectualizing***

When a person shifts the discussion from deciding how to proceed and starts exploring theory after theory about why things are the way they are, and the external forces impinging on this moment, you are face-to-face with intellectualizing as resistance.



The client says, “A fascinating hypothesis is implied by these results. I wonder if there is an inverse relationship between this situation and the last three times we went under. The crisis seems to have raised a number of questions.”

Spending a lot of energy spinning theories is a way of taking the pain out of a situation. It is a defense most of us use when we get into a tight spot. This is not to knock the value of a good theory or the need to understand what is happening. It is a caution against colluding with the client in engaging in ceaseless wondering, when the question is whether you and the client are going to be able to face up to a difficult situation.

The time to suspect intellectualizing is when it begins at a high-tension moment or in a high-tension meeting. When this happens, your task is to bring the discussion back to action, away from theories. Including your own.

## ***Moralizing***

Resistance in the form of moralizing makes great use of certain words and phrases: “those people” and “should” and “they need to understand.” When you hear them being used, you know you are about to go on a trip into a world of how things ought to be, which is simply a moralizing defense against reality. People use the phrase “those people” about anyone who’s not in the room at the time. It is a phrase of superiority used in describing people who are usually at a lower organizational level than the speaker or are unhappy about something the speaker has done and therefore “really don’t understand the way things have to be.”

Phrases of superiority are actually ways of putting oneself on a pedestal. Pedestal-sitting is always a defense against feeling some uncomfortable feelings and taking some uncomfortable actions. The phrase, “They need to understand,” actually means, “I understand; they don’t. Why don’t they see things clearly and with the same broad perspective that I do?” Frequently “those people” the speaker is talking about do understand. They understand perfectly. The problem for the speaker is that they don’t agree. So instead of confronting the conflict in views, the speaker escapes into a moralizing and colonial stance.

Moralizing can be seductive to consultants. The moralizing manager is inviting you to come into a select circle of people who know what is best for “those people” and who know what they “need to understand.” This is an elite position to be in; it has the feeling of power, and it is well protected. If the rest of the organization does not appreciate what you do, this is just further indication how confused they are and



how much more they need you. Resist the temptation with as much grace and persistence as possible.

## ***Compliance***

The most difficult form of resistance to see comes from the compliant manager who totally agrees with you and eagerly wants to know what to do next. It is hard to see compliance as resistance because you are getting exactly what you want: agreement and respect. If you really trust the concept that in each manager there is some ambivalence about your help, then when you get no negative reaction at all, you know something is missing. Each client has some reservations about a given course of action. If the reservations don't get expressed to you, they will come out somewhere else, perhaps in a more destructive way. I would rather the reservations were said directly to me; then I can deal with them.

You can tell when the agreeable client is resisting by compliance. You are getting this form of resistance any time there is almost total absence of any reservations and a low-energy agreement. If the agreement is made with high energy, enthusiasm, and a sincere understanding of what you and the client are facing, you might simply feel lucky and not take it as resistance, even if few reservations are expressed. But beware the client who expresses a desire to quickly get to solutions without any discussion of problems. Beware as well the client who acts dependent on you and implies that whatever you do is fine.

## ***Methodology***

If there has been elaborate data collection in your project, the first wave of questions will be about your methods. If you administered a questionnaire, you will be asked about how many people responded, at what level of response, and whether the findings are statistically significant at the .05 level. Next will be questions about how people at lower levels and those working at home in distant time zones responded.

Questions about method represent legitimate needs for information for the first 10 minutes, enough time for you to establish the credibility of the project if the questions are really for information. As the questions about method go past the 10-minute mark, you should cautiously begin to view them as resistance. The purpose of the meeting is not to grill you on methods; it is to understand the problem and decide what to do about it. Repeated questions about method or suggestions of alternative methods can serve to delay commitment to own the problems and invest in the actions.



## ***Flight into Health***

Another subtle form of resistance occurs when, somewhere in the middle or toward the end of the project, it appears that the client no longer has the problem that you were addressing in the first place. As you get closer and closer to the time for the client to face the issue and act on the problem, you begin to hear about how much better things seem to be getting.

Here are just two variations on this theme:

If costs and margins were bad when you started the project, as soon as they start to pick up a little, the manager comes to you and says that people seem to be feeling better now that the cost and margin picture has improved. Maybe the need for your services has diminished somewhat.

You talk to the client in May and agree to start the project on June 20. When you call on June 10 to confirm the beginning of the project, the manager says, “We can still begin the project if we want to, but for some reason, it appears the problem is not so severe.” Nothing can be identified that changed the way the group does business. What actually happened was that the group realized that on June 20, they were really going to have to start confronting their problems, so it seemed easier to act as if the problems weren’t so important now.

I once worked as a consultant to a company where the engineering and manufacturing groups were having a difficult time working together. In the discovery phase, I learned the groups had a 10-year history of conflict at all levels; the president of the company had sided with the manufacturing group and they were constantly attacking the engineering group, and responsibilities and authority between the two groups were overlapping and unclear. Just before I was to feed back the results of the study, the president called me and said that the head of engineering was changing jobs. He felt that because this one person was leaving, the problems would probably go away. He was holding on to the good feeling that this person was leaving as a way of not confronting the underlying problems facing these groups for the past 10 years. Ouch.

The manager’s process of resisting through health is similar to what happens when a fighting couple finally makes an appointment with a marriage counselor: as the session approaches, they find they are getting along better and better. By the time they get to the marriage counselor, they look at each other and say they aren’t quite sure what the problems were because they have been getting along so well lately.



Of course, there is nothing wrong with the situation improving for the client, but most surface symptoms have underlying problems that require attention. If all of a sudden the client is telling you that the symptoms are improving, I would be concerned that they are grasping for improvement too dearly and smoothing over what should be the real focus of your consultation. Knowing what to do in these moments is complicated; seeing it clearly is not.

### ***Pressing for Solutions***

The last form of resistance is the client's desire for solutions, solutions, solutions: "Don't talk to me about problems; I want to hear solutions." Because the consultant is also eager to see the problems solved, some collusion can take place between consultant and client if the discussion of solutions is not held off a little.

The desire for solutions can prevent the client from learning anything important about the nature of the problem. It also keeps the client dependent on consultants to solve these problems. If the line manager hasn't the patience or stomach to stop and examine the problem, then the solutions are not going to be implemented effectively. Recognize that the rush to solutions can be a defense and a particularly seductive form of resistance for the consultant who is eager to solve problems.

## **What Are They Resisting When Clients Are Resisting?**

Sounds like a song title, but it's important to know.

The main thing to do in coping successfully with resistance is to not take it personally. When you encounter resistance, you are the one in the room. Clients look straight at you while they are being defensive. You are the one who has to answer the questions and weather the storm. It is natural to feel that the resistance is aimed at you. The resistance is not aimed at you. It is not you the client is defending against. Moments of resistance are when clients are defending against the fact that they are going to have to make a difficult choice, take an unpopular action, confront some reality that they have emotionally been trying to avoid. Most often, this is a defense against having to become an agent of their own future.

If you have been brought in to solve a problem, it means the client organization has not been able to solve it themselves. It is not that the managers aren't smart enough to solve it. Rather, they have not been able to see it clearly. They are so close to the



problem and have such an emotional investment in any possible solutions that they need a third party to define the problem and possible solutions for them. In the problem or solution, then, is some difficult reality that the client has had a hard time seeing and confronting.

### **Examples**

The difficult realities that clients are stuck on will vary:

Someone may have to be fired or told they are not performing adequately.

People in the group may be very dissatisfied and the manager may be reluctant to surface the dissatisfaction.

The manager may feel inadequate in some part of the job and not want to face that inadequacy.

The political situation may be risky, and the manager doesn't want to make waves.

The task at hand may require skills that do not exist in the organization now. This may mean getting rid of some people, which is always hard to face.

The manager's boss may be part of the problem, and the manager may not want to confront the boss.

The organization may be selling products or services to a declining market, and this is too discouraging to deal with.

The manager knows he or she operates autocratically and doesn't want to change, yet sees the negative effects of their behavior.

A developmental project in which a lot of money has been invested is turning up some negative results. This means bad news has to be sent up the line, and promises made earlier will be taken back.

All these difficult realities involve painful problems that seem to promise painful solutions. Most very technical or business-related problems are in some way caused or maintained by how that problem is being managed. When managers are being defensive, they are defending their own managerial adequacy—a natural thing to defend. It is even worthwhile defending. Resistant managers are much more concerned about their own control and competence than about our skills as consultants.

This is what resistance is about: defending against some difficult reality and how the manager has been handling it. We consultants come in and, as part of our job, start pointing to the difficult realities. It is important that we help the client face the difficulties. We shouldn't avoid them just because the client will become resistant.



## ***Indirect Expression of Underlying Concerns***

When you encounter resistance, you are seeing the surface expression of more underlying anxieties. Two things are happening: the client is feeling uncomfortable, and the client is expressing the discomfort indirectly.

The reason consultants feel as if they are the victim of the resistance is that the client's discomfort is being expressed indirectly. If the client were able to be authentic and put the concern directly into words by saying, "I am concerned I am losing control of this group," or "I feel I am ill equipped to handle this particular situation," or "People expect things from me that we can't deliver," it is not resistance and we would not be tempted to over-explain or defend. We would feel very supportive toward the manager.

The manager's direct expression of underlying concerns is not resistance. Resistance occurs only when the concerns about facing the difficult realities and the choice not to deal with them are expressed indirectly. They are expressed indirectly by blaming lack of detailed data, not enough time, impracticality, not enough budget, lack of understanding by "those people," and so on—all reasons not to proceed with a project or implement some recommendations.

## **Underlying Concerns**

If I am facing resistance and trying to understand what the client is really concerned about, I would wager the client was concerned about either control or vulnerability. If what you are suggesting does not generate some resistance from the client, it is probably because your proposal does not threaten the manager's control or feeling of organizational security.

### ***Control***

Maintaining control is at the center of the value system of most organizations. There is a belief in control that goes beyond effectiveness or good organizational performance. Many managers believe in maintaining control even if keeping control results in poorer performance. Case after case demonstrates that more participative forms of management are more productive, yet the practice of participative management is not common. I have seen a division of one company where the controls on the management information system were proven to be a major obstacle to improving productivity, yet the manager chose to keep the controls at the expense of better performance.



Control is the coin of the realm in organizations. The whole reward system is geared around how much control, responsibility, and authority you have. When you perform well, you don't get a lot more money; you get more control. At some point in history, organizations realized that you can't pay people enough money to commit themselves like they do, so control is held up as the reward.

The message in all this is that control is valued very, very highly. There is nothing wrong with having control, and being out of control is a very anxious state to be in. It is just that control is what you make of it. Most innovations are an adventure. When we get resistance, one good guess is that the manager feels he or she is going to lose more control.

### ***Vulnerability***

Concern that the manager will get hurt is the second major issue that gives rise to most of the resistance that we encounter. Organizations are competitive and political systems. It is very important to get ahead of your peers, stay in favor with your boss, and maintain the loyalty and support of your subordinates. To do all three of these and also get your job done is difficult. As you move up in an organization and deal with people at higher and higher levels, you realize that the feeling of being judged and having to prove yourself again and again is part of every position in the organization, all the way up to the chief executive officer.

Politics is the exercise of power. Organizations operate like political systems, except there is no voting. The impact your consulting project has on the political situation and the power of your client is a very important consideration. When you get resistance, it may be that you are unintentionally disturbing whatever political equilibrium has been established.

An example comes from a research and development department where the group doing exploratory research had always reigned supreme and independent. The product development groups were much more tightly controlled and held accountable for short-term results. We were asked to help in restructuring the whole R&D department because the R&D vice president had a strong feeling that inefficiencies and overlap existed and the department was not operating as one organization. During the project, most of the resistance came from the exploratory research group. They would come late to meetings, question our methods, then be silent, and say in the end, "Whatever you think is fine with us."



So what was behind their resistance? Were our methods really faulty? Did they object to the technical basis on which our project was established? No. What they were resisting was the fact that right now, they were in a favored and powerful organizational position. They had high status, high autonomy, and a free hand at gathering resources and starting projects of their choosing. Underneath all the technical and structural questions they had, they were worried about losing status in the political system.

Their concern had some legitimacy. If an exploratory research group loses all its independence, the long-run picture for new products is dim. Yet the group's political concern—losing power in the organization—was expressed very indirectly and was therefore hard to deal with. When they finally stated their concern directly and reduced the resistance, a compromise could be worked out with the vice president and the product development group. In the end, people want the world to work. It is just a little bumpy getting there.

## **Sometimes It Is Not Resistance**

When he was asked whether the cigar he was smoking was also a phallic symbol, Freud once said, "Sometimes a cigar is just a cigar." In the same way, sometimes client objections are not resistance. The client just doesn't want to do the project.

We can all become hyper-sensitive by interpreting every line manager's objections as resistance covering some underlying anxieties. If a manager says directly, "No, I do not choose to begin this project. I don't believe in it," that is not resistance. There is nothing in that statement that blames the consultant or presses the responsibility for the difficulties on the consultant. The manager is taking responsibility for the organization and has a right to choose. If we think it is the wrong choice, well, that's life.

We are getting paid to consult, not to manage. If a manager says to me, "I am in too vulnerable a position to begin this project now," I appreciate the direct expression because I know where I stand with that manager. I don't have to worry whether I should have done something differently. I also feel the manager understands the project and knows the risks, and it turned out that the risks were just too high. I may be disappointed that the project didn't go, but the process was flawless.



## The Fear and the Wish

Although sometimes consultants and clients may act like adversaries, their feelings and concerns are frequently complementary. There are some common client fears that correspond to similar consultant fears. The same is true for wishes. There are three that bring you down and three that lift you up.

Client Fears	Consultant Fears
Helplessness. Futility. “I have no power to change the situation. I am a victim.”	“I can have no impact. No reward for the effort.”
Alienation from the organization and people around me. “No one cares about me, and I do not care about them. I don’t belong here.”	Distance from the client. “We will remain strangers. We will never get close. I’ll have to stay totally in role.”
Confusion. “I have too much information. I can’t sort it out or see clearly.”	“I have too little information. They won’t or can’t tell me what is really happening.”

Helplessness, alienation, and confusion are all underlying concerns that can cause clients to be resistant if these concerns are not expressed directly. Their indirect expression can create similar discomfort in the consultant. The way out is to help the client express them directly in words. And do the same ourselves. Client resistance and consultant resistance are complementary.

We can also look at the flipside of fear and resistance and identify the underlying potential for each client. Each client also has the possibility of flawlessness. As the client moves in this direction, the task of the consultant becomes easier.

Client Potential	Consultant Potential
Choice. Has choices and the power to act on the situation. Is an actor, not a victim.	High impact. Clear payoff for effort expended.
Engagement. Engages the situation. Feels a part of it. Moves toward the difficult reality and tension.	Can be authentic and intimate. No role-playing or missionary behavior.
Clarity. Choices are clear. Mass of information is simplified.	Is included with all information. Sees situation with clarity.

Reaching this potential is one of the objectives of any consultation. The client and consultant are taking responsibility for themselves and the situation they are in.



The process of dealing with resistance helps the client move from a position of helplessness, alienation, and confusion to one of choice, engagement, and clarity. The consultant accomplishes this by internally moving from feelings of low impact, distance, and poor information to a position of high impact, close relationship, authenticity, and clarity.

### ***Being Dependent, Asking for Help***

The climates of most organizations are not conducive to managers' asking for help. Organizations tend to be quite competitive, and asking for help from internal or other consultants can be seen as a sign of weakness. Our individualistic culture also signals early that we should be able to solve our own problems and not have to be dependent on anyone else for anything. Being a client goes against the stream of these organizational and cultural messages. Resistance comes in part from the discomforts of being dependent and asking for help.

There is a closely related feeling that also makes being a client difficult: the feeling that nothing can be done to help. Before the consultant is allowed in, the manager has tried to solve the problem with limited or no success. This is true if we are invited in, sent in, or made the first call. This can lead to the unstated belief that the problem is unsolvable; the manager or group members are so set in their ways that they think the problem must be lived with, not resolved. They feel they are beyond help. Or they believe that someone has to change.

When you encounter resistance, this possibility should be explored. When a manager is feeling pessimistic that the prospect of being helped is remote, this stance is your immediate obstacle to solving the problem. No technical solutions will suffice if the manager has no energy to try it. The manager's feeling of being beyond help is usually not that conscious. The consultant's task is to bring it to the level of awareness. Put it into words. When the manager examines the feeling of futility, they can realize it is a point of view, not the reality. Hope usually rises.

### ***Wanting Confirmation, Not Change***

When we ask for help, we want both a solution to the problem and confirmation that everything we have done has been perfect.

A colleague of mine, Neale Clapp, mentioned one day that people entering therapy want confirmation, not change. On the surface, it would be ridiculous for a client



to bring in a consultant for help, and then tell the consultant that no change was desired and the client did not really want to learn anything. This would not be rational. But that is the point: resistance is an emotional process, not a rational or intellectual one.

In the world of emotions, two opposite feelings often exist at the same time, and both can be genuine. Clients may sincerely want to learn and solve problems. At the same time, they also want support and to be told that they are handling that problem better than anyone else in the country. Approach—avoidance. The resistance is the avoidance. Right behind the avoidance, you will find the approach. When we help the resistance get expressed, it loses its power. It doesn't go away, it's just that it's present but not decisive. It increases the chances that we are working with a client who is ready and willing to learn and be influenced. As are we.

Flawlessly dealing with resistance is understanding the two-headed nature of being in the client position and accepting it as okay.

When a line manager has a problem and results are suffering, at least the extent of the suffering is known. The manager has a clear idea of how bad things are and has learned to live with the difficulty. The manager may not like the difficulty but has learned to cope with it. We, as consultants, come along and offer an alternative way of solving the problem. With the offer is the promise that the new situation will be better than the old situation: there will be less suffering, and results will improve. But this promise carries the manager into the unknown; it requires a change.

Fear of the unknown is a major cause of resistance simply because the unknown is uncertain and unpredictable. We all see couples that have been married 10 years and seem to be suffering every minute they are together. We wonder why they stay together. Perhaps it is because at least they know how bad things can get. They know what the downside looks like, and they know they can survive. There is comfort in knowing what to expect. To separate would be unpredictable. The fear of coping with unpredictability may be greater than the pain of staying together. Organizations also value predictability. The wish of systems to remain predictable ("Don't surprise me") is a defense that consultants have to deal with continually.

Not surprisingly, organizations that are in serious trouble tend to be the most difficult clients. They need to change the most and are least able to do it. For low-performing organizations, the tension of failure is so high that they are unable to take one more risk, and so instead they hold on to their unsatisfactory performance. In these extreme cases, there is probably not much consultants can do to surface the resistance to change. We may just have to accept it.



## **Ogres and Angels . . .**

In any organization, there are certain managers who are well known for their disdain for support groups and internal consultants. In workshops for people in the same organization—whether they are in human resources, auditing, IT, or engineering—the groups can all name the one or two managers at pretty high levels who are ogres in the eyes of the support groups. The ogres are seen as stubborn, autocratic, insensitive to feelings—the Captain Ahab of industry. When the subject of resistance comes up, the ogres are mentioned. We all seem to need at least one impossible client in our lives—the client who becomes the lightning rod of our frustrations in consulting. There is also a fatal attraction to the ogres—they embody some consultants’ wish to be all powerful and successful.

Ogres don’t really exist. A number of times I have heard how fire-eating and mean a certain manager is, and then actually met with the person. I approach the meeting with a lot of discomfort, not wanting to be the latest casualty. What happens is the conversation soon turns to the ogres in the ogre’s life. Ogres are not really consumed with vengeance for consultants; they are worried about the people who are giving them a hard time. Behind the ogre’s blustery façade are the same concerns all other managers have: losing control and becoming vulnerable. The more aggressive the client is, the more intense are the concerns and the more the client needs support.

Angels are also one-sided images. Every group I have worked with can name a manager who is willing to do anything they ask: a progressive manager, open, trusting, risk-taking, secure, intelligent, attractive. But there are no angels, either. Angels have a hard time saying “no” directly. There is a part of the most supportive manager that has reservations, avoids confronting real issues, and wants to maintain the status quo. We need to help that side get expressed. For the manager’s sake and for our own sake.

## **. . . and Heroics**

The need for a heroic self-image is another myth about consulting that ought to be laid to rest. We think that we should be able to overcome all obstacles. No matter how difficult the client, or how tough the problem, or how tight the time schedule, we believe it is up to us to do the best we can. This wish to be the heroic consultant more than anything else leads to taking bad contracts. Heroics often entail a hidden bargain. If we take on this bad job now, we will be rewarded later with plums. The essence of



the hidden bargain is that it is assumed and never spoken. The rewards in doing consulting need to be in the project as we are doing it now. If the doing has no reward, the project should be challenged.

This heroic impulse in the consultant is the consultant's own resistance against facing the realities of a difficult career path. Resist taking unstable or unrealistic contracts. If you can't say "no," say, "later." If you can't say that, say little. Heroes have a hard life. The rewards are overrated. Most heroes, unless they are the best in the world, get paid just about what you are making right now.



Understanding how resistance comes about is the first step. The next chapter shows you ways to deal with it.



## CHAPTER 11

# Dealing with Resistance

**P**EOPLE USE THE PHRASE “overcoming resistance” as though resistance or defensiveness were an adversary to be wrestled to the ground and subdued. “Overcoming resistance” would have you get clever and logical to win the point and convince the client. But there is no way you can talk clients out of their resistance because resistance is an emotional process. It is essential to learning. It is the early stage of surprise. Behind the resistance are certain feelings, underlying concerns. You cannot talk people out of how they are feeling.

There are specific steps you can take to help a client get through the resistance and get on with solving the problem. The basic strategy is to help the resistance blow itself out, like a storm, and not to fight it head-on. Feelings pass and change when they are expressed directly. The skill is to ask clients to put directly into words what they are experiencing—to ask the client to be authentic. The most effective way to encourage the client to be authentic is for you to also behave authentically. Being authentic in this context is to put into words what you see happening. Without judgment. That’s all there is to it.

This way of dealing with resistance—by not fighting it head-on—has a Zen quality to it. If you fight the resistance and feel you have to conquer it, all you will do is intensify the resistance. If a client is objecting to your methodology (and has been doing it for more than 10 minutes) and you keep defending the method, citing references, and recounting other experiences, the client is going to get even more frustrated. The client is likely to become even more committed to finding holes in your method than when the discussion started. The alternative to defending your method is to ask the client more about their concerns and try to get to why your



methodology is so important. Getting the client to talk more about their concerns is helping the storm to pass. Defending methodology is keeping the storm alive.

**Try this exercise** Put your palms together in front of your chest. Let your right arm be the client's resistance and your left arm be your response to that resistance. Move your right arm and palm hard to the left against your left palm. Now have the left arm and palm push at the same time, hard to the right. If you hold this position, the two hands stay stuck right in the middle, the strain increases in both your arms, and you soon get tired. That is what happens when you push back against the resistance. You get stuck, the tension goes up, and energy is drained.

Now put your palms together again in the same starting position. Move your right arm and palm to the left hard against your left hand. This time let your left hand give in, so the right hand keeps moving to the left. At some point, your right hand will stop. It will have pushed as far as it can go. If you hold that end position, you will notice that your right hand, the resistance, gets tired and drops of its own weight. The left hand, your response to the resistance, allows the right hand resistance to move to its own end. Contacted but unopposing, the left hand can maintain its position with no tension and little loss of energy.

This is the way to deal with resistance: encourage full expression of the concerns so that they pass. Remember that resistance is the indirect expression of client reservations. The goal is to help the line manager begin stating the reservations directly and stop the subterfuge. When the client's concerns are stated directly, the consultant knows what the real issues are and can respond effectively.

## Three Steps for Handling Resistance

There are three steps for handling resistance:

1. Identify in your own mind what form the resistance is taking. The skill is to pick up the cues from the manager and then describe to yourself what you see happening. This is meant to be very literal, not an interpretation of how you think they feel. What do you see?
2. State, in a neutral, unpunishing way, the form the resistance is taking. This is called "naming the resistance." The skill is to find neutral language.
3. Be quiet. Let the line manager respond to your statement about the resistance. Don't explain what you mean. It never helps.



## ***Step 1: Pick Up the Cues***

Technical training so focuses our attention on facts, figures, data, and the rational level that we are not accustomed to closely paying attention to the interpersonal, emotional level of conversations. Developing skill in dealing with resistance requires knowing what form the resistance is taking, but the first step is simply to notice what is happening.\* Here are some ways to pick up the cues.

**Trust What You See More than What You Hear** Pay attention to the nonverbal messages from the client. Is the client—

Constantly moving away from you?  
Tied up in knots like a pretzel?  
Pointing a finger and clenching the other fist?  
Shaking their head each time you speak?  
Bent over toward you as if they are royalty?  
Taking urgent calls?  
Leaning into the next meeting?

Take any of these as a sign that the client is feeling uneasy about this project. What they are uneasy about is what we want to understand.

**Listen to Yourself** Another way to know that you are encountering resistance is to use your own body as a thermometer. When you start feeling uneasy in a discussion with the client, it may be an early sign that resistance is on its way. Certainly when you are getting bored or irritated it is evidence that something is going on. When a discussion is confronting real issues directly, it is never boring or irritating. When you notice yourself yawning or suppressing some negative feelings, take it as a cue. These reactions of yours act as red flags, attention-getting devices. They are messages that you should begin to put words on the form of behavior, the resistance you are encountering.

**Listen for Repetition and Telltale Phrases** A sure cue that you are encountering resistance is that you hear the same idea explained to you for the third time. Or you hear yourself answering the same question for the third time. Repetition of ideas and

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\*Gil Gordon, a friend, years ago helped me see how the step of picking up the cues from the client is separate from the step of putting the resistance into words.



questions is resistance because expressing the idea or answering the questions the first time did not get the job done. Some underlying concern is surfacing indirectly through repetition.

You also hear certain phrases that tell you the client is not feeling understood:

- “You have to understand that . . .”
- “Let me explain something to you.”
- “I want to make sure this isn’t an academic exercise.”

These phrases are aggressive in a subtle way. They express some frustration and treat the consultant as if a serious mistake is about to be made, but somehow this statement from the client is supposed to save us.

There are probably certain phrases you hear a lot that signal difficulty. Take the time to make a list of them now, and update your list as you grow more skilled in picking up the cues of resistance.

***Step 2: Name the Resistance***

When you become aware of resistance, the next step is to name it using neutral, everyday language. The skill is to describe the form of the resistance in a way that encourages the client to make a more direct statement of the reservation he or she is experiencing.

Here are some examples of resistance and neutral language describing the form of resistance:

When the Resistance Takes	
This Form	Name It by Making This Statement
Client is avoiding responsibility for the problem or the solution	“You don’t see yourself as part of the problem.”
Flooding you with detail	“You are giving me a lot of detail. What is it that you think I do not understand?”
One-word answers	“You are giving me very short answers.”
Changing the subject	“The subject keeps shifting.”
Compliance	“You seem willing to do anything I suggest. I can’t tell what your real feelings are.”



**When the Resistance Takes****This Form****Name It by Making This Statement**

Silence

“You are very quiet. I don’t know how to read your silence.”

Pressing for solutions

“It’s too early for solutions. I’m still trying to find out . . .”

Attack

“You are really questioning a lot of what I do. You seem angry about something.”

The easiest way is to look for everyday language to describe the resistance. It is easier to name the resistance if you think of what you would say to a close friend or spouse and say that to the client. The sentiment in this suggestion that is helpful is to keep the statement simple and direct.

**Examples**

Here are some other forms of resistance. Try naming each one in a neutral, nonaggressive way:

Questions of methodology;  
Intellectualizing and spinning great theories;  
Confusion and vagueness;  
Low energy, inattention; and  
The dog ate my homework.

And here are some examples of statements you might make to name these forms of resistance:

*Methodology:* “You are asking a lot of questions about my methods. Do you have any doubts about the credibility of the results?”

*Intellectualizing:* “Each time we get close to deciding what to do, you go back to developing theories to understand what is happening.”

*Confusion:* “You seem very confused about what we are discussing. Are you confused about the problem or just not sure what to do about it?”

*Low energy or inattention:* “You look as if you have other things on your mind and have low energy for this project.”

*The dog ate my homework:* “You think others might be responsible for what we are up against.”



In a high percentage of moments, clients will respond with a more direct statement of what they are feeling about a project, putting into words their underlying concerns. Sometimes naming the resistance won't work. It may be there is nothing you can do about it.

**A Hint for Finding the Right Words** If naming the resistance isn't helping, an option is to put into words how you are feeling about the discussion. Meeting resistance is uncomfortable and frustrating. Sometimes it makes you feel stupid, irrelevant, or unimportant. Try stating this to the client with statements like these:

"I can't see where this conversation is going. It is frustrating."

"It seems my comments are treated as though they are irrelevant or unimportant."

"I have a hard time seeing where agreement might occur between us."

"It is clear you have doubts about this. What might they be?"

Sometimes the client will stop short and ask you why you feel that way, and this might get you to a direct discussion of the problem.

Expressing your feelings can be riskier at times than just naming the client's resistance. The client may not care how you are feeling and say, "So you are feeling uncomfortable. What has that got to do with getting this equipment working?" But stating your own feelings is being authentic and acts to encourage a like response from the client, which is what you are after.

### ***Step 3: Be Quiet, and Let the Client Respond***

After naming the resistance, we have a tendency to keep talking. For example, a consultant might say to an unmotivated client:

"You seem to have very little motivation to go ahead with this project. Let me tell you four reasons I think this project is important and you should feel differently . . ."

The first sentence is good—a neutral naming of the concern. By continuing to talk, though, the consultant is taking the client off the hook and making it easy for the client not to take responsibility for their actions.

We keep talking to reduce the tension we feel when we confront the client. Don't keep talking. Live with the tension. Make the statement about resistance and remain silent.



“The opposite of a great truth is another great truth.”

— *Niels Bohr*

## **Two Good-Faith Responses**

The majority of questions you get about methodology and the cost and the results of the project are expressions of the discomfort and doubts the client is feeling. It is important, however, to respond to the substance of the questions as best you can.

One ground rule is to give two good-faith responses to every question you are asked. If you are asked about methodology and your summary or how you designed the analysis, answer each question twice. The third time the same question is asked, interpret it as a form of resistance and do not respond to the content of the question. Instead, realize that clients who ask the same question over and over are in effect expressing their caution about committing to the process and owning up to their own problems. So the third time the same question is asked, the only rational response is to make the statement that perhaps what the client is feeling is some reluctance to commit to the problem or the process.

After two good-faith responses, understand that you are facing problems of low client commitment and not being clear about that. Don't deal with resistance as though it were merely a problem of procedure or method. Make the two good-faith responses and then treat the questions as resistance.

## **Consulting with a Stone**

Every once in a while you meet your match. Your consultation is flawless, yet your progress with the client is in a nosedive.

Some of our consulting workshops have the participants engage in a consulting project with a real client as part of the learning experience. One consulting team returned from their contracting meeting with the client with long faces. The client was resistant, withholding, and uncommunicative and even told the group in the contracting meeting that he thought they were doing a lousy job.

As a way of coping with our despair and frustration, we made a list of different ways of consulting with a stone:

1. Don't look for approval, emotional support, or affection.
2. Don't expect the responsibility to be shared 50/50. Stones dump it all on you.



3. Expect argument and criticism.
4. Don't ask for the client's feelings or express your own feelings.
5. Do ask the client for understanding. Don't ask for agreement.
6. Let the client have a lot of control over the procedure used in the project.
7. Minimize elaborating or explaining the data. Justification just makes it worse.
8. Give the client support.
9. Don't take the response you are getting personally.
10. Don't get hooked; avoid details.
11. Hope that the client may learn from this project later, after you are gone. You are not going to get closure from the project now.
12. Show confidence.
13. Look for comic relief.
14. Remember that the stone's anxiety is over losing control.
15. Keep moving.
16. Avoid stones whenever possible.

There aren't many real stones out there. If the surface of the client is that hard, the stuff inside must be equally soft. Often, clear support to the stone will be softening. If the stone client stays a stone client, minimize your investment in the project; don't pressure yourself to be heroic. If the stone turns out to be someone you work with constantly or is your boss, either plan your escape or start putting your energy into activities outside the job. Finally, do what you can to not become a stone. That can happen if you are around them too much.

## **Don't Take It Personally**

A client's behavior is not a reflection on you. Many of us have a habit of analyzing what we did wrong. In a recent workshop, I asked a group of engineers to make a list of what they did well as consultants and what they did poorly as consultants. They were able to quickly list 8 to 10 things they did poorly or had problems with. The lists of positive qualities averaged two items and took twice as long to make. This passion for self-criticism is very common and gets in the way of keeping the resistance focused on the client, or the situation, where it belongs.

If you must take the client's reactions personally, the rule is to do it after six o'clock in the evening—on your own time. Spend the whole night at it, and involve your



friends. But don't take resistance personally when you are with the client. There are exceptions to this. If you have, in fact, done a poor job and the client tells you so, you have to own up to it and shape up your act. This doesn't happen often—and it's not resistance from the client; it is a mistake by the consultant.

Remember that client defenses are not to be denied. In fact, they need clear expression. If suppressed, they just pop up later and more dangerously. The key is how you respond in the moment.



To recap ways of dealing with resistance:

Don't take it personally. Despite the words used, the resistance is not designed to discredit your competence.

Defenses and resistance are a sign that you have touched something important and valuable. That fact is now simply coming out in a difficult form.

Most questions are statements in disguise. Try to get behind the question to get the statement articulated. This takes the burden off you to answer a phantom question.

Dealing with resistance is harder than actually doing data collection and much harder than coming up with good ideas for implementation. The meat of the consultation is staying engaged in the face of hard moments. These are the critical relational moments of every project. It is not resistance that is the challenge; it is our response to it that matters.







# Technology: A Marriage of Myth, Convenience, and the Virtual Hour

**T**ECHNOLOGY HAS, FROM THE BEGINNING, carried a promise of speed, cost, and scale. Bring them together and we have the dominant narrative of the consumer culture, which is convenience. Communicating with people not in the room is not new, but it has accelerated in this century, especially in what used to be called a workplace. We act as if we are in a new technological age, but the invention of writing and then printing launched long-distance exchanges long ago. The telephone was another big step. We now have what we call a virtual or digital workplace. Online life. Another version of the old Yellow Pages advertisement to let your fingers do the walking.

Johannes Gutenberg, inventor of the printing press, put the availability of spiritual and professional content into secular hands. This was disruption then, banned by the Catholic Church, which was a sales bonanza for Gutenberg. His Bible went viral.

What is new is how the virtual way of being has entered every corner of our lives. We now email people sitting next to us. We find love, companionship, and conversation on the internet. We work on a regular basis with people we will never meet. We receive coaching and therapy from across the country, with most senses unneeded. As consultants, we not only want to have influence with people over whom we have no control, we now may not even get to be in the same room with them. Plus, every minute of the day we are on call. We know that we have surrendered our privacy and



solitude, our evenings and weekends, in the way we sneak a look at our emails and texts, even while walking. A modern version of walking your talk.

Computer technology and the virtual world it creates is amazing and breathtakingly convenient. Right up there with the dishwasher, the car, and the telephone. However, it is just what it is. It is technology. It is also good for commerce and it powers the consumer marketplace. Advertising is very happy. So is marketing and messaging and self-expression and ideology. Technology is not, however, in its nature, a delivery system for relatedness, authenticity, meaning, or even getting work done where interdependence is required, which is most work and the delivery of outcomes.

The big advantage of technology is that it is fast and very accessible. These are good things. The key is to understand what aspects of work are amenable to more speed and reduced labor, and are cost sensitive. This is why the virtual world is a mixed blessing for support functions and consulting. Any work that is relationship based at its core is going to struggle to deliver outcomes when more speed is expected and time, whether virtual or in the room with people, seems to keep shrinking.

No matter how virtual we become, the consulting process set out in this book still applies, whether we are in the room together or on telecommunications media or in cyberspace. We still need to be connected and ask how the other feels about working together. We need to exchange wants, search for doubts, listen for and surface resistance, ask the same questions in discovery. Teams still have to work together, and we have to be willing to speak to that issue. Here are some specific issues to pay attention to.

### ***The End of Casual Contact***

Working in the virtual world loses the value of casual conversations. As we wait for the meeting to start, take breaks, linger for a moment at the end of a meeting, pass in the hall, or walk by an open door in the real world, we encounter, as Jane Jacobs said about a neighborhood, “. . . the ability to be near the touch and sense and experience of another human being. I see these small portions of the surroundings that are important to understanding and building a neighborhood.” There are ways to make the virtual events more personal, but it takes special attention.

The effect is that all that we do electronically requires special care to make the time more personal since we are not in the room together. As a consultant, I have to double-check what the client wants from me. I have to trust my listening more diligently when I hear or see a pattern of resistance. I have to consciously create space for silence, which is more difficult in a virtual meeting. The questions halfway through a meeting



of “How are we doing?” or “Are you getting what you want from this?” are even more essential since we know we are missing so much.

### ***Email Doesn't Count***

One thing we know about email is that meanings are guaranteed to get distorted. Mild sarcasm can be taken as disappointment, humor as lack of caring, and real anger gets exploded and has a longer shelf life on email. Plus, if you send a message by email and think that the message has reached and been seen by the receiver simply because you sent it, you are wrong half the time. Email is great for the logistical side of life, but risky for the relationship side.

### ***Efficiency Has Hidden Costs***

In the realm of human development, a major concern to every consultant is that there have been significant efforts to substitute online training for direct classroom experience. Online learning has been sold as learning that can occur on demand and at the convenience of the learner. Asynchronous. All that is true. What goes unspoken is how that affects the quality of the experience and the type of learning that is possible.

The internet is great for getting facts, to become well informed, to find out the latest news right away. It is one big encyclopedia and news service. Its possibilities are very seductive, but there is a human cost hidden in all the excitement. If our consulting is in the area of transformation and people's relationships with each other are vital to the outcome we seek, then computer technology is mostly convenient. It cannot replace the fact that most learning is social. Memory is not so social, but learning is. Content is not social, but the conversation about the content is best done through live interaction. The voice matters.

Just as my Facebook and LinkedIn profiles have little to do with who I am, an alternative future takes careful design and orchestration to give relational meaning to faces on a screen. Zoom, Skype, Teams, Google, and all the team delivery systems have to be carefully designed for contact and dialogue.

### ***Connection in the Virtual World***

Where this takes us as consultants is the need to decide to create connection regardless of whether we are operating virtually or live. There are always ways to structure



connection, independent of what the world hands you. Basically, it is a question of depth and risk. Certain consultative questions are more difficult and emotionally demanding, and require more of us than others. But the questions are powerful despite the medium.

Here are some ways to humanize virtual engagements:

- With a group of 6 or more, break into small groups of 3 every 30 minutes. Always structure randomly so the chance of combining people who know each other the least is maximized.
- Use the personal questions about control, meaning, and vulnerability that this book is about: Why is it important for you to be in this discussion? What doubts do you have? What are you up against? What do you want from the people in this gathering?
- When coming back from small groups ask: What struck you about the conversation you just had?
- Absolutely minimize screen sharing. It shrinks each human being into something smaller than a postage stamp, even into invisibility.
- Halfway through, ask whether people are getting what they want from this gathering and producing what they have to offer. Accountability, ownership, and agency shift on this question. But only in groups of three.
- To end, in small groups, ask what gifts or insight each received, and from whom, in this meeting?

The virtual world can handle any question that the in-person world can handle. And it can do this across all geographies and cultures. This is what we have learned in the pandemic. We can consult and connect under all conditions. There are design elements that make a difference, but the capacity to follow the consulting process is always available.

**More Questions for Connection** To summarize, here are some additional questions to use to make intimacy and relatedness a major intention the virtual world:

Why was it important for you to join this call today? (Not what do you expect? Or what do you want to leave with? These are consumer questions with no agency or accountability.)

What is the crossroads you are at in this point of this project or your work? (This question treats you as always having a choice.)



Where do you feel you are losing control? Where do you feel vulnerable?  
What do you want from each other? What do I want from you? What do you want from me?  
What promises are you willing to make with no expectation of return?

These are important questions. These are all questions that are relational and personal and capable of being handled well by the virtual world when we are willing to ask them and make them central. They are supportive of these questions:

How do you feel about working with me?  
What is your contribution to creating the problem we are concerned with?  
What doubts and reservations do you have that anything will change here?  
What gifts have you received from others in this gathering? What gifts of your own occur to you at this moment?

These are the questions that build intimacy and bring us together. They are the questions that create the social fabric and social capital that get us through the hard moments of a project. They are the questions where we need all our senses in order to have the influence that we seek. And now there are times when some senses of being with a human are unavailable.

### ***A Problem-Solving Virtual Hour***

It is always surprising that even meetings about engagement aren't really engaging. Most virtual meetings are a reflection of how traditional gatherings have usually been conducted. Teacher stands in front of the class, expert stands at the podium with a microphone, leader presides at the head of the table. The goal is to share information, ensure that the playing field is understood by all, or the points to be made are well presented, and each person leaves with either a list or a predetermined learning.

With this as an intention, here is an example of how traditional virtual meetings most often play out:

1. Wait in silence in the Green Room or in the meeting room itself until meeting begins. (5 minutes)
2. The leader of the meeting says, "Let's get started." The View is most often on SpeakerView. The message is that the speaker is the point.



3. The host welcomes people. Reviews the technical elements of the meeting tool such as chat, raising hands, asking questions, the number to call if technology breaks down. (4 minutes)
4. PowerPoint is screen-shared. It is often an image of the agenda, even if it was shared ahead of the event.
5. The speaker talks through the agenda. Participants read along with the speaker. (6 minutes)
6. The speaker shares the next slide, usually about how we got here. Perhaps, if it's a webinar, the speaker introduces the next speaker. (6 minutes)
7. The speaker shares PowerPoints and speaks into the slides. (30 minutes)
8. After 30 minutes or more, the speaker asks if there are any questions.
9. Then participants ask; speaker or expert or advisors answer. (7 minutes)
10. If it is a straight work meeting, then the discussion turns to what actions we are leaving the meeting with. Who does what by when? Perhaps adding clarity about measuring outcomes. The implication is that people will be held accountable for the action steps volunteered or assigned. (10 minutes)
11. The host or speaker then announces the next meeting, the next steps, or the next event. (2 minutes)
12. The host or speaker says, "Thank you for coming. We will send out the PowerPoints for your reference." (1 minute)
13. The host or speaker closes with, "If you have suggestions of how we can do better next time, put them in the chat." (1 minute)

The primary purpose of this meeting structure is to cover and move the agenda forward. Its strength is clarity of agenda and action steps. It includes discussion on the agenda, often beginning with a little history about how we got here and what else is going on in other places. It is organized to create clear understanding and follow-up actions through discussion among leader, expert or host, and the participants. The technology is used for chat comments, questions, polls, and surveys. The scenario just described took 72 minutes. Sorry, we will tighten it up next time.

### ***A High-Engagement Virtual Hour***

The alternative is to design a virtual hour to create clarity and accountability through deeper engagement among participants with each other. The relationship among



expert or host, leader, and participants is of secondary concern. If learning and chosen accountability is our intention, then the expert or host and leader's primary task is convening. The hour is designed to use the time to bring peers or participants together to discuss in a more personal way how they are responding to what is being presented or requested. This comes from the structure of the time and the nature of the questions we ask people. This aligns with the partnership and peer focus that this book is about. Flawless consulting is about creating a 50/50 way of being and working together.

Here is what a high-engagement virtual hour would look like:

1. Everyone is let into the common room immediately. Eliminate the waiting room, which just reminds us of our isolation. Display the images of the people attending, not the logo or the name of the gathering. I suggest using the gallery view. Play music in the background while people wait. It humanizes the moment even though we are here to talk business. (3 minutes)
2. The host welcomes people. Talks about the purpose of the meeting. No PowerPoint of the agenda. In fact, the fewer PowerPoints the better. Speaking what people can see drains energy. If there are points to be made clearer by seeing, cover briefly and make the images of the people in attendance as least as large on the screen as the points to be made. (6 minutes)
3. After 10 minutes at the most, break people into meeting rooms in groups of 3. Do this randomly; the less people know the others in their small group, the better. Community and learning are most likely to occur by getting to know strangers, or people you know the least. The best question is: "Why was it important for you to come to this conversation or meeting or event?" No "ice breakers" or discussion of expectations or history of what led you here. The focus is one of each person's sense of the purpose and meaning of this agenda. This gets us into a deeper and more personal conversation right at the start. (9 minutes)
4. Return to the main room and ask for three people to answer the question: "What struck you about the conversation you just had?" No reporting, only three people comment. (6 minutes)
5. Present the ideas or expertise or challenges that the gathering is about. Short PowerPoints or slides allowed. Twenty minutes is the maximum time people can listen and pay attention. Why cover material if it is not landing? (20 minutes)
6. As you might have guessed, small groups are next. Return to the groups of three. The question will vary depending on the purpose of the gathering. If it is an



educational gathering, you might ask: “If I took these ideas to heart, what actions or commitments would it demand of me?” Or: “What doubts or reservations do you have about these ideas?” If it is a work meeting to move things forward, in addition to doubts, try: “What promises are we each willing to make, to each other, to implement what is on the table?” This can be a moment for contracting where participants share their wants of each other. You can configure or reconfigure the groupings depending on the situation. Another ground rule for encouraging chosen accountability is to remind all that it is perfectly acceptable to pass or say “no” to a request. These are acts of integrity and carry no cost. (10 minutes)

7. Before sending people into their separate rooms, request that they not give advice to each other. It only creates imbalance. Instead, ask them to be curious, asking each other: “Why does that matter to you?” Or: “What price will it cost you to deliver on your promise?”
8. With the short time left, ask people to put their promises in the chat. Ask for three people to share with the whole group what value they received from the hour we spent together. All closings end with some kind of gift conversation. (4 minutes)

The point is that it is especially important to structure peers and participants into the design for the virtual time together. What is lost in the virtual world is all the incidental contact that meeting live provides. Before and after meetings. During breaks and food and drink. This is where many of the authentic and personal connections are made or reinforced. By spending more time in the small groups, the loss of this personal contact is partially mitigated.

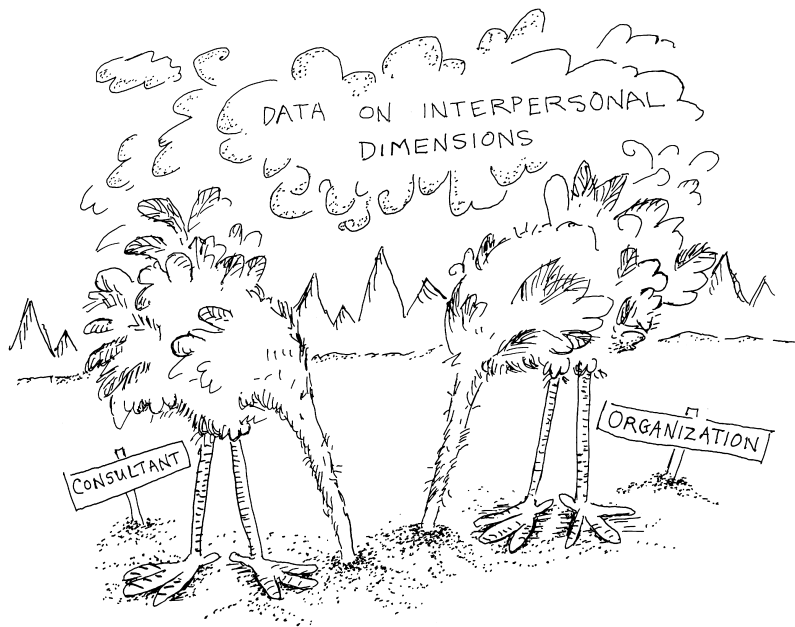


In this hybrid world, you will know when virtual technology is called for. Knowing which parts of a project can be handled virtually and which demand people being in the room with one another is now a vital part of the consulting and work process. We need to ask for what we think is important. This means we need to get real about the virtual world. We need to neither romanticize it nor resist it. It is a useful and entertaining tool. Also, each step of the consulting process is workable on most any medium.



## PART 4

# Discovery and Underlying Concerns









## CHAPTER 13

# From Diagnosis to Discovery

**WHEN THE CONTRACT IS CLEAR** and you are ready to deal with resistance, attention turns to the discovery phase. There are two primary purposes for this phase: (1) to develop an independent and fresh way of looking at what is going on and (2) to create a process that leads to client commitment, ownership, and action. This means that the goal of discovery is not to be right but to be effective and powerful.

There are two quite distinct ways of thinking about this part of the work. The traditional way is to consider it a diagnosis, following the medical model of diagnosing the problem, coming up with a prognosis, and then offering a prescription. This is the expectation most clients have. They have a problem, want a solution, and want you to give it to them. As common as this expectation is, it has the limitations of being strictly problem focused, and it has the consultant doing the bulk of the discovery.

In recent years, a way of thinking differently from diagnosis has emerged—one that focuses more on possibilities than problems. Instead of looking at what is wrong, looking at deficiencies, we look at what is working, what the client's strengths and gifts are, and seek to deepen and take advantage of those assets. This is variously called an *asset-based approach* or a *strength-based approach*.

The shift from problem to possibility grows out of the belief that dramatic change or transformation comes not from problem-solving but from a more future-minded way of proceeding. "Are we here to solve a problem or create a new future for ourselves?" is one way to put the question.

One methodology that is future- and asset-based is called Positive Deviance. Developed by Jerry and Monique Sternin, this discovery strategy looks for examples in the system where something is working well. The Sternins have worked in businesses, poor villages, and hospitals where problems seemed unsolvable. Rather than showing up



as experts or even researchers, they simply listen to examples of something that is working. When they discover in villages that some children are healthier than others, they ask what that family does that is unique. The mere act of asking this question of many people in the village causes an improvement in the health of children. In hospitals, they achieve the same effect: disease and accidents decrease; in businesses, sales and profits go up.

A second example is in the domain of organizational change, where there is wide support for a method called Appreciative Inquiry. Initiated by David Cooperrider, the whole discovery process focuses on what is working well for an organization, what traditions and rituals are worth sustaining, what dream or vision for the future is in people's minds.

Although my own practice has migrated toward the asset-based, future-based approach, enough of the world is still problem minded enough that we want to support consultation that follows either path. Plus, when there is a specific problem, a direct analytical and technical solution is exactly what is required.

## **It Is Still the Relationship That Counts**

Regardless of whether you choose a problem-based discovery process or a future- and strength-based discovery, the focus on relationships that was emphasized in contracting continues to be important in the discovery phase. If we want to create ownership of what we come up with, the relationship aspect of the discovery process becomes decisive, regardless of the special expertise or worldview of the consultant.

For the content of the discovery, your particular area of consulting expertise will determine what kind of data you will collect. Systems people look at information requirements; engineers and scientists, at the technical questions; financial experts, at money and economics; and organization development people, at asset-based or problem-solving-based change efforts.

One consistent source of tension, regardless of expertise or methodology, is that what the client may want and expect is often at odds with what is most likely to be helpful. We know that sustainable improvement comes when clients internalize what is new, make it their own, participate fully in the improvement effort, and build their own capacity. But this is not what most clients have in mind. They want an answer. Although they may agree with high engagement and capacity building in theory, it is not what they want in practice. In practice, clients want a turnkey solution. We are calling this "the presenting problem."



It is similar to when we are not feeling well. We want to go to a doctor, get a prescription, swallow a pill, and get on with our life. Better living through chemistry. When the physician says we need to change our diet, reduce stress, exercise more, and make more fundamental changes, this is not what we came to hear.

When line managers decide their organization is not functioning well, they want someone to come in, take a good look with fresh eyes, and suggest a solution that will be quick, cheap, and painless. That is why the first questions from the client are, “How long will it take?” “How much will it cost?” and “Give us a solution that will cause the least disruption.”

If we give clients precisely what they ask for, we run the risk of not having served them well. If, however, we tell them that the solution will take a while, cost more than they imagined, and require of them more time and involvement than they want to give, we run the risk of alienating them. Some of this will have been dealt with in the contracting phase, but this tension exists at every step of the way. What is hard for clients to realize is that long-term solutions to problems or applications of strengths require some rethinking on their part and some rearranging of the way they work.

This relearning takes time and effort. Clients can outsource or contract to an outsider the research and technical inquiry, but implementing and sustaining a solution or new direction they always have to do themselves. This is why we serve the client best by breaking out of the medical model. We are not an organization doctor who looks them over, analyzes their symptoms, prescribes a solution, and sends them on their way. A better approach is to define our task as a process of discovery and dialogue more than as an act of diagnosis and prescription, independent of whether we are looking at problems or gifts and possibilities.

The limit to the term *diagnosis* is that it implies that a third party, a consultant, can analyze the situation, come up with an accurate picture of what is wrong, and deliver a recommendation for corrective action that will be useful. This frame of diagnosis and prescription is a comforting problem-solving model, but it is based on the belief that organizational improvement can be engineered. In many cases, especially where a shift in a complex human system is involved, this is not realistic.

For strictly technical problems, such as equipment that doesn't work or software that crashes, this might seem reasonable. It is rare, however, that problems originally defined as technical are amenable to strictly technical solutions. Often we are dealing with human systems, and human systems are not responsive to technical solutions. Human systems are complex and require more than mechanical cause-and-effect



solutions. Equipment and software most often break down because people run them, people maintain them, and people ask them to do things they were not designed to do. The resolution of the problem most often requires a change in thinking and action on the part of the client, and this is the challenge.

So when we accept the term *diagnosis* as a description of this phase, we reinforce the belief that a prescriptive engineering strategy can improve a living system. This rational stance undervalues the emotional and affective requirements of real improvements.

The stance we want to take is that we can be a guide through a process of discovery, engagement, and dialogue in which our clients will find an answer to their question and launch an implementation that will be enduring and productive. This is the thinking behind the future-looking and dialogue-based methodologies. It may seem like playing with words, but it makes a difference in what we do and what we leave behind.

This chapter describes the kind of discovery, engagement, and dialogue that gives us our best shot at building client capacity and solving problems so they stay solved.

## **The Call to Action**

The challenge is how to help the client to be open to the discovery process. This is much more important than for us to be correct in our analysis. This means giving more space to dealing with resistance. It also demands work on building the client's internal commitment to the process at each step of the way. To wait until a report is put together and presented in a feedback meeting is too late to worry about client acceptance of recommendations. We also must be concerned about how to handle the politics and personalities surrounding the discovery process.

Navigating through clients' management styles and organizational politics and helping them to look objectively at the data are vital tasks. The skill comes in addressing the organizational element of each challenge as rationally as we address the technical part.

This begins with understanding that there are no purely technical problems. As consultants, we always have a perspective on how the business and technology are being used or managed. Even if we hire a contractor to install an electricity generator to power our house in the event of a power outage, there are still questions of what size generator, where it should be placed, which technology is best for our lifestyle and budget, and who will run and maintain it. A good contractor will ask questions about client expectations, who in the household will be operating the generator, how much protection the



household needs, how important having instant power is to the family, and, most difficult of all, whether there is agreement in the family about the answers to these questions.

These are questions about how the “problem” is being managed, what it means to the “client,” what attitudes surround the seemingly simple step of purchasing some technology. A good contract will treat these questions as being as important as the knowledge of how to purchase and install an alternative power source. Architects and contractors say that the hardest part of their job is dealing with client doubts and family dynamics. Designing and building a house they know how to do. Navigating their way through the politics of the family is where the challenge lies.

If this is true for a family, it is magnified when dealing with an organization. The politics of an organization is a reality, always present and powerful, and this is the challenge of discovery and action.

The purpose, then, of discovery is to mobilize action that will improve the organization’s functioning. The purpose is not research, which is aimed at simply understanding something and treats the understanding itself as enough.

This emphasis on action and utilization has strong implications for how you approach discovery.

<b>Research Approach</b>	<b>Action Approach</b>
Interested in all factors that have an impact on the situation at hand.	Interested in factors that are under the control of the client and affect the situation.
Being comprehensive and complete in the discovery phase is essential.	Completeness and comprehensiveness are not vital. They can be overwhelming at the point of deciding what to do.
You can do research on your own. The organization doesn’t have to be involved as part of the research team.	The client’s involvement in the study is important at each stage.
You try to eliminate bias and intuition. There is heavy emphasis on objectivity and hard data.	Consultants are getting paid for their own bias and intuition—it is called judgment. You use all the feelings and perceptions you have in addition to hard data.
Essentially neutral toward whether the organization approves of the outcomes of the study.	Deeply concerned about the attitude of the client toward the outcome of the study.

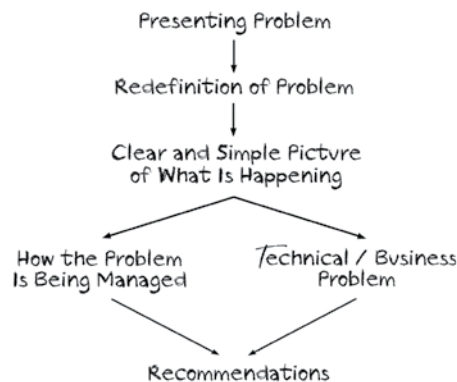


These distinctions in approach may be unnaturally polarized, but the point is that our objective is action, not understanding. With that objective, we need to concentrate on four things beyond the technical considerations:

1. Keep simplifying and narrowing the inquiry so it focuses more and more on the next steps the client can take and what is under their control.
2. Use everyday language. The words you use should help the transfer of information, not hinder it.
3. Give a great deal of attention to your relationship with the client. Include the client at every opportunity in deciding how to proceed. Deal with resistance as it arises, even if it doesn't have an impact on your results.
4. Treat data on how the client organization is functioning as valid and relevant information. Also, assess how the group you are working with is being managed.

These four factors affect how your expertise gets used. They take your technical skill, and your investigative and analytical abilities as givens. This action orientation makes the assumption that client readiness to accept your input is as important to discovery as the technical analysis of the problem to be solved or the possibilities and gifts that are in play.

Figure 13.1 shows the basic distinctions in the discovery phase between the technical problem and how it is being managed. You can make the same distinctions when working with possibilities and assets by imagining the possibilities in the left column.



**Figure 13.1** The Discovery Model for Problem-Solving



## The Problem Is Not the Problem

What all this implies is that one of the consultant's most important contributions to a client is a redefinition of the problem. The line manager begins by experiencing some pain: people are restless, equipment isn't working, output is down, the invoicing process is flawed, the line extension is running way late.

<b>The client gives you a . . .</b>	<b>Presenting problem</b>
You begin to . . .	Redefine the problem or the cause of the problem.
Your goal is to develop . . .	A clear and simple picture of the situation.
Included in this clear and simple picture is a description of . . .	The technical or business problem the client has asked for help on.
And also a description of . . .	How that problem is being managed—the attitudes of people; the manager's style; the politics of the situation; the gifts, strengths, and possibilities that surround the technical or business issue.
This leads to . . .	Recommendations on next steps for handling the business situation and dealing with how this group manages itself.

Most consulting projects get started because managers feel pain. Once in a while, they get started because of a desire for further success or preventive measures, but most often there is some pain in the picture. When the organization feels the pain, managers start to describe for themselves why the pain exists. When their explanation of what is causing the pain is accurate, their attempts to solve the problem are usually successful. When consultants are called in, the line manager's attempts at solving the problem have not been that successful, or maybe the manager has no idea at all how to solve the problem. When a manager's attempts to solve the problem have not succeeded, it is probably because the manager's attempts to describe the cause of the pain have been inaccurate.

The client's initial attempt to describe the cause of the difficulties is called the *presenting problem*. As a consultant, I never accept the presenting problem as the real problem without doing my own discovery and analysis. The presenting problem and the real (or underlying) problem are different. Because line managers start from an



incomplete definition of the problem, their attempts at solution have not entirely worked out. Therefore, an important contribution for the consultant is to redefine that initial problem statement for the client.

### **Example**

Here is an example of how presenting problems get redefined.

A large technical organization was having difficulty retaining new employees for more than two to three years. The people would come to work, get training, work on the job for a while, and then leave just when they were becoming valuable employees. The managers asked the first-line supervisors why the younger people were leaving. The supervisors identified three reasons:

1. Salaries in hi tech are out of control.
2. Housing was very hard to find in the most desirable areas. Apartments were scarce, and houses for sale were so expensive that an employee had to save for 10 years to have enough for the down payment.
3. Young people these days want too much too soon. Their ambition and sense of entitlement are way beyond what a business can satisfy.

Top management accepted these reasons as valid. They conducted a salary survey and made some adjustments in the compensation practices for short-service employees. They also created a housing section in human resources to help people find apartments and work with realtors to identify moderately priced housing in the area. They held workshops about the realities of modern business careers. These solutions were a direct response to the presenting problem of market pressure on salaries, poor housing, and people's entitlement mindset.

But a year and a half later, the turnover rate for the organization was not reduced, and in some sections, it was even higher.

Top management brought in the training group in the company as internal consultants and asked them for help on the problem. The training people first interviewed first-line supervisors and short-service employees. From these interviews came a different explanation of why people were leaving. The employees said:

1. When they were hired, they were sent to an orientation program that exposed them to the company vision, mission, and culture.
2. They didn't get a really responsible assignment until they had been there for almost a year.



3. They never got any accurate feedback from their supervisors about how they were doing. This made it hard for them to know what to work on for their own development. It also left them in limbo about their prospects with this company.
4. The first-line supervisors were under so much pressure to get the work done and to do it perfectly, they just didn't have the time to spend with new hires.

The interviews revealed a very different cause of the pain the company was experiencing in losing so many people. The original presenting problem was that people were leaving, and the reasons they were leaving were low salaries, a tight housing market, and unrealistic expectations. This initial problem statement led to solutions in the form of compensation, housing aid, and workshops. The consultants developed a different explanation for the pain and essentially redefined the cause of the problem: new hires were not given enough support, attention, meaningful tasks, and feedback. Interestingly, the shift in defining the problem was from a cause that no one had any responsibility for to one where the client was a player. This is the essence of discovery: to move from the language of innocence (salary, housing, and unrealistic expectations—not our fault) to accountability (how we bring them in and structure their experience is in our hands).

Once management had this redefinition of the problem, they could start to solve it. They began a series of programs to have supervisors and new hires contract with each other for how much time they would spend together, the tasks they would be assigned, and when they would get feedback from the supervisor. Management also supported the supervisors in devoting more time to new employees. Over the next year, the turnover rate leveled off, and in the second year it began to go down. The contribution of the consultants had been to redefine the presenting problem and present to the client a clear picture of what was causing the difficulty.

“The formulation of a problem is often more essential than its solution, which may be merely a matter of mathematical or experimental skill. To raise new questions, new possibilities, or to regard old questions from a new angle, requires creative imagination and marks real advances.”

—*Albert Einstein and Leopold Infeld, The Evolution of Physics*



## How the Problem Is Being Managed

How the technical or business problem is being managed is a critical area of inquiry in action-oriented discovery.

Consultants are usually aware of the client's management style and the politics of the situation, but we tend to shy away from dealing with them as part of our consultations. We believe that we have been asked to solve a business problem, not to comment on the organization. As a result, we tend to exclude organizational problems from our field of inquiry. We don't ignore the human problems entirely, though, for these are the things we talk about most with our colleagues and friends. The way the problem is being managed usually gets discussed in the restroom, between meetings, offline, or when we have social contact with peers after work when we are eating or drinking, or during breaks during the day.

Sometimes the management issues are even more interesting than the technical issues. But there is a part of us (with support from the client) that does not want to get into what we call personalities, politics, or relationships. It is a mistake to avoid these areas. The way the problem is managed has a powerful effect on the way our expertise will be used. We can't really avoid it entirely, even when the client agrees that we are only technical consultants. Technical and business problems almost always have accompanying management problems that affect how the technical or business problem gets resolved.

Figure 13.2 shows some examples of typical management problems that could occur along with technical or business problems in selected disciplines and functions.

For more examples of management and technical/business problems from other disciplines, visit [www.flawlessconsulting.com](http://www.flawlessconsulting.com).

So here is the point: each discipline or function faces both technical and organizational problems. The presenting problem is almost always about the technical or business problem. Organizational problems, or what we call *social system problems*, include how the technical or business problem is being managed. The choice is whether to address how the problem is being managed directly or indirectly.

To address the social system side is riskier for the internal consultant than for the outsider. You might hear clients say that they didn't invite you in to comment on their



	Technical or Business Problems	How the Problem is Being Managed
<b>Finance systems</b>	<p>Inadequate control procedures and practices</p> <p>Too many reports</p> <p>Too few reports</p>	<p>Defensive cover-your-tracks environment</p> <p>Withhold information and figures</p> <p>Little verbal communication between groups</p>
<b>Human resources (HR)</b>	<p>Improve policies and practices in areas of compensation, benefits, recruiting, training</p> <p>Improve general organization and management development</p>	<p>Every manager is an HR expert</p> <p>HR function is a low-status group and is treated accordingly</p> <p>HR specialists used as a pair of hands</p> <p>Managers fear HR will be involved in their performance evaluation, so they are reluctant to trust and include HR</p>
<b>Marketing research, product development</b>	<p>Policies on pricing, promotion, and packaging</p> <p>Information on customer preferences and market characteristics</p>	<p>Distrust and distance between marketing and the sales force</p> <p>Struggle for control</p> <p>Market research operates as a black box; the rest of the organization operates on private opinions and doesn't believe the black box</p>
<b>Management and organization development consultants</b>	<p>How to improve an organization's attitudes and productivity</p> <p>New organization structure</p> <p>New roles and responsibilities</p>	<p>Certain individuals and groups have a lot of power under the current system; changing the structure will change the power balance among groups</p> <p>A new structure signals who is on the way up and whose star is fading</p> <p>A very authoritarian manager may not care how people feel</p>

**Figure 13.2** Differences Between the Technical or Business Problem and How the Problem Is Being Managed



own personal style or the politics of the situation. To not address the social or organizational side is to see your technical recommendations distorted and only partially implemented because of the difficulty the organization has in communicating, trusting, and managing itself.

## **Flawless Discovery**

To consult flawlessly, you need to begin to address the organizational side of the problem as a regular part of your consultation. At a minimum, each assessment you do should have one section devoted to how the problem is being managed. This section needs only to present a clear and simple picture; it doesn't need to include specific recommendations.

The worry about confronting the client on how the client is managing the problem is a fear that resides within the consultant. Line managers usually want feedback on how they are doing, and they have a hard time getting it. Their own subordinates are reluctant to give them feedback. You, the consultant, are in a special position to provide it. The only caution is to do it in a supportive and nonpunishing manner. There is guidance on language in Chapter 17.

To summarize, remember to do these things in the discovery phase:

- Ask questions about the client's personal role in causing or maintaining the presenting or target problem.
- Ask questions about what others in the organization are doing to cause or maintain the presenting or target problem.
- Involve your client in interpreting the data collected.
- Recognize the similarity between how the client manages you and how they manage their own organization.
- Condense the data into a limited number of issues.
- Use language that people outside your area of expertise will understand.
- Distinguish between the presenting problem and the underlying problem.
- Elicit and describe both the technical problem and how it is being managed.



# Whole-System Discovery

**MOST OF OUR DISCUSSION** on discovery so far has been written from the perspective of a third-party approach, the third party being the consultant, engineer, IT specialist, or support person who is doing the data collection, analysis, and feedback. Although this is the most typical expectation clients have when using support people, and also the way we have traditionally seen the consultant role, there is an alternative.

The option is to involve the whole client system much more directly in redefining the problem, naming a desired future, outlining alternative actions, and deciding how to proceed. This is a *first-party* or *whole-system discovery strategy*, and the methodology has come a long way in the past four decades. Many consultants and support people have adopted the whole-system approach and redefined their role to be one of convening people to collectively develop a change strategy.

What is significant about this approach is that the people doing the discovery and making the recommendations are the same people who will implement the change. In other words, people from the whole system are involved early in the process and are active at every step.

The name *whole system*, though, is a little misleading because it is not literally the whole system that is involved. You can have representatives from all parts of a system in the room but not really everyone. It means that at least a large sample of those who will be acting on the recommendations is going to play a major part in creating them. It makes the change effort more self-managing than a third-party approach.

What also is important about a whole-system approach is that it looks at the entire system, not its parts. It can involve a cross-section of people that approximates a whole system much more directly and much earlier than a third-party approach. A first-party



or whole-system strategy engages entire units to self-assess their current reality and plan how to improve it.

Each strategy—third party or whole system—has its advantages and limitations, and I will outline them briefly. As you read, remember that your goal in each consultation is to catalyze action, not just to be right and have an accurate assessment.

## Third-Party Consulting

The most traditional third-party process involves the consultant or team who studies the situation and makes recommendations for improvement. The consultant may come from inside the organization or be an outsider. Sometimes the third party is a team of people from inside the organization that is given the charge of coming up with recommendations. Often called *design teams*, these groups may number 10 to 50 people, and they have 6 months, more or less, to work on the project, after which they are expected to return with recommended actions that management can endorse and implement.

Although the design team involves more people than the traditional lone consultant arrangement and members are taken from the organization itself, it still represents a third-party strategy: whenever some individual or group develops a solution for another, it is taking a third-party stance.

The rationale for employing a third-party approach is that consultants, and design teams, have special expertise and are positioned outside the specific system in question, even if only temporarily. This is supposed to lead to a certain objectivity and a willingness to confront difficult issues that people inside the system don't see or don't have the expertise, or ability, or willingness to face. In addition, third parties may be aware of possibilities that people closer to the problem may miss. The idea of combining a design team with an outside consultant has the added advantage of applying local, intimate knowledge of the problem. The belief is that given adequate time for analysis and reflection, the partnership of consultant and design team, composed of organization members who know the work well, can make more practical and actionable recommendations than a consultant alone might offer.

The strength of any third-party strategy is objectivity. Third parties offer an independent point of view, an outlook that is not colored by being so much a part of a culture that they cannot see it in a new way. When we can so easily see in others those things that we are blind to in ourselves, why not use a third party to help us see ourselves? The third-party path also has the power of management sponsorship, and



the unique energy and impetus for improvement it may provide. We believe that if management supports the change, maybe even models it themselves, we are well down the road to making the change happen.

The limitation of third-party help comes from the separation between the discovery and the doing. Third-party recommendations have to be sold to management, and then management has to either mandate or sell the ideas to the employees. The very process of selling is based on flawed premises: it pretends that there is a right answer to the problem; that the consultant or design team knows the right answer; and that, in good engineering fashion, the line organization can (and should) be persuaded to accept the answer and act on it. Also, it believes that there is such a thing as objectivity. We all have a lens through which we view the world. There is a point of view embedded in the questions we ask (see everything in this book). Objectivity is part illusion.

In some cases, especially when the problem is strictly technical in nature, there may be a right answer, and it may be accepted and implemented on its own merits. In most cases, however, this thinking is naive. Whenever there are questions of management or employee commitment, or issues of developing new skills or new organizational relationships, the prescriptive engineering or medical model ends in modest change at best. At worst, even if the third party's answer is right, it still may not be acted on, even with strong management sponsorship.

## **Taking a Whole-System Approach**

The point here is: Why not engage the people who will be affected by the change? Let them join you in the process of discovery, recommendation, decision, and implementation. This is the whole-system approach, whereby the parties to the change work through the process on their own behalf.

The essence of whole-system discovery is to get everyone in the room at the same time. Or online at the same time or even asynchronously. This deepens an organization's sense of community and allows people to operate with the same information, a common database. All hear what is said, and you avoid the limitations of having a few people condensing and planning what is best for a large group.

The main advantage is that there is no need to sell a set of actions to anyone, especially to people at lower levels of the system. When the goal is to build internal commitment to a set of changes, selling is the worst way to do it. People will resist change that is inflicted on them, no matter how compelling the case.



The power of the whole-system approach lies not so much in management sponsorship, but in the high engagement and involvement of the entire organization. The whole-system process doesn't proceed without sponsorship, for management will be in the room, but it doesn't bet on sponsorship so heavily. It is a bet on collective knowledge, collective purpose, and the commitment that grows out of deciding for oneself.

*Whole system* means you want representatives from all parts of a system in the room, but not literally everyone in the client organization. In this way, at least some voices of those who will be acting on the recommendations are going to play a major part in creating them. It makes the change effort more self-managing than a third-party approach. But if the whole system can literally be in one room together and the work of the organization allows it, go with everybody in the room.

## **Putting Whole-System Discovery to Work**

The technique of bringing a large number of people together to assess the situation, define a future, and talk about action goes by many different names. Because it can work with several hundred people in the room, it is often called *large-group methodology*. Other proponents focus on the involvement it provides and call it a *high-interaction* approach. Because it tries to embrace all the players at once, it also can be called a *large-scale* method. Harrison Owen gave us the method called Open Space Technology. The name isn't important, really, as long as it gives a sense of the intent of whole-system methods.

## ***Whole-System Process***

The number of people is limited mostly by the size of the room. The sessions usually last for two or three consecutive days. Twelve hours in a virtual world. A design team, usually guided by a consultant, typically plans the large-group event, but they focus only on the process and do not get into statements of the problem or solutions. They deal with questions of whom to invite, the right focus for the meeting(s), and how to manage the logistics and stage the activities. For specifics on how to do it, there are some good books by Kathie Dannemiller, Marvin Weisbord and Sandra Janoff, Barbara Bunker and Billie Alban, Dick Axelrod and Emily Axelrod, Harrison Owen, and Juanita Brown. They are listed in the Further Reading section at the back of this book.



Here are the kinds of questions that engage people in co-creating an alternative future:

- What is the change that we want to participate in creating together?
- What can we create together that we cannot create alone?
- To what extent are you invested in the well-being of the whole?
- What have we done to contribute to creating or sustaining the very thing we want to change?
- What doubts do we have that anything can be different?
- What have we said “yes” to that we no longer mean?
- What do we want from other people in this group or other groups in the organization or community?
- What are the gifts we are receiving from each other in this process?

### ***Trusting the Process***

To make this approach work, consultant and client have to give up some control and start down an unpredictable path, one quite different from the way the organization usually operates and probably not destined for comfort. Here are the conditions that have to be present:

- *Management has to be more transparent.* Management has to be willing to state to the group all they know about the current reality. This includes financial information, progress on important goals, any failures occurring, and how the organization is doing in meeting its key promises to its constituents. If management is contemplating any changes in structure or functions, these need to be on the table, regardless of the anxiety it might create.
- *Management joins the proceedings not only as hosts, but as full participants.* The session is led by the design team or planners and consultant. Each manager is one among many, and management’s ideas are not viewed as better than anyone else’s. Management may decide to retain some veto power, which is fair enough. This is a good model when management is willing to be vulnerable to the same thing prescribed for others.
- *Differences in status, power, title, and function are lessened during the process.* There is a more level playing field, and all work as equals. Each working team in the session will have several levels and functions represented. Participants must be willing to cross social and organizational barriers. Sometimes this is called a diagonal slice.



- *Employees have to be ready to speak up.* We ask that they suspend their caution and cynicism for a couple of days. They don't have to forsake caution and cynicism forever, but the meeting is not designed as a forum for complaint and response; it is a co-created event where all have answers and all have questions.
- *If employees choose not to participate, they surrender their right to complain or be heard.* There is no claiming later that they were not part of the decision. Rights of citizenship are earned by the choice to participate.
- *There is an emphasis on the future and what the group wants to create together.* Some discussion addresses obstacles and the current reality, but the strategy is to talk more about what we want to create tomorrow than how to fix what we've got today.
- *The session ends with agreements on next steps and who is going to work on them.* Management and employees have to be willing to allow next steps to emerge out of this session. Everyone gives up some control.
- *Consultants give up the expert role.* We no longer analyze the data, make recommendations, and follow up. Our role is to conduct people through a highly participatory series of steps. We become less central, less visible, and less able to be an advocate for a certain answer.

Each of these conditions moves the organization in a wider commitment, unpredictable, self-governing direction. That is the power of the strategy, but also its limitation. Managers cannot start this process of sharing power and then pull back at moments of doubt and nervousness.

## The Payoff

My intent in introducing whole-system and self-assessing discovery is to explain why this method is important and show how it changes the role of the consultant. But I must also admit a certain inclination toward using a whole-system strategy whenever possible. If the conditions are right, it has an advantage over a third-party stance in the way it builds the capacity of the organization to manage itself in the future. It also keeps the consultant in a design role. It demands that we develop our ability to design learning experiences for others. It also requires that we expand our skills in how to convene and bring people together, how to encourage them to question their current reality and envision their future. Also, it gives the consultant another pathway to confront all parties with their freedom and responsibility. It does this through the structure of the engagement rather than confronting these issues in a more traditional face-to-face way. It affirms that, in the end, questions are more powerful than answers.



## CHAPTER 15

# Discovering Gifts, Capacities, and Acting on What We Know

**WHAT YOU SEE IS WHAT YOU GET.** An essential element of change is the choice whether to focus on what is missing or on what is present. I once thought that my service as a consultant was to identify problems, and so I dedicated myself to figuring out what was missing. After capitalizing on weaknesses for years, I changed my focus to seeing what gifts are there and where capacities lie. If the value proposition is to help our clients and partners create a future distinct from the past, gifts and possibilities are a powerful and unique path to take us there.

There is a practical side to this choice. We can choose to accept that we have harvested the yield available in the deficiency field. Why pursue a path of diminishing marginal returns? As individuals, we are the product of a lifetime of working on deficiencies. A lot more effort will yield few more results. Same with the workplace.

In terms of strategic work with clients, John McKnight, leading light in the world of understanding the nature of community, has articulated a wonderful case that focusing on deficiencies or needs does not produce growth, it only reinforces the power of the expert at the expense of the client or employee. In his language, it turns citizens, people with rights and power, into consumers, people with weaknesses and needs. He believes that in this shift from citizen to consumer, the one who benefits is the service provider—in our case, the consultant. It is a short-term benefit.

Focusing on deficiencies is also a question of how we treat the human spirit. Are we here to remind each other of what is missing or what is possible? If what you see is what you get, then look for the strength, and you will find it. The problem with



looking at strengths is that we are not used to it, and we don't know what to say, so we feel embarrassed. And we have dealt with weaknesses for years, so it is easy for us to decide not to change them. But to search for the divine in each of us, or in our organizations and communities, would confront us in ways that most of us are not prepared for.

Finally, if we persist in looking at needs and weaknesses, it becomes a political gambit, an expression of power. The one who defines the conversation and the needs is the one who controls the narrative and the action. When we institutionalize the talk of weaknesses in others, it is a way of maintaining control over what we are talking about. When we look at what is missing in other people or other organizations, we put them in a lesser position, even if we do so with the intent that we just want to be helpful. Our attitude implies that they have work to do and we do not. We are the parents lovingly looking at the child.

There is a growing range of useful methods for looking at a system's gifts, capacities, and possibilities. This approach is used in addition to, or sometimes in contrast to, looking at problems and ways of solving them.

This gifts-based approach goes under many names: Appreciative Inquiry, Asset-Based Community Development, Future Search, Positive Deviance, Positive Psychology, and more. Each is based on the premise that looking at what in our history we want to preserve, or what is working in a system now, or what a system longs to create in the future is a powerful way to build commitment and sustainability into any consultative or change process.

Adopting this perspective is a way of compensating for one of the limitations of a problem-solving focus, which is that when you call something a problem, it is difficult to avoid having others think maybe *they* are wrong and need fixing.

The problem-analysis approach also tends to focus on what we have been doing up to now. It asks for a history of problems, how we got into this fix, what the causes are, and what can be done to correct this. It implies that if we understand the past and the road that got us to this place, this bodes well for an alternative future. This is an illusion. Our work is to complete the past. Keep it in the past.

It is too easy when focusing on problems to slip into trying to sell others on the need for a new future and to get into dramatizing what is often called "a burning platform" to promote the urgency of the need for change. The selling in itself can create its own resistance. Selling usually triggers as much defense as commitment. We don't resist change; we resist coercion.



## When All Else Fails, Make a Reservation at the Last Resort

The most obvious condition calling for a possibility- and strength-based approach is when the traditional model of problem solving has been tried again and again and has not worked. This is usually the case with intractable problems—for example, long-term low morale, poor market performance, or quality issues that will not go away. In a broader context, more problem-solving, more programs, more reforms, and more funding have had little real impact on challenges with poverty, violence, climate, and addiction.

When conditions are intractable, an alternative future usually requires a shift in a social system. Technical solutions fare poorly where improvement is dependent on a change in culture or a shift in people's habits.

Take education reform as an example. We have been trying for years in public education to implement best curriculum practices, raise standards for certifying teachers, reduce class size, install better leadership practices, and implement standardized testing and curriculums. All of these practices are reasonable; they make sense, and they have worked in some places. Yet the problem of schools where children do not learn persists and the drumbeat for reform just gets louder. Most of these change strategies for schools are deficiency or need based. They look at what is wrong and then problem-solve to make it better.

This might be an indication that dramatic new outcomes require more than simply a technical solution or better problem definition and solutions. Or more research. Improvement in a school and children's learning requires a shift in the social system surrounding the child, which itself requires a changed mindset and a search for a more fundamental shift in the ways of doing business.

We want to offer some examples of where the gift-focused approach has worked. In the case of education, for example, we will discuss how we shift our attention from the performance of the teacher to the capacity of students to learn. In healthcare, we look at how to shift the conversation on healing from the prescription and treatment emanating from the doctor to the full participation of patients and their families, the social worker, lab people, nurses, and others who touch the patient.

## The Power of Positive Deviance

One of the most powerful gift-based approaches is *Positive Deviance*. It is a process developed by Monique Sternin and Jerry Sternin working on problems that have been almost unsolvable by traditional means. They have used it in villages in Vietnam



dealing with undernourished children, ending the practice of female genital surgery in Egypt, and the curtailment of methicillin-resistant staph infections in hospitals.\*

What the Sternins discovered, along with their associate Richard Pascale, was that aiming one's focus on the entrenched, long-term problems themselves yielded marginal results. They had been running workshops for years. All the education, workshops, funding, benchmarking, and intervention in the world had not touched the ingrained daily practices that sustained poor outcomes like undernourished children in Vietnamese villages and infections in hospitals.

The essence of their approach is radically different from the way problem-solving works.

- They are interested in finding exceptions to conventional thinking and practice. In Vietnam, for example, every other group had studied the malnourished children and tried to bring in best practices from other places. The Sternins asked, “Are there any children in this village who are healthy?” Their belief is that we start from the premise that at least one person in a community, working with the same resources as everyone else, has already solved the problem that confounds others.
- They operate strictly through invitation. They invite as many people as possible who care about the issue to a meeting. They show the process that they have used elsewhere, take questions, and then invite those interested in the process to come to a meeting the next day. They work only with people who come the second time. No mandates allowed.
- They organize these volunteers to begin looking for people in the community who are the “positive deviants”—people who have figured something out about dealing with the situation and gone against the prevailing norms. Usually, these deviants do not even know what they know, which is why they need to be observed, not interviewed.

After finding examples of the positive deviants, the Sternins get really radical. They realized that this was the point where most change efforts fail “because we

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\*The approach is fully explained in their book, coauthored with Richard Pascale, *The Power of Positive Deviance: How Unlikely Innovators Solve the World's Toughest Problems* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2010).



were acting as though once people ‘know’ something it results in the ‘doing’ something.” This is the limitation of the problem-solving and problem-focused approach we are accustomed to: “The next, almost reflexive step,” the Sternins recognized, “was to go out and spread the word: teach people, tell them, educate them. . . .” They did not do this.

The Positive Deviance approach counts on the teaching and learning capacities of the *members* of the community. The community members actually decide what methods will work. They together create structures where members of the community share, demonstrate, and help others practice what they, the community, already know. In the case of the village children, they said, “mothers and caretakers would bring their malnourished children to a neighbor’s house for a few hours every day. Together with a health volunteer, they prepared and fed a nutritious, supplemental meal to their children.” This strategy counted on the wisdom and generosity of the villagers. It also meant that practicing what works was more powerful than hearing about or seeing what works.

## **Implications for Consulting**

Many lessons from the Sternins’ experience are relevant to the discovery process in consulting. For one, we see there are ways to reduce the dependence on the consultant or support person to have the answer. We can contract from the beginning that we will engage people in the system to seek solutions and treat the engagement as important as the solution. We can also agree that we want an approach that can be implemented by the people in the system now.

Second, we can choose to focus on the solutions that already exist in the organization or community, even though they may be rare and not accepted as common knowledge. This honors the gifts and capacities of organization members, who are what the Sternins call “invisible in plain sight.” We can decide to contract for discovering what is working and who in the client system has figured something out. It is our choice to proceed this way, even when the client or community is problem-focused, which is most often the case.

Also, any of the gift-based strategies almost always have to work through invitation. Even with the support of senior leadership and their ability to mandate a process, it is better to work with a smaller group that shows interest than with strategically placed and leveraged people who are not acting so much out of interest as out of obligation.



Finally, what is appealing about any of the strength-based methods is that practitioners have a profound commitment to work in a true partnership with those they are intending to be of service to. They listen endlessly and carefully as a practice. They offer no solutions other than some principles of the approach. They are equal learners as well as teachers at every stage and in every project.

## **More Examples of Partnerships That Work**

What is appealing about any of the strength-based methods is that practitioners take a consultative stance in their work. They have a profound commitment to work in a true partnership with those they are intending to be of service to.

Partnership has three core elements:

- A capacity to contract well and being clear about our own wants and the wants of others;
- A willingness to inquire and discover through listening and ensuring the client feels seen and understood; and
- A belief that answers and the decision to act ultimately reside with those who come to us with questions, regardless of how much expert knowledge we possess or they are looking for.

To make these consultative elements concrete and specific, here are examples from two friends and colleagues—Paul Uhlig, a thoracic surgeon, and Ward Mailliard, an educator—who have been taking a partnership approach in their work for many years. I like using their work as examples because they come from arenas that touch us all—healthcare and education—and which might be considered unlikely places for partnership and a consultative stance to take hold.

## **Healthcare Reform for Real**

No other profession has produced a more authoritative, knowing role than that of the physician. We may be masters of our destiny in every aspect of our lives, yet when we walk into a doctor's office, we give it all away. The very idea of diagnosis, prescription, and knowing what is best for others originates in this place. It has become sacred space where eventually our life can be at stake, and we often place it in the hands of another.

Despite its status in our society, healthcare is churning with a desire for reform. We think it is too costly and often inequitable in who has access to it. Some feel it is too



tightly managed and driven by corporate interests. Others are worried about the quality of care, the safety of patients, and the absence of proof that some procedures and prescriptions are really necessary. The Covid pandemic has only exaggerated our anxiety.

What is striking is that in all the reform debate about healthcare—all the talk of cost, access, management, safety, and quality—the conversation is mostly about disease, needs, and deficiencies, not about what produces health. We think better health can be purchased through better control of costs, advanced chemistry, improved technology, and more evidence. Trying harder with conventional thinking.

What is absent in the reform conversation is the recognition that reform grows out of transformed relationships, the primary one being the relationship among the doctor, the patient, and all the other human beings who swirl around them. We take the authoritative position of the physician and the dependent position of the patient for granted. In effect, the dominant healthcare reform conversation is mostly within the context of the expert role orientation.

It would be easy to accept this as inevitable and in the nature of how healthcare must work. There are, however, places where the context is shifting and authentic reform is occurring. They give us a good example of how rethinking the contract, discovery, and feedback processes described in this book can make a big difference.

### ***Renegotiating the Social Contract***

One person who has conceived and initiated such a shift in the basic physician-patient contract is Paul Uhlig, a cardiac surgeon now residing in Wichita, Kansas.

Paul is interested in healthcare reform, but reform to him has little to do with regulations, cost control, and standardization. He is about reimagining healthcare by remembering its true purpose, as he wrote in a letter to me:

The work that we are doing was given form years ago by a question that I and other members of my cardiac surgery team often heard from patients and families as we went about their daily work. The question was: “Don’t you people talk to each other?”

Of course we talked to each other. We worked together every day in the operating room, ICU, and other patient care areas. We wrote notes to each other, paged each other, and had impromptu conferences in hallways, lounges, and the cafeteria. Yet despite all those conversations, there was a frustrating sense in patients, families, and the team itself that we were often not on the same page.



“Don’t you people talk to each other?” This question opened important insights into a puzzle Paul had been concerned with for years: the state of healthcare itself. How could it be that so many well-trained people could work so hard to offer good care and have the net effect be the runaway costs, uneven quality, and inadequate access that left us all alienated and discouraged instead of rewarded and fulfilled? Paul and his colleagues began to see that the simple question: “Don’t you people talk to each other?” was a window into these challenges.

Paul and his team decided they would change how they worked together with the goal of making the question go away. They basically decided to renegotiate their social contract with each other. They believed that if they could create new ways of working together that resulted in better-informed and better-connected caregivers, patients, and families, then costs, quality, access, and patient and caregiver satisfaction would get better too. This is the power of the contract.

One of the changes the team made was to hold weekly meetings of anyone interested in the care of cardiac surgery patients. It might seem unusual that such meetings did not already occur. But in healthcare, most disciplines work separately from one another, connecting only through orders in the chart. It was not common practice to sit down during the week to talk about teamwork and how it might be better. What Paul was doing was introducing a self-managed consultative process for the whole system around the patient. Fancy talk for a weekly meeting.

### ***Changing the Conversation, Changing the Culture***

One of the changes that emerged concerned the way the team related to patients and family members. Several respected voices had advocated for a new approach that actively engaged patients and family members as fully participating members of the care team. One suggested that the team make daily collaborative bedside rounds, with patients and family members actively included. They wanted to renegotiate the contract between caregivers and the patients and their families toward a structure where all voices were heard by all.

At first, many care team members laughed at this idea because of how impractical it sounded. There was no good time for everyone to meet, they said, and patients and families would not be able to understand what they were talking about. Gradually the idea was accepted, and 8:45 a.m. was chosen as the “least impossible, impossible time.” And so daily collaborative bedside rounds with patients and families began.



Again, in Paul's words:

Having all of us there together with patients and families changed everything. Our work became much easier, although none of us understood that at first. At first, it was confusing and stressful. We were not used to being open about what we were thinking and doing with one another, making that accessible and asking for advice, especially not with patients and their families. *We were very concerned that we needed to be perfect in their eyes.*

In reality, it turns out that just the opposite was true. The more we showed patients our unfiltered uncertainties and concerns, the more they were able to trust us and contribute. It seems paradoxical at first, but I can see now, at the far end, that it makes all the sense in the world. I think that is what is meant by *authenticity*. Our experience over time taught us the power and value of just being ourselves.

I would say that none of us, even those of us most committed to patient and family participation in rounds, was prepared for what we experienced and learned from our patients and how much those experiences changed us. We thought we understood what it meant to be patient-centered. I thought I was one of the most patient-centered doctors that there could ever be. But we were wrong and I was wrong.

It was like peeling away an onion. We would make a shift—for example, one of the biggest was making a mutual commitment to use ordinary language rather than medical language for our conversations on rounds, and speaking directly to the patient and family rather than to each other—and we could see from the new perspective that much of what we thought was patient- and family-centered was not that at all. That eye-opening just went on and on.

It was startling and humbling to experience this awakening. One thing for sure, once you understand this, it changes you forever.

The goal became helping each person achieve a whole and meaningful life on his or her own terms. That is a very different goal than what I was trained to achieve. Imagine what a healthcare system would be like that had that as its goal—achieving life wholeness on the patient's own terms, not battling disease on my terms. It would not be recognizable. That vision is very hopeful to me.

As Paul and his care team began working differently together and began including patients and their families, their outcomes and results improved. Recovery after surgery



happened faster, deaths and complications decreased by half, and people found new meaning in the experiences of being a patient and of being a caregiver. One patient said, “For something you think would be so difficult, this was a wonderful experience.” Another said, “You treated us like ordinary people, and that made all the difference.”

What they had done is change the social contract with the patient and their family, shifting from expert to collaborator and consultant. It began with the healthcare professionals’ re-contracting with each other: they committed to be in the same room together on a regular basis. They initiated a self-managed discovery process. They got curious about each other and began to understand the problems each faced. These changes gave some early returns. As people began conversing in weekly team meetings, individuals who had worked together in the same environments, sometimes for years, got to know one another in new ways. Roles now had faces, and faces soon had names with stories.

The second transformation was the contract between caregivers, including the physician, and patients and families. Paul and his team created a structure where the wants, doubts, and statement of the problem of all parties were equally relevant. They made it a consultative process, a partnership between experts and clients.

### ***Success Carries Its Own Set of Challenges***

Paul offered a follow-up to the initial experiment that is also instructive. After some time, the team started talking to others about their experience. Paul and his team received the Eisenberg Patient Safety Award for their work, the highest recognition in patient safety given by the Joint Commission and National Quality Forum.

The story should end here, but, of course, it doesn’t—and this is the paradoxical nature of the consultative and change-making path. After the initial success, complete with real measurable outcomes and national recognition, Paul lost his job. This had nothing to do with his work as a surgeon, but because what his team had invented called into question historical convention. The system in place refused to accept the idea that partnership made such a difference. The resistance was to value control and status over outcomes. This is not surprising; dealing with this resistance is as much a part of the work as contracting, discovery, and feedback.

Just to finish the story, Paul says he lost sleep for a week, then realized that this was data about how hard it can be to change culture. Like most other true innovators, Paul kept learning and found new ways to keep moving forward. He is now internationally recognized for his work in patient safety and healthcare teamwork, and is currently



developing what he calls Proximal Health, well-being that is derived from the network of social relationships present in our daily lives.

Proximal Health views health and healthcare as continuously “co-created” among people rather than “delivered.” The term implies health that arises in and flows from the environments that immediately surround us, Paul explains:

Proximal health models connect people with one another in local places, foster collective learning, and lead over time to the development of cultures of health and well-being.

The new world of healthcare that Paul imagined is about achieving possibilities. He is no longer interested in diagnosing and treating problems. “Our understanding of health is evolving,” Paul says. He adds:

The more my colleagues and I learn about health and healing, the more we are recognizing the power and importance of community for changing the context and culture of healthcare. If you want to create a better, safer healthcare system, bring the people involved together and ask them what matters most, what works, and why. Create protected time for people to meet and reflect. Creating opportunities for reflective conversations to happen—making places where people can reconsider their beliefs and expectations together—is how real reform begins.

## **Teacher as Consultant**

Ward Mailliard is an educator who decided that if he wanted to make more of an impact on student learning, something more dramatic or radical was required than trying harder with the traditional conversations about teacher performance, curriculum, consequences, or measurements. He determined that he needed to reexamine the nature of the contract between him and his students. Using the approach and terminology from this book, he experimented with giving up the expert role of the teacher and moving toward a more consultative learning stance.

This journey took him beyond recontracting with the students. He adopted a discovery and inquiry way of viewing student performance questions. He began to see difficult student behavior as a form of resistance, not as rebellion or dysfunction. The class learning agenda shifted from a focus on deficiencies to a focus on gifts. Every



meeting of the class was designed for engagement as much as curricular content. He also rearranged the room.

Ward never called himself a consultant. He operates in the fire of the educational marketplace, in an arena where much of the conventional wisdom is not working for too many children. As a result of applying many of the “flawless” ideas, he got new, improved outcomes and did not have to spend more money to get them.

## ***The Story***

Ward’s story is about how the *Flawless Consulting* contracting and discovery processes are making a difference in a classroom. This example is not just about producing exceptional learning in a high school classroom. It is about a deep-seated shift—from teaching to learning—in the way we educate children.

Like healthcare reform, the debate about education reform has been argued long and hard. The conversation has focused on class size, teacher performance, a variety of standardized curriculums, and testing. We have tried a variety of different structures like charter schools, private-sector management of public schools, quality improvement methods, site-based management, high community control, hiring former military and executives as superintendents. It doesn’t matter if you are not familiar with these approaches because they have not improved the school performance for most of our young people.

Instead, Ward radicalized learning. In a letter to me, he described his own thinking process and how he became committed to consultative learning. Here are his words:

If we want to reform education, at the heart of the matter is a shift in thinking about teaching and learning. When we traditionally think of a teacher, we conjure up someone who knows. Someone who will impart knowledge. Conversely, when we think of a student, we think of someone who does not know and who needs to acquire knowledge.

We have active teacher and receptive student. The directional flow of information and decision making is from teacher to student.

In this context, the teacher is given a stage and assigned an audience. The teacher often works from a prepared lesson plan: clear teaching points, a sequence of activities, content and expected outcomes. We expect the students to grasp and often memorize that content, by a certain date, and we measure to assess performance. Teacher improvement usually means giving the teacher better tools and techniques to deliver the content and win on the measures.



## ***Assumptions about Motivating Students***

The conventional arrangement Ward describes puts the challenge of motivating students in the hands of the teacher. Grades, a major tool for motivating students, are designed to maintain some control over an increasingly difficult and distracted student audience. Grades determine movement up and down the performance-and-achievement ladder. They control entrance to college, which, according to the conventional storyline, leads to well-paying jobs that provide security and purchasing power. The equation is simple: grades equal performance, which guarantees advancement, which delivers wealth, which offers security and is the key to happiness.

This is a reasonable theory of motivation; unfortunately, it applies only to a minority of students. And if it does not work, it is viewed as the student's fault or the family's or the educator's. Why is it only partially successful? In Ward's words:

There are very few levers of control for today's adolescents. They have money, mobility, and distractions galore: sex, drugs, entertainment, subcultures, social media, and sufficient freedom to sample everything out there. This is as true for suburbs and small towns as for urban centers.

The result is that teachers don't have the student attention or obedience necessary for the standard teaching and motivation model to work. The way the system tries to cope with this is with competitive strategies: make grades the point and high performance on grades the bottom-line measure. This creates in the classroom essentially a power relationship between teacher and student based on the normal distribution of rewards. The teacher is left to cling to the last vestiges of authority: grades, threats, and the cultural shame of underperforming. Go to the principal's office.

## ***The Possibility***

What Ward began to search for and found was a shift in the context of his thinking about the classroom. For example, he wondered: *What if we shifted the stance of teacher as knower to teacher as learner? From consultant or leader as expert to a collaborator.* The questions might be: "What could I learn from my students that would allow me to be more effective in the learning environment? What if I stopped thinking of myself as a teacher and started thinking of myself as a consultant to learning?"

Ward says he was inspired by the definition of a *consultant* in Chapter 1 of this book: "In its most general use, *consultation* describes any action you take with a system of which you are not part." Influence without control. He observed, "I hope that none of us as teachers



are under the illusion that we are part of the system that is thriving around us and remains distinct from our plans and curriculum. As we all know, the youth culture is a separate system with its own associations, rules, intentions, language, entertainments, and purpose.”

### ***Taking a Consultative Stance***

Ward decided to become a consultant to his students: he would stop controlling them and reach a point where they get some privacy and relief from the relentless pressure that they need to perform because it is useful and their future is at stake.

His first step was to work out of a new context. The essence of a new context was to see a class as a group of human beings, each with gifts in abundance, rather than as students with deficiencies or needs. Even in the face of real challenges, like dyslexia, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, eating disorders, disabilities, behavior problems, or low motivation, students are learning, alive human beings, not, in Ward’s terms, “identified patients.”

Even when it seems that they are not learning, or not present, or unsupportive of what we adults have to offer, when we give priority to valuing their own experience, we will discover that they will learn what matters; we will see that, given a chance, found on their own, they discover a pathway into their own future that neither we nor they could have imagined.

Given this context, when Ward took on a consultant role, he could not walk into a classroom and start telling students what to do without first taking the temperature of the room. Ward said:

Teachers need to do the discovery work as described in *Flawless Consulting*. Inquire, interview, map, understand the dynamics, see how students are “managing the problem” of learning. Ask students about their intentions, goals, and challenges. We put what we do know, our expertise, at the service of the culture in the room by first learning everything we can about it.

### ***Renegotiating the Social Contract***

The shared project or business objective of the classroom is exceptional learning for each person. The consulting challenge teachers confront is how to create a practice where learning occurs. This begins with contracting. The struggle that many students have with learning in the classroom might be best understood by considering that the learning project was faulty in the initial contracting stage.



In truth, the contracting stage in traditional teaching is implicit, fear-based, predetermined, and by no means mutual. This is so for many reasons, the most prominent being that many students are not at school by choice. Where there is no choice, accountability and enthusiasm are hard to come by.

What the consultative stance offers to teachers is a way of dealing with the fact that many students show up saying, in essence, “Tell me what minimum I need to do to get what I want.” Students become obedient and act as if they care because they think that obedience is worth at least a grade point. The compliance response works because teachers are seduced by interest and positive reinforcement like anyone else.

What Ward embarked on was an effort to renegotiate the contracting in the early phase of the class. It was not easy, he said:

If we do not have freedom of choice about being here, how do we claim our freedom or create in students a sense of real accountability?

Ward began to have honest conversations with the students about these and other topics to begin to make the shift from “How do I have power over my students?” to “How do I have power *with* my students?” They actually opened up a conversation about trust. When he took the time to inquire about what might work differently, he was surprised to find caring behind their mask of indifference.

## ***The New Contract***

Here are some elements of the new contract he developed.

**Tell the Truth** Ward had to ask himself how to tell the truth in his classroom:

If you ask how many read the homework, what kind of an answer will you get? If 60 percent have not, do you want to hear it? When students tell you something you do not want to hear, how do you react? With criticism or curiosity? Are there subtle ways we teach them to lie? What do we do when they are not paying attention? Tell them to pay attention, or try to understand where their attention has gone? Lying is what they have learned, it is expected in traditional classroom.

**Failure Is an Option** One of the rules that emerged in Ward’s classroom is that failure is okay. Resistance is also okay, and so is being wrong. Wherever they are is okay



because that is where they are starting from. Ward understood that resistance is a sign that something important is going on. It is not a problem to be solved or overcome. It just has to be named without judgment.

Agreeing not to have reprisals helped change the culture and context of the classroom. There was no judgment for what others were doing, only on what students were choosing. Ward told them: “If you are tired, take a nap. When you are done with a task, go do something else. If we are doing a task as a group and what you are doing is not useful, find something else that is useful to do.”

This is based on the reality that successful learning is about discovery. If the goal is learning, not teaching, each person needs permission to fail. That cannot happen without a stance that favors trying something new and being supported whatever the outcome since if the goal is learning, “failure” is a big way it happens. So, in effect, students who fail are on the way toward reaching the learning goal. This is what it takes, Ward says, to turn students who have become performers back into people who become learners.

**Conserving Not Knowing** Another big question Ward and his students asked themselves is, “What is the cost of not knowing?” “Usually it is shame on the part of the student,” Ward says, “and disappointment on the part of the teacher.”

When we are disappointed or even irritated that they do not know, we are holding on to who we want them to be. We are not seeing who they are. We are also not setting up the conditions where failure and learning are friends to each other. Being wrong and fallibility have to be valued for learning to be oneself. If not this, then performance becomes the point and learning about self is sacrificed.

**How Do We Measure Success?** In any discussion of education reform, we have to take up the question of measurement and have a thicker discussion than just grades. Success in learning and success in teaching may be different things. “As a teacher,” Ward said, “we are not just selling ideas, like selling an experience.”

We are also promoting awareness of self and the agency and choice that grows out of that. Awareness of what it means to be part of a community, a citizen. Students need to struggle with their own definition of success in this class. If we do not put the question of success on the table, then we will get stuck with the default position of student as consumer if they do well, identified patient if they do not. Too often we talk of students as someone to cure, fix, heal, or fill with information.



**How to Deal with Functions of Umpire (Grader) and Consultant (Facilitator) at the Same Time**

This is the paradox inherent in the role of the teacher and consultant. Also in the role of auditor, performance manager, even boss. The resolution is to present this as a conversation. Teacher and student, contracting together, work to figure out how to meet the grading requirements of the larger society, yet not let that dominate the way they operate together. Ward said:

It can begin by asking students what they want from this class. What wants do they have of themselves? What is their intention for themselves? The conversation could be about how they learn, how they work, how they operate as members of a team. Another contracting process.

He asks them what they want from him, the teacher. What can he, the teacher, do to support their intentions, achieve what they want from the experience? What role does the teacher play in supporting their definition of success and helping them measure that? And what does the teacher, as the convener committed to learning, want from the students? These are all very consultative questions, Ward noted:

This can play in very concrete ways. We can elicit the student vision of what defines success for each project or even each assignment. What is success and how do you know? *The challenge is to get past what they are told to want.* For example, on a reading or research assignment, ask them, “What struck you, what did you notice, what challenged you, what was interesting? What value did this book have for you?” These are different questions than asking what they remember, what was the storyline, what did the author have in mind?

**Affirming Learning Methods versus Teaching Methods** If we reflect on how students learn, there is a continuum from listening, to reading, to seeing, to speaking, and to doing something. Most learning comes from speaking and doing. Yet we ask students to spend a lot of time listening and reading. This is a telling quote from a student in one of Ward’s classrooms: “I like the small groups because when I talk to my peers I learn. When you, the teacher, speak, I don’t listen.”

If we really believe in their learning, we may have to give up a fair amount of our content since what is the point of teaching or speaking if there is no listening? This is part of shifting the contract from teacher as curriculum provider to teacher as



consultant. The strategy is that if we can engage and gain more investment from students, they will get something greater out of this. If focus is primarily on the content, then students, just like clients, will never understand the power of their own agency and power to act on what they know.

The shift from teacher as knower and judge to student as learner, producer, and center of the project can be uncomfortable. But as Ward's experience shows, that is when learning will take place for both. This is the intent of the consulting process discussed here. When we give up control and act as relative equals, we make ourselves vulnerable. This is what creates trust. Most teachers know intuitively and by experience that relationship is the key to teaching and learning, and relationship is based on trust. Without some level of mutuality in our classrooms, we will at best have moderate trust. The effect of this is that students, especially those for whom the classroom is not their sweet spot, will remain reluctant performers and a whole deeper level of learning will be sacrificed.

## **The Choice in the Matter**

One of the major shifts that occurs when we move from being teachers to becoming learning consultants is in our own perspective on where choice resides. In the workplace world, a consultant knows the client has a choice. Part of the skill for the teacher becoming consultant is to acknowledge that even in school, where the student is required to show up, choice exists.

So this example of education reform in the classroom is about choice, which is at the center of a consultative stance. Ward reflects on the experience:

We need to be conscious of what we want to conserve in our way of being in the classroom. There is one question we as teachers need to ask ourselves, and that is, "What am I affirming in my manner of living? In my manner of being with the students, what am I living? Am I affirming trust, intimacy, and cooperation? Or am I affirming fear, isolation, and competition?"

These questions are at the core of consultation and even leadership. Certainly partnership. They are very specific conversations that are at the heart of having influence without control. They rest on a platform of paying ultimate attention to the gifts and capacity to choose on the part of whoever is in the room with us—a patient; a group



of students; top, middle, or any management. Again, the agency of each person in the room is implied in each of the consulting steps:

- How do you feel about working with me on this project?
- What are you up against?
- What do you want from me?
- Here is what I want from you.
- Where are the points of agreement?
- Where do you feel vulnerable?
- Where are you concerned about losing control?
- What is your contribution to the problem or challenge?
- Here is what you are really good at.
- Here are the choices you have.

Any one of these, in most any setting where you want to see an alternative future, builds trust and affirms our reciprocal humanity. They run deeper than the doctor providing a diagnosis, a student getting a grade, and managers meeting their quarterly targets.







## PART 5

# Analysis and the Decision to Act









## CHAPTER 16

# Focusing on the Picture

**N**OW THAT YOU HAVE NAVIGATED the discovery choices and methods, you are ready to produce a picture of what is happening for the client and/or to document what is a future possibility. Remember, you have the choice to be problem-focused or possibility- and asset-focused. It's up to you and the place where you are doing the work. Also in your hands is the choice to structure the discovery. Will it be through the eyes of you and a third-party team, or will it be a whole-system self-assessment effort?

Again, your preferences and the client's will dictate the choice here. The possibility and whole-system choices are labeled as *Notes* within the lists of steps that follow. In each of these cases, the business of this phase is:

1. Collecting information at three different layers of analysis: understanding what the presenting problem is, what others are doing to create the problem, and what the client is doing to create the problem.  
*Note:* if this phase is about creating a new possibility rather than solving a problem, the requirement is to define the organizing question that will animate the possibility discussion.
2. Assessing the organizational and managerial climate in which action will be considered.
3. Dealing with client resistance to sharing information with you or fully engaging.
4. Choosing the right discovery process so that the structure of this phase begins to create ownership in dealing with the problem or the possibility. The discovery process itself changes an organization.



5. Reducing what is learned to a manageable number of issues.
6. Giving language, order, and meaning to what choices emerge that are actionable and lead to a change.

## The Steps in Getting the Picture

No matter what kind of information you seek—whether you look at information flow, equipment design, people’s attitudes, difficult long-term problems, or the social culture itself—and whatever dimensions you analyze, there are some general ways to describe the steps in discovery that might be helpful. Each time you collect information to form a picture, whether it is a six-month or six-minute project, you make these choices.

*Step 1: Re-decide to Proceed.* You and the client together make a decision to begin the discovery. Often this involves several people who work for the manager who can confirm that there is an incentive to initiate a new study. The motivation to proceed should be based on the desire to make improvements in the organization, not just on the desire to do research.

*Step 2: Select the Discovery Strategy.* At this point, you have to decide whether you want to look at problems or possibilities, that is, to look at what is working or not working. You also have to decide if you or a third party will conduct the inquiry or whether you want a self-managed discovery process. Chapter 14 covers the choices in designing self-managed discovery in more detail.

*Step 3: Identify the Presenting Problem.* Any discovery begins with a conversation about a concern that line managers have about their organization. The manager’s first description of the problem is the *presenting problem*. It is usually about what others are doing to create the problem. The presenting problem is a symptom of the real problem, and the purpose of the discovery is to elaborate and deepen the client’s initial statement. Identifying the presenting problem is the first step in discovery.

*Note:* if you are taking a positive or possibility stance, then you need to focus on what in the internal or external environment is calling for a new possibility. What is the question that, if answered, would initiate a transformation or the beginning of a new vision? Also, what are the gifts inside this system that appear to be undervalued?

*Step 4: Decide Who Will Be Involved.* Decide what levels of the organization will be included in the discovery: the greater the diversity is, the richer the outcome will be. How many from each level? Who from which departments? Do you ask customers,



suppliers, support people, others? Remember that asking people questions creates expectations that something will shift, and that they will get feedback on the results.

*Step 5: Select Dimensions to Examine.* Discovery hinges on the questions to be asked. A limited number of questions need to be selected from within the discipline of the consultant or the context that gave rise to the project. A financial person will select questions about financial information and control; human resources will ask questions about compensation, attitudes, or culture.

*Note:* in the possibility approach, the questions will center around giving form to a vision or details about what is working well or who is succeeding against the odds.

In either case the dimensions and questions should be limited—fewer than 20. Too much data from the discovery will be overwhelming.

*Step 6: Select the Method(s) of Inquiry.* Regardless of your strategy, the information-gathering method depends on the scope and purpose of your inquiry. Select a method that fits with the time available, the motivation of management, and the intent of the effort.

There are only a few ways to find out what is going on:

*Interview.* Do it individually or use a group interview. Use either a structured or unstructured interview.

*Survey.* Takes more time to prepare. Good for large numbers of people, but numerical results can be hard to interpret.

*Research and document analysis.* Look at the numbers, results, written communication. Useful because it takes up your time only. Also gives available objectivity.

*Direct observation.* Sit in on critical events and meetings, and watch what happens. Look at the equipment. It may be the only first-person data you have. This can be the best source of data if you can trust your own perceptions.

*Your own experience.* Know that you are being managed by the client organization the same as everyone else is managed. Pay attention to how they treat you. On this project, how much information, influence, access, pressure do you have? This is valuable data on the client's management style, and it is valid data.

*Whole system/self-discovery.* Bring together those who have a stake in the problem and possibility, including those who will have to act on their recommendations, to discuss the dimensions of the situation. Here, you are more a facilitator than an interviewer. Again, see Chapter 11.

*Step 7: Collect Data and Observations.* Do it. Distribute questionnaires, conduct interviews, sit in on meetings, study reports, bring people together. Collect information



until it starts to get repetitive. You will recognize this when you start getting bored. But remember, the discovery process gives voice to those you talk to. Asking people what they see is a form of engagement, so you may have to learn to enjoy occasional repetition.

*Step 8: Funnel the Information.* Somehow all that people have said and named, all you observed and researched needs to be reduced to manageable proportions. The purpose of the analysis is to focus energy, not describe the universe.

*Step 9: Summarize the Picture.* You need to find a format that will summarize what has been produced. Concentrate on the visual impact of the story you are creating and how easy it is to understand.

*Step 10: Construct Meaning from the Process.* What does the information mean? What is important? And why? What is the solution or alternative future the discovery points to?

*Step 11: Manage the Feedback Meeting.* Report the picture and its implications to the organization. Who should be at the feedback meeting? How are those who were involved in the study going to find out the results? Be sure you have allowed enough time in the feedback meeting to deal with the resistance you will surely get. Structure the meeting so the majority of time is for discussion, not presentation. Chapter 18 provides more about this meeting.

*Note:* even with self-assessment and whole-system dialogue, the picture has to be captured and meaning extracted. All that differs from the traditional third-party process is who does it.

*Step 12: Offer Choices or Recommendations if Necessary.* Sometimes recommendations will come before the feedback meeting. They are most useful when framed in terms of choices the client has. This should be within the control of the group that requested the study. In a self-assessment strategy, recommendations come from the community.

*Step 13: Facilitate a Decision.* The process is not complete until a decision has been made to do something. It is their decision to make, not ours.

*Step 14: Implementation.* This is the payoff, so stay around for this phase even if it's on your own time. After discovery, you have your own feel for the problems and possibilities. Your information can be useful in interpreting the hills and valleys of implementation. You also offer ways of involving people in the implementation that will increase the chances that the decision will be translated into effective change.

Most of these steps apply to all projects, regardless of your technical discipline or particular field of expertise or the discovery strategy. You know what technical data



you want, ways to get it, and what to do with it when you have it, so the rest of this chapter concentrates on discovery in dimensions you may not be used to, paying special attention to your face-to-face encounters with the client as you engage in discovery.

## **Don't Worry Much about Bias**

Having an impact as a consultant is to pay attention to more than your methodology or field of expertise. Regardless of your assignment or its designated scope, the work almost always impacts the social system and touches on core issues around the management of the organization. It is important, then, to pick dimensions of how the problem is being managed that you are comfortable with and go with them in your discovery rather than worry about whether you've selected the right or wrong one.

In selecting the dimensions of your discovery, you predefine the problem, but there is no reason to feel anxiety about biasing the data. If you have contracted to look at how conflict is handled, or how much people level with each other, or how they plan, you may already have some idea of what is wrong with the organization, particularly if you are an internal consultant.

Do not treat this as bias; treat it as insight. Your predefinition of the problem is valuable and gives you good clues on how to spend your discovery time. Trust this. You do need to keep listening as you're collecting data to see whether there are other issues that you don't know about. If there are, you need to pursue them. The point is not to treat the insight of your own feeling about being part of the organization as bias but as useful information.

## **Assessing Culture and How the Situation Is Being Managed**

If you want to develop your skills in collecting information directly about the social system or how the problem is being managed, there are more than a dozen aspects of organizational life to explore. Your goal is to understand something about the culture and how this organization functions so that you will understand how it will manage the implementation of your recommendations. Paying attention to these dimensions will give you a good picture of the organization. These are also areas that people being interviewed love to talk about, so you will have fun with it.



Choose among these areas:

1. *Objectives.* What are the goals of the group and the person you are talking to? You want to determine how much goal clarity and goal agreement there is.
2. *Subgroups.* What is the relationship among groups that have to work together on this problem? Which groups are supportive? Which groups are in conflict? Do some groups or individuals tend to be excluded from the action? Why?
3. *Support.* How does this group express support? In many groups, support is expressed by silence: "If I like what you are doing, I will leave you alone." Who gets support, and from whom?
4. *Evaluation.* Do people know where they stand? How do they find out? What are the norms about asking where you stand and getting an answer?
5. *Positive history.* What are the stories of what made this place great? What are its strengths and assets? What do people take pride in and want to preserve?
6. *Status differences.* Which are the high-status and the low-status groups? How are the differences expressed, and what impact does this have on the problem and people's attitudes toward a particular solution or possibility?
7. *Authority and power.* Who has high and low power in this situation? How do people working with it deal with the power differences: openly or cautiously? What are people's attitudes about authority? Do they openly resist it, overly give in to it, put up with it, or not care?
8. *Decision-making.* How does the group make decisions? What role does the boss play? How do people get their viewpoints considered in a decision?
9. *Norms for individual behavior.* What are the norms on taking the initiative, making demands, expressing disagreement, aggressiveness, asking for help, using questions to make statements, dealing with boredom, taking risks in expressing doubts or uncertainty, and openly confronting differences?
10. *Management information.* How are resources identified, progress monitored, movement evaluated, problems identified?
11. *Leadership style.* What are the styles of formal and informal leaders? What is their impact on this situation?
12. *Conflict.* How is conflict managed, confronted, smoothed over, compromised, forced, ignored, or suppressed?



13. *Domination.* Is the situation dominated by one or more persons? What is their impact? Are they part of the group trying to work the problem, or are they so high up in the organization that they are unreachable?
14. *Attitudes about this project and your involvement.* To understand people's attitudes about the situation and what they think of your being involved in working on it, try asking some of these questions:
  - "How do you feel about my being brought in to help with this?"
  - "Why do you think the organization needs the help of someone like me? Do you think my help is needed?"
  - "What kinds of questions do you think I should ask people to get a feel for what is going on around here?"
  - "What ideas have been supported by people but have not gotten enough support?"
15. *Diversity.* How are differences handled? What is the mix of people from different worlds, cultures, races, and how are they valued? What positions do they hold? Is there a place to say "no"? Is surprise tolerated? How are strangers welcomed?
16. *Going forward.* What would people recommend if they were in your position? How hopeful are people about making real progress on this problem or possibility? What obstacles do they see to your suggestions being accepted?

Of course, you wouldn't use all of these questions. For any one situation, you can scan the dimensions, and the ones that are relevant will stand out to you. Asking any two or three of the questions will give you data on a lot of the rest. You can also assume that how the organization manages its current situation will be identical to how you and your suggestions will be managed. If you use these kinds of questions, you will know what you are getting into, and some of the answers should be part of the clear picture that you are going to report on at the feedback meeting.

Again, it is critical to use this kind of information as part of your analysis—even if the client didn't ask for it. It is one of the unique contributions you can make to the client. If you want to be of unique value to your client, then you have to take the risk of offering unique information. Accurate information about how the organization is functioning is not available to most managers. The people they work with have such a vested interest in the organization that no one is trusted to be objective. You have less of a vested interest and are in the best position to deal with sensitive issues.



## **The Discovery Interview**

The interview is a means of discovery that is common to all disciplines and cannot be underrated. Although there is much written about interviewing methods, the interview receives special attention here because of its interpersonal nature and the effect it has on the client organization. It is where relationship is built.

### ***The Interview as a Joint Learning Event***

If you can take the time to talk to a wide cross-section of people, it means that by the time you start making sense of what you have discovered, you have already had a large impact on the organization. The mere act of asking questions can stimulate people to rethink what they are doing. Your questions express to them without ambiguity what you think is important to focus on in solving the problem you are working on. Clients can learn a lot from your choice of what to investigate. Plus, they have the rare experience of really being heard.

### ***Difficult Interviews***

If you encounter resistance in an interview, deal with it the same way you deal with resistance at any other stage of the process: pick up the cue, name the resistance, and wait for the person to respond. If you are in an interview and it is giving you nothing, deal with it as authentically as you can. Tell the person that you are not getting what you need. If that doesn't help, at some point, terminate the discussion. You will build more trust with that person if you stop the interview than if you go ahead mechanically through your questions, while both of you know that nothing productive is taking place.

## **Layers of Analysis**

Every problem facing persons or organizations has layers, like an onion. Each statement of a problem or situation is an approximation. As you go to deeper layers, you get closer to causes and actionable statements of the problem.

As mentioned before, the initial statement of a problem, the presenting problem, is almost always made in a way that inspires futility—futility on the part of the client and the consultant. If the presenting problem did not inspire futility, it would already have been solved and you would not be talking about it. To accept the presenting problem



at face value is to get stuck. The same usually goes for the client's first portrayal of gifts or possibilities. There is more than meets the eye. In discussing layers of analysis, we will stick with problem-solving language to keep things simple.

Your task is to work with the line manager—or group or organization—to shed light on the layers underneath. By position alone, you are situated advantageously to see the complexity of the layers below.

When you are working with individuals, the layers generally stack up in a pattern like this:

*Top layer.* The presenting problem comes most often in the form of a concern expressed in organizational or business terms: “We aren’t getting our product.” “My group isn’t delivering on its promises.” “The system isn’t working.” “This food group is not selling in certain markets.”

*Second layer.* The person’s perceptions about how others are contributing to the need for change is the next level: “People are more interested in their career than in what is good for the whole.” “Two members of the group do all the talking.” “The people don’t understand the system.” “The outside world is demanding something new.”

*Third layer.* This is a statement of how a person sees their own way of contributing to the situation. The person may be contributing by certain conscious actions or by simply not giving the situation much attention. This statement is vital because it brings the responsibility closer to the line manager or whomever you are talking to. Instead of expressing the situation in terms of forces outside the person that are creating the problems, the focus is moved a little more internally.

The questions you ask to get information on each layer are straightforward:

### **Top Layer**

What is the technical or business problem that you are experiencing?

### **Second Layer**

What are other individuals or groups in the organization doing to either cause or maintain this problem at its current level of severity?

What are they doing that limits the possibility?

### **Third Layer**

What is your role in sustaining all of this?



What is there in your approach or way of managing the situation that might be contributing to the problem or getting in the way of its resolution?

What might you be doing that gets in the way of an alternative future emerging?

*Note on the third layer:* The person you are talking to might answer, “I don’t know of anything I am doing that is a problem. That is your job to find out.” If you get this response, be a little skeptical. People usually have some idea of how they are contributing to a problem; they are just reluctant to mention it.

When someone says to you, “I don’t know what my role in sustaining the problem is,” there is another question you can ask: “Suppose you did know what your role was. What would it be?” Sometimes this jogs them enough to answer your third-layer question.

If people really do not see themselves as part of the problem, this in itself is important. Why do they not see themselves as players? Their stance of spectators or, more precisely, as victims may be part of a pattern that speaks to the way the group is managed. Include this in your understanding of how the problem is being managed. This sense of helplessness, or being an outsider, will make a difference in the energy available to act on what you recommend.

The root issue is almost always how much responsibility or ownership a person or work group feels for the problem—how much people are in the stance of a victim versus in a position with some power to act. Uncovering deeper layers of a problem is really the search for unused resources available to solve the problem or create something new.

For a layers-of-analysis exercise and a discussion of issues in small-group discovery, visit [www.flawlessconsulting.com](http://www.flawlessconsulting.com).

## Your Experience as Data

A last comment on discovery addresses your own experience. Clients manage you, the consultant, in the same way they manage other resources and people. If you want to understand a client’s management style, you simply have to observe how you are experiencing the relationship. Are you feeling controlled, listened to, supported, treated with respect or disdain? Are decisions with the client collaborative or one-way? Is the client open to options or forever on one track?



Your observations and experience about the client are valid data. Paying close attention to how you are managed by the client early in the project gives you more guidance on what to explore in determining how the technical or business problem is being managed.

For a downloadable copy of Checklist # 5, visit [www.flawlessconsulting.com](http://www.flawlessconsulting.com).

### **CHECKLIST #5: PLANNING A DISCOVERY MEETING**

These planning guidelines cover the business of the data collection phase and help you prepare for any resistance you might get:

1. The response you get provides valuable data on the ultimate implementation of your expertise. Notice how the client manages the discussion with you:
  - How much interest and energy are there on this project?
  - On which points is the client uneasy or defensive?
  - On which points is the client open to learning and change?
  - Where is the client unrealistic in estimating the ease or difficulty of some action?
2. What is your understanding of the presenting problem or possibility? Now, based on your experience, what do you think your layers of analysis will yield?
  - *Top Layer:* What technical or business problems is the client likely experiencing? What client assets or possibilities exist?
  - *Second Layer:* What are others in the client's organization likely contributing to the problem? Who are the other likely actors in the problem? What are others in the client's organization likely contributing to the collection of assets and possibilities? Who are other likely contributors?
  - *Third Layer:* What is the client doing that is helping to create the problem or prevent it (unknowingly) from being solved? What is the client doing to hold back on the possibilities?
3. What organizational folklore, history, and culture surround this project? Who are the ogres and angels in the client's setting? Acceptance of the folklore as truth is part of what blocks resolution. Identify areas of potential blind spots.
4. You can support and confront during the meeting:
  - What support can you give the client at this point? Examples: offer tentative paths of action, offer personal encouragement and assurance, acknowledge difficulties, describe similar situations you have known, thank the client for being candid with you.

(continued)



(continued)

- How might you confront the client in this meeting? Name the resistance. For example: are you not getting good data, is the client over-answering questions and controlling discussion too much, is the client omitting key areas to discuss or answering questions with one-word answers, are there constant interruptions in the meetings, is the client skipping around too much, does the client not believe in the project or play down the seriousness or implications of the problem, are there negative attitudes about consultants in general?
5. What nonverbal data can you look for? What in the setting of the meeting carries a message on client commitment and involvement in your project?
  6. What data do you want to collect about how the organization is functioning?

For a downloadable copy of Checklist #6, visit [www.flawlessconsulting.com](http://www.flawlessconsulting.com).

**CHECKLIST #6. REVIEWING THE DISCOVERY MEETING**

Your notes contain the content of the discovery meeting. Here are some questions to answer afterward about the process of the meeting. It also is a review of the discovery concepts.

1. How did the client manage the discussion?

Client Control	Consultant Control
100 percent	100 percent
<hr/>	
No client energy for the project	Very high client energy
<hr/>	

2. What is the technical problem or possibility?
3. What others are contributing to it?
4. What is the client doing to create the problem or prevent its resolution? Or what is the client doing to impede realization of the possibility?
5. What folklore, history, ogres, and angels can you identify on this project? Are there any blind spots that the client is missing?
6. What supporting statements did you make?
7. What confronting statements did you make?
8. What nonverbal data did you notice?



## CHAPTER 17

# Preparing for Feedback

**EVERY LINE MANAGER WANTS** to know what to do about a problem or possibility and so wants recommendations. Resist being too carried away by the struggle to develop perfect recommendations. Recommendations are the beginning of a conversation, not the end. If you have presented a clear and simple picture of why the problem or possibility exists, the client will have as many ideas for recommendations as you do. The reason clients need our recommendations is because of the limiting picture of the situation that they are now working with.

## A Clear Picture May Be Enough

The consultant's primary task is to present a fresh picture of what has been discovered. This is 70% of the contribution you have to make. Trust it.

What you do with your discovery is to focus attention on areas that your expertise tells you are the likely causes of the problem or sources of a possibility. What to focus on is under your control regardless of the assignment. Trusting yourself to focus on what you feel is important may be the most valuable thing you have to offer the client. Treat the choice of what to examine as a highly important one and yours to influence.

## Condensing the Data

You always collect more data than you could ever use. A high anxiety point in any consulting project or ongoing relationship is what to share. When discovery is done—when you have finished asking your questions and have all the information you are going to get—you now have to make sense of it.



You may have devised a rational, logical process to sort out and categorize the information, but the selection of what is important is essentially a judgment on your part. This is what your client is paying you for. Trust your intuition; don't treat it as bias. If you are an internal consultant, you are often familiar with the organization, the people, and how they operate. Use this information.

### ***Keep It Simple***

When I am struggling to decide what is important in a pile of data, I sometimes read through all the notes, reports, and meeting summaries once. Then I put them aside. On a blank sheet of paper, I then list what I think is important in what I know—usually about four or five items. I let that be my guide on what to report and how to organize the report.

I have faith that what I can remember is what is really important. Since a person can absorb only a limited amount of data, what stands out to me is what I want to stand out to the client. Let the information that stays in the background become part of an appendix, but don't clutter the picture with a complete list of everything you found out. The point is to be a catalyst for action, not to be complete and comprehensive.

Guidelines for selecting what to highlight to the client are to favor items that—

1. The client has control over changing,
2. Are clearly important to the organization,
3. Have some commitment somewhere in the client organization to work on,
4. Are clearly a strength or an expansion of something that is currently working or under discussion, and
5. Are a unique way of viewing this situation.

### **Some Do's and Don'ts**

As you get close to presenting the picture and recommendations, you start making decisions about what to include and how to say it. Here are some suggestions.

#### ***Don't Collude***

There are two things consultants typically do to collude with clients, thereby undermining themselves. The first is to develop explanations for problems that leave the



solution outside the client's control. We blame higher management, the general economic condition, the marketplace, other groups in the organization. Each of these explanations has the benefit of reducing the immediate pain of the client's own responsibility, but carries the price of feeling helpless about improving the situation. Don't collude with the client in avoiding responsibility. You can acknowledge the role others play in the problem, and at the same time keep the conversation focused on the client's role.

The second way we collude with clients is to play down the impact that difficult relationships have on the problem. The client may be having trouble with a subordinate or a boss and yet barely mention this as part of the problem. If you get wind of this kind of difficulty, mention it in your report. If the written report is slated for wide circulation, you may want to mention it only verbally. Don't avoid dealing with it. Name it without judgment or taking sides. Helping the manager face up to the impact difficult relationships have on the problem may be one of the most important contributions you can make.

### ***Don't Project***

Projecting is placing your own feeling onto another person. If you are feeling anxious about part of what you have discovered, you assume the client will also feel anxious. If you would not like someone to tell you that your team feels you are too autocratic, you assume the client also would not like to hear that feedback. Clients have a right to all the information that you have collected. Let them have it.

Stay aware of your own feelings, but keep testing the limits of what the line manager can accept. If you feed back data that causes a minor uproar, stay with it. You and the client will both survive. Make direct statements, and then ask how the client feels about the statements. Of course, the language you use matters, but we will discuss that later.

### ***Do Support***

Clients (and consultants) need support. If you have parts of the picture that are confirming to the client, reinforcing the reasonableness of what the client is doing, include these in your report. If the client has a perception of the problem or possibility and you see it the same way, say so. Clients have a right to know what they are doing that is working.



I once had a client who felt that everyone in the organization was avoiding responsibility for the fact that a certain test procedure wasn't working and so poor raw material was being delivered to the customer. The customer unknowingly used the raw material in its finished product, got serious customer complaints, and eventually had to recall the product.

This became a huge crisis that returned to my client's door. He had been trying to focus attention on the problem with the test, but to no avail. When we interviewed others in the organization about the problem, it was clear that no one felt responsible for solving it, although everyone felt it should be handled by a specific research group. When we reported this to the client, he was relieved and reassured that we shared his perception of the problem. He had begun to think maybe he was crazy and everyone else knew what they were doing.

This was a confirming and valuable experience. If you have confirming data, report it. Although many clients say they want to hear only about the problem, don't you believe it. And don't you believe it when clients say they don't want to hear about the things they have already told you are working. Give support even if it is not requested.

### ***Do Confront***

Your data will also indicate areas for improvement. You can identify what the client is doing that is self-defeating and areas in which the client is vulnerable. Report them, even if they are painful. The hardest data to report may be about the client's own personal style. Just share this information with the client in as kind and supportive a way as possible. If you avoid information that creates tension, then why does the client need you as consultant? The client already knows how to avoid tension. Your role is to help the client move toward the tension and face the difficult reality that has been skirted. This is why building a close relationship early in the process, during contracting, is so important: it will make the difficult conversations later in the process productive.

### **Language in Giving the Picture**

The most useful guideline for conveying the picture effectively—either written or spoken—is to behave assertively. There are many frameworks for looking at personal behavior and personal effectiveness. I think this is simple and practical.



## ***Assertive***

Every person has rights. Clients and consultants too. Assertive behavior is stating directly what you want and how you see things without putting down or infringing on the rights of others. Assertive feedback is stating to the client how you see the problem or possibility without implying that the client is a bad manager or has missed seeing the obvious.

## ***Aggressive***

Aggressive behavior is also expressing your own wants and views, but doing it in a way that puts down or negates the other person. Aggressive feedback is describing the situation in a way that implies the manager is incompetent, unfeeling, uncaring, or in need of fixing. The operational test for aggressive statements is whether you can add the phrase “you dummy” to the end of the sentence. If “you dummy” fits nicely at the end, the statement was aggressive.

## ***Nonassertive***

Nonassertive behavior is when you hold back your feelings and views and don’t state them at all. Nonassertive feedback, in the name of protecting the manager or yourself, occurs when you don’t present the client information on how the situation is being managed, or how the management style of the manager is affecting the problem or possibility. Nonassertion also occurs when you ignore the politics of the situation or avoid sensitive issues.

## ***The Goal: Assertive and Authentic***

Authentic behavior and assertive behavior are very close together. Aim to be authentic and assertive with a client. Aggressive behavior creates resistance unnecessarily, and nonassertive behavior does a disservice to both yourself and the client.

In wording feedback, then, your goal is to describe what you have found and not to evaluate it. Your task is to present a clear and simple picture of the situation. The more the feedback is evaluative, the greater the resistance there will be. The choice is to make the narrative as descriptive as possible. For example, it is one thing to say that when the group sits down to do work, the boss does about 80% of the talking. That’s a descriptive



statement. Another way to put it would be that the boss dominates the group and meetings are unproductive. This second way is the evaluative way. Words such as *weak*, *strong*, *incompetent*, *indecisive*, *dictatorial*, and *controlling* are very evaluative and should not be used.

Also avoid vague stereotypes. The more specific you are about what's going on in the organization, the more useful this information is. A general statement like, "We have a problem in decision-making," is so vague that people can't really identify the problem being presented.

Also avoid long explanations and justifications. Most questions about method and recommendations can be answered in a paragraph or less. If the questions persist, give your two good-faith answers, and then acknowledge to yourself that it is resistance that confronts you. Deal with the resistance by naming it and waiting for a response. Resist the temptation to explain again.

The picture you present is a statement of what is, not a statement of what ought to be. To discuss what ought to be is to moralize and sound like a judge or seer. The only time to talk about what ought to be is when your contract with the client is to predict or prescribe the future. Otherwise, make neutral, descriptive statements of what is currently causing the problem or revealing the possibility. To recap:

Use Language That Is:	Avoid Language That Is:
Descriptive	Judgmental
Focused	Global
Specific	Stereotyped
Brief	Lengthy
Simple	Complicated

## Presenting the Picture . . . as Courtroom Drama

If you can view a consulting project as a process in search of the best decision, you can view yourself and the client as taking different roles commonly found in a courtroom. Most of these roles are negative examples of what not to do. I apologize for this. But you see these roles played out so often in offices, conference rooms, and production areas that they are worth mentioning. None but the last role really serves the consultant well, though I admit some do have a certain appeal.



### ***Consultant as Judge***

You are there to interpret the law, or interpret corporate policy, or tell clients they are out of line. When a client makes a mistake, the consultant judge decides what the penalty should be by influencing that manager's performance appraisal next time around. Because judges sit higher than the rest of us, people fear them and don't come to see them voluntarily. The only ones really comfortable with judges are other judges (sometimes called top management). Or internal staff people participating in the performance evaluation of managers.

### ***Consultant as Jury***

Juries determine guilt and innocence. Consultant juries feel responsible for ultimately deciding on their own whether the client was wrong or right. This stance is remote and very parental.

### ***Consultant as Prosecutor***

The prosecutor is there to present evidence to the jury. Some consultants present feedback as if they were going for a conviction. They develop irrefutable data and statistics and present them in a fool-proof, totally buttoned-up package. This creates distance from the client and carries the message that success is in the hands of the consultant rather than a joint effort.

### ***Consultant as Defendant***

Sometimes we go into a feedback meeting feeling like we are the one on trial. We have all our just-in-case files with us. We have rehearsed our presentation three times and even have an extra set of PowerPoints in case of an accident. When we get questioned by the client, we overexplain and make promises to get more data, even when we know it is a waste of time.

The consultant is not a defendant. If the client is treating you as if you are a defendant, it is just resistance and the client's own anxiety about the project. All you have to say is "You seem upset with what I am presenting." Sounds simple. It isn't.



### ***Consultant as Witness***

This is the preferred role for a consultant. An impartial witness has no direct vested interest in the outcome of the deliberations and is there to present accurate information. Witnesses give a clear, specific picture of what they observed. Presenting what came out of discovery is designed to do just that, so view yourself as a fair witness.

It is a great luxury to be able to be just a fair witness for a client and not also to have the responsibility for guarding the corporate interest. Many internal consultants have to be part-time police officers and part-time judges. When this happens, these roles greatly interfere with developing the kind of trust with clients that we would all wish. There is no way out of this bind. The best you can do is be clear with the client when you are in uniform and when you can be just a friendly, down-home consultant. If, however, as an internal consultant, you have a choice about whether to take on some policing responsibilities, think twice. The attraction is that it gives you instant access and instant power over some people in the organization. The price for that power is high, and in my opinion, it is usually not worth the distrust that you create in your potential clients by taking on the robes of judgment. Most internal consultants disagree with me on this, so there you have it.



## CHAPTER 18

# Managing the Meeting for Action

**A**NYTIME YOU PRESENT a clear and simple picture of the current situation and make your recommendations, you do it in hopes of triggering action. The action could be a decision, further discovery, or learning. It is the moment of truth and high anxiety for the client and the consultant. It is also exciting and fun. Next to that moment at the beginning of the project when the client says “yes,” this is the part of consulting that I enjoy most.

The excitement of the meeting for action is that it holds the promise of some movement. It holds some hope that the energy the client and I have invested in this process will pay off. This is the major agenda—the commitment to act. To step into something new. Even if most of the meeting is spent in understanding the problem or the possibility, the heart of the meeting is the discussion of what to do. This is the way to approach the meeting: as an opportunity to get commitment, not just an opportunity to present data. In this sense, the meeting is not an ending. It is the beginning of the implementation phase that will solve a problem or change the status quo. This chapter is about how to structure and manage any meeting designed to be the beginning of some action.

To flawlessly manage this meeting, you need to attend to the business of this phase:

1. *Keep the picture in focus.* Keep it simple and straightforward. Use everyday language that is accurate, specific, and nonpunishing.



2. *Present personal and organizational data.* Include in your summary information on the people and how the situation is being managed.
3. *It is your meeting.* Maintain control of it and structure it. Keep it moving toward what will be done about the problem or possibility.
4. *Focus on the here and now of the meeting.* To have maximum leverage and get your expertise used, you need to watch the process of the meeting and deal directly with the resistance and the movement as it occurs. If you don't deal with the resistance in the meeting, you may never get another chance. If you do not acknowledge movement, it may evaporate.
5. *Don't take it personally.* A special reminder here because this is the phase of consulting where you are likely to get the most pushback. Remember the rule: after 6:00 p.m., you can take anything personally, but during the day, no matter how many guns are aimed at you, your task is to stay focused on the client's internal struggle to confront the reality that is on the table.

The other half of consulting flawlessly in this phase is to behave authentically—to state to the client what you are experiencing as the meeting progresses.

## How to Present the Picture

The mistake with most presentations is that they are too long and too intricate. When we have spent all that time analyzing data, we fall in love with all of the facts and figures. We find interesting discrepancies that defy explanation; we notice historical trends and comparisons; we discover curves and graphs with shapes, heights, and textures that are each worth an hour's discussion. Go ahead and fall in love with your data—but don't tell everyone about it. Keep your presentation short and simple. The longer and more complex you make it, the more you are open for endless questions on methodology and interpretation.

Repeating several earlier points in one place: to structure the presentation, there are only four general categories of data—

Analysis of the technical or business problem,  
A picture of what is working and what the possibilities are,  
Analysis of how the situation is being managed, and  
Choices and recommendations.



In deciding how to present data, remember:

- The purpose of discovery is to focus awareness on a manageable number of dimensions. Most feedback overloads the organization. Keep the feedback down to under 10 issues, or even fewer.
- What you want is action. You are not doing research, even if it is called research.
- If you are using a PowerPoint, don't read it. Talk about where it leads. What it means. Let others in the room look at it.

The report does not have to have all the answers and does not have to be complete. It is often useful to devise a format that offers a role whereby the manager or group can participate in the analysis. The end result with a group, as with an individual, is to have it take responsibility for its own path forward.

## **Structuring the Meeting**

The purpose of every meeting is to get the client's and possibly their team's reaction to the data and recommendations, and have something important occur as a result of your study. Here is a way of thinking about the meeting.

First, control the flow of the meeting. You are in the best position to do this. The client is going to be busy working through their response and is in a pretty dependent position during the course of the meeting. If you control the meeting, it serves as a model for the client to learn how to manage meetings like this.

The agenda should follow the sequence shown in Figure 18.1. Keep the steps in mind, although the moment might move them around.

## **The Meeting for Action, Step by Step**

Here is a detailed breakdown for the steps. The right-hand columns suggest how to allocate time to each sequence of steps. Beginning and ending times for each sequence in a 60-minute meeting are shown. The percentage of meeting time that should be devoted to each step or group of steps is also listed. That way if you have planned a four-hour meeting, you know to ask the client how the meeting is going (Step 6) at the end of two hours.



- 1. Restate the Original Contract
- 2. State the Agenda/ Structure of the Meeting
- 3. Present Clear Picture
- 4. Present Recommendations
- 5. Ask for Client Reactions
- 6. Halfway Through Meeting: Ask the Clients If They Are Getting What They Want
- 7. Decision to Proceed
- 8. Test for Client Concerns
- 9. Ask Yourself If You Got All That You Wanted
- 10. Give Support

**Figure 18.1** Steps in Managing the Meeting for Action

***Steps 1 and 2: Restate the Original Contract; State the Agenda/ Structure of the Meeting***

Steps	Percentage of Total Meeting	Time for a 60–Minute Meeting
1. Restate the original contract.	5%	Begin: The beginning
2. State the agenda/structure of the meeting.		End: 3rd minute

In restating the original contract, state what the client wanted from you and what you promised to deliver—for example, “You asked us to investigate why the Brogan plant reactor broke down. We agreed to do that and come back with recommendations. We did not look into the auxiliary equipment that supports the reactor.” This restates the presenting problem and reminds the client of the essentials of the contract. Sometimes consultants like to give a little history of the project. I do not. I devote only 5% of the meeting for Steps 1 and 2.



After restating the contract, state the purpose of the meeting and how you want the meeting structured. Remember that you want to control the flow of the meeting. You don't have to announce that you are in charge; you just have to act that way. One way to act that way is to announce right at the beginning, "Here is how I would like to structure this meeting. I would like to present the results of the discovery process and spend most of the time on what action might grow out of that."

### ***Steps 3 and 4: Present the Picture and Present Recommendations***

<b>Steps</b>	<b>Percentage of Total Meeting</b>	<b>Time for a 60-Minute Meeting</b>
3. Present the picture.	15%	Begin: 4th minute
4. Present recommendations.		End: 12th minute

These two steps get intermingled. Some people like to start with the headlines and list recommendations after each point of the findings. Others present the whole thing and then move into recommendations. It helps to structure this part of the presentation so the client's reaction to the picture will be separate from the reaction to the recommendations because you want to protect the recommendations from any first reactions. If the manager is taking your feedback hard and asking you question after question, you would rather have your analysis be the victim of the barrage of resistance than sacrifice your choices and recommendations.

If the client is eager to get to the recommendations and skip over the data, slow down the process. Say you will get to the recommendations in a minute, but first you want to get reactions to your assessment of the situation. Each organization has different norms about how to format this part of the meeting. Some are very formal; others are informal.

My preference is to avoid a lot of formality. A formal presentation, especially one using PowerPoint, puts too much distance between the client and the information. When you look at a PowerPoint slide, the screen is far away, and the content looks as if it's cast in concrete, so this tool actually works against the primary objective. I know this is a blow to PowerPoint users, but the point here is not to hold the power or point to it. Presenting a perfect package at the feedback meeting is a mistake.



Remember that you have to be finished with data and recommendations after only 20% of the meeting is gone. In a one-hour meeting, this is the 12th minute. Figuring it took you three minutes to introduce the meeting, you have nine minutes left. This time constraint forces you to get to the point and to action quickly.

*Step 5: Ask for Client Reactions*

Step	Percentage of Total Meeting	Time for a 60-Minute Meeting
5. Ask for client reactions.	30%	Begin: 13th minute End: 30th minute

This is the heart of the meeting. The client’s reaction will determine the amount of commitment that exists when you leave and whether your expertise gets used. If the manager holds back reservations about the data or the methodology in the middle of the meeting, those reservations will come out later, at a much less desirable time—either at the moment of decision or after you have left the scene.

Sometimes you need to ask direct, specific questions to get the client’s reactions. Clients often give their reactions with no prompting at all. If you get a silent or very quiet response, ask the client: “What is your reaction to the information I am reporting?” or “What concerns do you have about the data or the analysis?” There may be a portion of the data that you know touches a very sensitive issue. I would ask about this directly: “Part of our report is on how you have been managing the problem and your boss’s role in this problem. How do you feel about the way we have summarized the situation?” The goal here is to move toward any tension in the situation and elicit any unexpressed concerns.

A certain amount of tension is useful in any meeting. If there is no tension, then it is likely that the issues and recommendations are ones that nobody really cares about, which means there also won’t be any energy to implement. If the tension is too high, the client and the consultant can be so distracted as to be unable to take responsibility and plan for any realistic, useful next steps. What you want is a moderate level of tension.

You have 30% of the meeting to devote to client reactions. This is the time you want the client to express his or her feelings, so don’t get defensive when you hear



them. The client's reactions are not against you; they are against having to face the pain in acting on and confronting the data you present.

If you find yourself being defensive, you are in danger of being captured by part of the same anxiety that has infected the client. Be aware of when you are getting defensive.

It is also important to stick to your assessment of the situation and your belief in your recommendations. There must have been a good reason that it made sense to you. Don't cave in when you meet resistance. You trust what you are suggesting, and although you don't need to defend it, don't give it up too easily.

### ***Step 6: Halfway through the Meeting, Ask the Client, "Are You Getting What You Want?"***

<b>Step</b>	<b>Percentage of Total Meeting</b>	<b>Time for a 60-Minute Meeting</b>
6. Halfway through the meeting, ask the client, "Are you getting what you want?"	10%	Begin: 31st minute End: 36th minute

One powerful thing you can do is to ask clients, at the halfway point in meetings, whether they are getting what they want from the meeting. This is an insurance question. I used to ask the manager about the meeting just before the meeting was about to end, say with about 5 to 10 minutes left. This was too late. A few times when the manager was in fact disappointed by the meeting, I had no time to recover. If the manager wanted more specific recommendations, or had concerns that he or she was feeling but not expressing, there was no time left to respond. If half the meeting is left, there is a good chance you can come up with what the manager might want or can help the manager surface the reservations fully enough to get past them or adapt the direction of the conversation.

Despite the emphasis we give to this step in training other consultants, they rarely are able to ask for feedback halfway through the meeting. The consultant and the client are so immersed in the task that the time slips by. The consultant can also be reluctant to ask how the meeting is going for fear there will be no way to respond to the client's disappointment. It is better to at least make the recovery attempt than to find out after the meeting what went wrong. (What to do when the meeting is not going well is covered later in this chapter.)



**Step 7: Decision to Proceed**

Step	Percentage of Total Meeting	Time for a 60-Minute Meeting
7. Decision to proceed.	30%	Begin: 37th minute End: 54th minute

The purpose of the meeting is to produce client commitment to some form of action. The question of what to do next should be asked early enough in the meeting so you can participate in the decision.

If you wait until near the end of the meeting, the real discussion of how to proceed might take place at a time and place that will exclude you. If the client makes a decision when you are not present, the chances are somewhat less that the decision will really deal with the difficult realities your study has surfaced. This is particularly true if your discovery has at all focused on the way the problem is being managed and the client’s management style. It is hard for clients to see their own roles in creating or maintaining a problem, and your presence makes it more likely they will recognize the part they have played.

When you participate in the discussion of what to do, there are some key tasks to concentrate on:

1. Keep the discussion centered on things that are under the client’s control.
2. Keep raising the parts of the situation or recommendations that you think are essential to addressing the immediate and the longer-term problem or possibility. The essentials are often the more sensitive parts of the situation: a difficult relationship, a poor performer, or some political consideration. As a consultant, you can focus on the sensitive issues without vested interest and perform a service by doing this.
3. Keep balance in the discussion by surfacing the viewpoints of everyone in the room. You usually have a clear picture of how different people in the organization see a situation. Aid the quieter ones in finding their voice. Call on them.
4. Support the right of the players to declare themselves and make the final choices. Each person needs the opportunity to say no, even though dissent is simply the beginning of the conversation.

At times, the client will want to exclude the consultant from the decision-making discussion. I always ask to be present. To be present at the decision-making point is



something to ask for in your initial contract. The reason the client might want to exclude you from the decision is to maintain control. It is really another form of resistance.

***Steps 8, 9, 10: Test for Client Concerns about Control and Commitment, Ask Yourself If You Got What You Wanted, Give Support***

<b>Steps</b>	<b>Percentage of Total Meeting</b>	<b>Time for a 60-Minute Meeting</b>
8. Test for client concerns of control and commitment.	10%	Begin: 55th minute
9. Ask yourself if you got what you wanted.		
10. Give support for behavior in this meeting.		End: 60th minute

Closing the meeting is similar to closing the contracting meeting. You want to ensure that the decisions made have the commitment of the client. You can also view the meeting as the entry stage of the next contract you might have with this client. The closing should be as direct and complete as possible.

Here are the steps.

- Ask the client, “How do you feel about the control you will have if we go ahead with these actions?” If the client is uneasy, you may want to discuss ways the uneasiness can be managed.
- Ask the client, “Is the solution we discussed something that really makes sense to you?” If the client’s commitment seems low, you may want to pursue it further in the meeting or raise the matter at a later time.
- Ask yourself if you got what you wanted. You may want some continuing involvement. You may want feedback later on the effect of your consultation. You may want feedback now from the client on whether you were helpful on this project and how you might have been more effective. You may want the client to informally tell your boss that you did good work. You may want another contract with the client, either to implement this project or to begin a different one. If there are things you want, consider asking for them now.



- Finally, give support. Implementation is a time when the heaviest burden is on the client. Give support for this responsibility, and tell the client what they did right in this meeting. This is what completes the process.

A Recap

Figure 18.2 gives a recap of the steps in managing the meeting for action.

Following this meeting structure ensures that you have attended to the business of the feedback phase. This is half the way to consulting flawlessly. The other half is

STEPS	Percentage of Total Meeting	Begin	End
1. Restate the Original Contract	5%	Beginning	
2. State the Agenda/ Structure of the Meeting			3rd minute
3. Present Clear Picture	15%	4th minute	
4. Present Recommendations			12th minute
5. Ask for Client Reactions	30%	13th minute	30th minute
6. Halfway Through Meeting: Ask the Clients If They Are Getting What They Want	10%	31st minute	36th minute
7. Decision to Proceed	30%	37th minute	54th minute
8. Test for Client Concerns	10%	55th minute	
9. Ask Yourself If You Got All That You Wanted			
10. Give Support			60th minute

Figure 18.2 Summary: Managing the Meeting for Action



behaving authentically at each stage of the meeting. The greatest strain in doing this is dealing with the resistance that is sure to arise in the meeting. Here are some reminders to help overcome these hurdles.

## **Resistance in the Meeting**

Every meeting is part of the client's discovery and learning process. The crucial skill in conducting any meeting is to stay focused on the here-and-now process. This is more important than even the content of the findings being discussed. Many of the issues explored in the discovery phase that deal with dysfunctional ways of operating will be acted out in this meeting. Being conscious of this will help you resist getting stuck, which can take many forms:

Having to rigorously defend the data against people who are supposed to learn from it,  
Finding yourself providing the energy for the next steps for an organization or group  
that you are not really a member of,  
Being expected to have all the answers, and  
Being in the position of providing solutions to highly complex problems in less than  
three minutes. Feel free to simply offer choices without having a strong stance on  
a particular action.

The way out of most stuck places is to put what is happening into words as it is happening: "I find myself having to defend this data," or "I keep hearing myself come up with next steps for your organization, and I am not even going to be around!" or "One of the norms I mentioned is that people express support with silence. Is that happening right now?" Be silent and let them respond.

The resistance you get to suggestions for next steps is valuable because it means you are on target. You shouldn't view it as a rejection or disinterest on the part of the client. It means that you're dealing with something that's important to the client, so you should move toward the resistance rather than away from it.

Remember that the response you get in any meeting will reenact all the problems that the organization has in solving other issues and managing its other business. The response to difficult issues may be a retreat into detail, a postponement of a decision to act, or a denial of problems. Whatever the response, you can interpret it as being the characteristic way the organization handles its decisions. It is important to name the response and give support to an organization in seeing what it is doing.



Also, as in all the other phases of consulting, you have to trust your own feelings in talking about implementation or planning. If you are feeling uneasy about something—confused, frustrated, or not listened to—or if you are feeling excited and positive and supportive, you should put your feelings into words as part of the model and methodology you offer the client.

To elaborate one more time, every meeting involves an affective dimension—feelings about the interaction itself. There’s a process going on between you—the consultant giving the recommendations or choices—and the client, who is hearing a statement of their situation. For example, suppose you are feeling repetitive and unsure about where to go next. There are two ways to deal with this. One is to try to speak with more certainty, more clarity. The second way is to simply say, “You know, as we’re talking here, I feel confused and uncertain where to go next.” You’re much more likely to get to the heart of the problems around responsibility and commitment and owning up to problems if you react and present your own feelings or nonjudgmental observations as the discussion is going on.

For a downloadable copy of Checklist #7, visit [www.flawlessconsulting.com](http://www.flawlessconsulting.com).

### **CHECKLIST #7: PLANNING A MEETING FOR ACTION**

Here are some more guidelines you can use to help you prepare for the meeting:

1. What do you want from the meeting? Understanding? Agreement? Action? Further work?
2. Structure the meeting so you have at least as much time for discussion as for presentation of results.
3. Review the wording of the “picture” to make it as nonevaluative and descriptive as possible.
4. Think of where you are likely to get resistance in the meeting. What questions might you ask to get the underlying concerns expressed directly?
5. Think about who might be missing from the meeting who has a high stake in the outcome.
6. How can you ask for feedback on how this consultation is going?



## When Group Members Are at Odds among Themselves

When you are reporting your findings and choices to a group of people, your task takes on an added dimension. If the group is not used to working together or works together poorly, they might take out their difficulties with each other on the consultant. You become an easy target when they cannot confront each other directly. The skill is not to let the meeting be set up as client versus consultant.

There are some ways you can counter that:

- *Treat the group as a collection of individuals.* Don't assume that everyone is in agreement, that they all support each other, and that they feel or think alike. One by one, ask each person what they want from the meeting. This question will surface differences and force the group to take responsibility for some of the difficulties that may arise. If they are not listening to each other, ask them, by name, to react to what another is saying. This takes some of the focus off you and puts it on the group, where it belongs. Give support at all times. When people are under stress and things are not going well for them, they need support, not more confrontation.
- *There is always going to be some segment of the group that came to argue and resist.* They will express this in the form of aggressive questions about the change or your data or the program. The ground rule is not to overinvest in the resistant people. Again, the questions deserve two good-faith responses, but you have to have some political sensitivity about where the power really is in the group and whose opinion is going to sway the group. Invest your energy in those people rather than in the most verbal or vocal people who are raising questions. You might say at some point, "Well, we've heard several questions from Bob and John. I don't know how the rest of you are feeling. Jean [if Jean is the boss], what do you feel about this?"
- *If your client gives quick compliance to a suggestion, beware.* Many people and teams handle conflict in either a passive or compliant way, and I would be very suspicious of that.

For a downloadable copy of Checklist #8, visit [www.flawlessconsulting.com](http://www.flawlessconsulting.com).



**CHECKLIST #8: REVIEWING THE MEETING FOR ACTION**

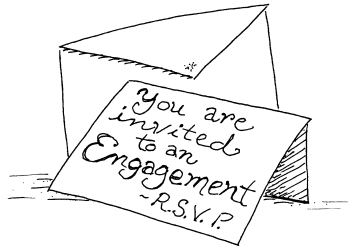
Here are some questions to ask yourself after a meeting for action. Answering them should help you to assess your own learning from each meeting and prepare for the next one.

1. What was the outcome?
2. What was the final understanding of the choices or possibilities? How did this shift as a result of the meeting?
3. What form did the resistance take?
4. How did you respond to the resistance?
  - Take it personally?
  - Give more explanation and data?
  - Seek underlying concerns about control and vulnerability?
5. Did you get stuck at any point?
6. What nonverbal messages did you notice?
7. What connections can you make between the way the meeting was managed and the way the technical or business problem is being managed?
8. What effect on your relationship with the client did this meeting have?



## PART 6

# Engagement and Implementation









## CHAPTER 19

# Implementation

**WHEN I WROTE** the first edition of this book, I devoted exactly two pages to implementation. Over the years, though, I have become increasingly aware of how many consulting efforts, including change management processes, have been aimed at doing the right thing but have resulted in little change. It is frustrating, to say the least, to contract well, develop an accurate picture of the current reality, give feedback, and make a good decision, and yet see few concrete results from the effort.

Implementation is, in theory, the point of the consultation, the fruit of our labor. Unfortunately, knowing what to do (the product of the discovery phase) and finding the right way to do it (the focus of implementation) are two different worlds. Consultants have traditionally given too much attention to analysis and recommendations and too little attention to the complexity of translating those answers into action.

Our mistake is treating implementation as a fundamentally rational process. We believe that logical, step-by-step problem-solving can bring the fulfillment of our plans. Our love of lists, milestones, and electronic calendar living is an example of this. If we can keep a list of what we need to do in one place, these things will get done. Although it is hard to argue against being organized, we tend to oversimplify what it takes to act on what we know to be true. At a personal level, it is the gap between having a vision and living it out. The more serious we are about being true to a vision, the more we realize it is our life work.

## Choosing Engagement over Installation

For an organization, shifting a way of thinking and a way of operating is even more difficult. Part of what makes implementation difficult is that we often treat change as



if it can be installed, driven, managed, and engineered. Installation plans rely heavily on having clear goals, a defined set of steps, and carefully specified objectives and measures—as if a blueprint can be developed for others to follow. This is the engineering mind at work, which works well for solving engineerable problems, but is incomplete in trying to have an impact on living systems. Change cannot be installed and engineered, and so it always takes longer and is more difficult than we imagined. The Positive Deviance people mentioned earlier understand this, and it is why they have been so successful. The same is true with whole-system approaches, betting on communal gatherings and insights to make a difference.

There are two aspects of implementation for consultants. One is the technical work using the expertise you have spent years developing. If you are a financial analyst, you begin introducing a system of controls. If you are an IT specialist, you redesign the software platform and applications to support it. If you are a training manager, you start the training program.

The second aspect of implementation is how to build support for the business or technical change you are planning. This is no easy task. Real changes require commitment, and part of your role is to help fire that spark. To get serious about building internal commitment requires dispelling some conventional beliefs that get in the way.

The engineer in us needs to be married to the thinking of the social architect and the skills of a community organizer. Any implementation requires not only a shift in what is tangible, such as methods or structure, but also a shift in what is intangible, such as relationships and personal faith and commitment. This chapter and the next are about ways to approach the intangibles. They focus on an essential aspect of implementation: bringing people together to create and plan how to make something work.

For the art of bringing people together we are using the term *engagement*. The ideas here are really about the means of engagement as an alternative or enhancement to strategies of installation. The steps offered are the elements of engagement. What I am proposing is that we become engaged. If you can find a better offer, take it.

## Deciding Doesn't Get It Done

Too many consulting projects result in cosmetic change: the thinking and rhetoric about the change are perfect, but the experience of people does not match the promise. One of the obstacles to change (I use *change* and *implementation* to mean essentially the same thing) is rooted in our belief in executive decisiveness. In our reverence for leaders and our stubborn belief in authority, we think that when the boss's mind is



made up, action will follow. This is rarely the case. No one person runs a business, no one person makes or delivers a product, and no one general ever fought a war.

It is interesting that managers understand their limitations better than consultants do. Managers know that the fact that they have made up their minds does not mean that decisions will be acted on. Every day they face the reality that many of their best intentions have little impact on the way work gets done. It is consultants who have a hard time accepting this. Any gathering of consultants will, at some point, complain that managers lack the courage, will, or persistence to follow through on their decisions and make sure that our recommendations are implemented.

## **The Limits of Installation**

The blueprint for traditional installation-style implementation is to:

Articulate a vision,  
Set standards for what is expected, and  
Define measures for the change.

Kept in perspective, all of these are legitimate elements of day-to-day life in every workplace. What interferes with implementation is that we misuse these tools. When we do, they become subtle forms of coercion rather than neutral and cooperative ways of managing and defining a future. We think we have to sell and induce support for a new way of operating. When consultants and managers apply centrally created vision, standards, and measures as primary tools to maintain control and make the world predictable, they interfere with the implementation effort.

What could be an opportunity for people to choose accountability by designing their own answers to these questions is lost. Instead of confronting people with their freedom, we invite their compliance. It is the mandated institutionalization of useful practices that takes the life out of most implementation efforts. Here are some major ways that efforts at implementation stumble over themselves.

## ***Transformation by Lamination***

We interfere with real change and service when we think that progress grows out of the vision of the leader, regardless of whether the leader is “us,” as consultant or trainer, or “them,” as managers. The myth is that if we can just make the message sufficiently



clear and compelling, if we can describe the burning platform with enough urgency and a bright tomorrow with enough zeal, change will occur. This leads to a great emphasis on communicating the vision and the business case for change.

I contributed to the problem when I wrote a chapter on vision in my book *The Empowered Manager*. It was about the power of vision and how transformation begins with imagining a different future. This became the most popular chapter in the book. I received hundreds of vision statements in the mail and in my travels. Most were compelling, and most were laminated in wallet-sized versions so people could carry them with them. Now they are digital. Where people still have an office to go to, vision statements hang on walls and are displayed in reception rooms, many signed by the management team. All have a common theme: building a lasting organization required the top to have a vision.

The problem here is twofold. First, we affirm, at the moment of lamination, that top management's vision is the one that counts. We all want to know what top management is seeking. Once we know this, we can all align ourselves and proceed to live it out. This has given rise to a cottage industry in vision articulation. We consultants begin each project helping the top define and express their vision. This could take days or months. Most often, it is actually a support person or consultant who writes the vision and brings it back to management for approval. But the product reflects management's thoughts, and gives it their stamp. This is fine for the managers who create the vision—fine, that is, if they had created it primarily for themselves and seek guidance for their own actions through it.

Unfortunately, the visions were usually designed for others. We believed that the top should decide the culture that the middle and bottom would live by. This is the mindset that takes the power out of vision, even though the middle and the bottom want to hear what the top has in mind. The fact that everyone wants to know the vision of the top does not make it meaningful.

Most frequently, when the organization hears the vision of the top, they are vaguely disappointed. The large meeting designed to mobilize energy actually drains it. It became clear to me after I started to read the four hundred or so vision statements I received: they all read the same. Every organization cares about customers, values teamwork, exists for shareholders or the community, believes in excellence in all they do, and is concerned about the environment. If we all threw our vision statements in a hat and then drew one out, we would think it was ours regardless of where it came from. I finally realized that it is the act of creating a vision that matters, not so much the content of what it was.



The second consequence of lamination was that management's vision could now withstand the ravages of wind and rain and dark of night. That is why we laminated it: so it would last forever. That management's vision should be permanent and enduring is the fallacy. Management vision is not only not the point, but it is not immortal. Everyone needs to struggle with the question of what kind of future we want to create, and that vision is something that is alive and open to change. Vision is more a dialogue than a declaration. It is an important conversation, a significant stretch of the imagination, and it needs to emerge as a collective work-in-progress from each unit. Once a vision is laminated, it loses its life.

In practical terms, if a group needs a clearer vision for themselves, by all means help them create one. But don't make any videos of leaders calling for transformation. Don't hold some large meeting for the purpose of clarifying the vision of top management. If implementation requires that people know the state of the union and where we are headed, don't have those in charge announce it. The option is to bring people together to define the state of this moment in history and to pool their knowledge of what the future might bring. But we are getting ahead of the story.

### ***We Need Higher Standards, and This Time We Mean Business***

There is a widespread belief that we have not set the standards high enough. This is most visible in education, where every state legislature thinks that it can improve public education by being tougher on standardized curriculums, performance standards, students, and teachers.

Of course, the belief that low standards are the problem is not confined to education. It invades all of our institutions. It is born of the belief that people will not set high standards for themselves—that they need an outside agent to motivate and inspire them. At heart, it is a fear-based strategy, where those who set the standards are the subject and those who must meet them are the object.

There is some validity to the idea that standards and performance are related. We do know that people will be responsive to the expectations others have for them. If a boss expects the team to perform well, it is more likely to happen. If a boss expects failure, that may happen also. There is a difference, though, between expectations between boss and subordinate, or teacher and student, and standard-setting.

To have high expectations of others is to have faith in them. It is an expression of optimism and hope in the capacities of another. It is an expression of the connection



between people and is experienced as support. Standard-setting, as it is most commonly used to trigger change, is born not of support but of doubt and demand.

To judge others to be performing poorly because of low standards is to hold them in contempt. It is a belief that they need our standard-setting intervention to wake them up and motivate them. It is an institutional act that depends on coercion. If we don't raise the bar, they will not jump higher. There is little care or connection in the strategy, and it therefore builds as much resistance as it was designed to overcome.

It is a myth that setting standards will increase accountability. What it most often creates is compliance. People may be forced to find a way to meet those standards, but the institution suffers in other, less measurable ways. Instead of a more accountable culture, we find more bureaucracy, more people working to rule, more caution, and less flexibility.

Bosses, of course, have a legitimate role in defining a playing field and specifying what outcomes the organization requires of each unit. But defining outcomes is different from standard-setting as a tactic in initiating change or implementing some recommendation. What corrupts the process is the belief that one group knows what is best for another. That is why these engineering and installation strategies fall short. The focus on standards is also very seductive for the consultant. After we have been through a contracting and discovery effort with a client manager, we want to be on their side and too easily align with that person's traditional ways of making things happen.

### ***People Need Fixing***

We need to avoid planning something in a huddle with our client that is supposed to change the behavior of others outside our circle. We are not here to fix people. Our task is to stay focused on the gifts and capacities of people in the room, and what they can do about their own actions. If managers believe in change targets for individuals, let them set them for themselves and live according to them for a while.

This keeps legitimacy in the consulting effort and in our relationship with the client. When we join with bosses to plan for the changes in their subordinates, we have been co-opted into the belief that the employees need to change and the managers are just fine. We then miss the opportunity to shift in a more fundamental way the beliefs about how change happens and accountability is created. Change and accountability occur when we live them, not preach them. The common instinct to begin implementation with clearer and higher standards gives way to the idea that standards or desired outcomes are a product of engagement, not the point.



## ***If We Can't Measure It, It Doesn't Matter***

One more way we interfere with implementation is through our attitude about measurement. We have turned measurement into a god. The question here is similar to the preceding questions. No argument with the need for measurement; it's the question of how central it should become and who should provide it. When we impose measurements system-wide, we have to be very careful that we really need and can make use of the measures that are collected.

Measuring the quantitative elements of work, of course, is essential. The simplest example of the legitimate need for common measures is common accounting practices. The economics of each unit in the organization need to be folded together to meet regulatory requirements, and so we know our economic viability. There is the need for common measures of product quality and customer service, and for many more measures that assess the success of the institution. We move on to soft ground, though, when we invite the economist in to develop common measures for how we are working together, what processes will create quality, and, in general, anything in the realm of how management and human systems operate. Every measurement of the human or qualitative dimension of work leaves more untested than it covers.

The belief that if we cannot measure something it does not exist treats the human system as if it were a mechanical one. The belief that people will do only what they are measured against is a narrow and cynical view of the human condition. When we attribute to measurement the capacity to create the behavior we want, we have moved into a simple cause-and-effect relationship and hold on to the belief that implementation and change can be engineered. With a human system, that is more fantasy than fact. Each of us wants feedback on how we are doing. But the feedback does not create the doing. Imposed measures on the qualitative aspect of work may actually get in the way of the doing.

We particularly dilute the value of measurement when we separate the people who evaluate from the people who do the work. Quality control used to be separated from those who did the work. It was a judging function and created alienation between the doers and the quality assessment. This has now changed, for the betterment of both the quality of the product and the quality of the relationships that surround the workplace.

We can learn from the quality movement that while there are useful tools for measuring, they need to be under the control of those doing the work and need to be kept in perspective as simply one part of making change. Much of what matters cannot be measured, and our consulting needs to reflect that.



## **Betting on Engagement**

Nothing here is an argument against vision, standards, or measurement. They are important elements of organizing human efforts. It is just that we have abused them when we make them coercive instruments of control. And then we compound the error. When they do not result in genuine change, we try harder to make them work instead of betting on other strategies. Trying harder, pressuring, and persuading have limited impact on changing a social system. And when they do help, they soon develop their own immune system.

A social system is a living system and not that amenable to linear or mechanical beliefs about organizations. Whenever management or consultants bet on definitions, inducements, measures, and standards, they unintentionally reinforce the bureaucratic mindset that we are trying to reduce. They are the tools of the engineer and the economist's mindset and basic assumptions. Engineering and economic strategies do not build commitment and accountability, despite their appealing face value.

What we have undervalued is the power of engagement as not just a concept or intention. The movements toward the learning organization, total quality, six sigma, and teamwork are in the direction of engagement, but with a few exceptions, they are rarely given the importance that they deserve. The next chapter explores engagement in the implementation process and offers some concrete examples for involving people in a way that increases the likelihood of a real, lasting alternative.



## CHAPTER 20

# The Structures of Engagement

**ONE POWERFUL SERVICE OF THE CONSULTANT** may be to raise clients' consciousness about the value of engagement in the discovery and implementation process. Engagement has power independent of the content of the recommendations. The most technical content or important business decision will not be acted on without a different interaction within the client system. If the quality of the interaction does not change, standards, measurement, or rewards will just be that and not lead to anything shifting. You can help leaders engage others in implementing decisions by following the same principles for building commitment that we explored in the process of contracting and discovery. To review briefly:

The contracting phase was based on:

- A deep understanding of the concerns underlying the presenting problem,
- The clear expression of wants in both directions,
- An exploration of concerns about control and vulnerability,
- Giving support, and
- Declaring what worked in this meeting.

The discovery phase emphasized:

- Treating each interaction as a learning event,
- Persistently asking what the client was doing to contribute to the problem, and
- Seeking language that gave clarity to reality without judging it.



Sustaining that same spirit when you are dealing with the client during implementation and action requires:

Designing each gathering to strengthen connections,  
Balancing between presentation and participation,  
Supporting dissent and the public expression of doubt,  
Placing real choice on the table,  
Initiating new conversations as a primary means for change, and  
Choosing a physical structure of the room that supports community and peer connection.

## **The Meeting Is the Message**

Implementation of any new strategy boils down to whether people at several levels are going to take responsibility for the success of the change and the institution. This is it. Period.

We can broadcast our intent to give people at the bottom more choice and involvement, but if the meeting that broadcasts this intent is not itself an example of the content of the broadcast, the promise has little legitimacy. The nature, tone, and structure of how we come together are the sampling devices people use to determine the credibility of the strategy.

This means each consulting event needs to be a sample of the way we wish the larger change to proceed. Each moment becomes an example of the destination. If you are holding a meeting to discuss a new set of measures for a telephone call center, for example, this meeting on measures needs to embody major principles of engagement such as putting real choice on the table and dealing publicly with difficult questions. We need to ask how we are doing, a measuring tool, even in the meeting on measures.

## **Eight Ways to Engage**

The structures of engagement look simple enough, but they are easier to list and to talk about than to practice. Here are eight practical ways for engaging people, regardless of the setting or the expectations they have on entering the room. Altogether these methods represent the key elements of engagement and increase the odds of flawless implementation, for they confront the emotional and relationship-building work that this phase requires.



### ***Open with Transparent Purpose and a Level Playing Field***

To open a conversation or gathering, describe the concerns that began the process, define where the change effort is at this moment, describe what the organization needs from us right now, and give some idea of the structure of this step. This creates the playing field and context for what follows.

Most of us are familiar with the need for this kind of information. The key is to tell a balanced story. This includes weaknesses and failures. Don't protect people from bad news in the name of protecting them from anxiety. Anxiety is the natural state, best handled in the light of day. The only caution is to keep it short and informal, with more from the heart than from the head. No PowerPoints. We want people to listen, not read.

What is not needed are upbeat motivational blessings from managers or important sponsors who will not be part of the whole session. To have an executive show up for the beginning, express commitment to the process, and then leave is oxymoronic. To say, "I care, I am committed, and I'm gone," does not play well.

### ***Contract for Expectations about Participation***

It amazes me how many new strategies or programs begin their implementation with a management/consultant lecture/presentation about goals, strategy, methods, and measures. I have watched a manager or consultant stand in front of the room for long periods of time—sometimes hours—stating vision, defining terms, giving the whole picture of what is to come. The structure of a meeting telegraphs our intention for the future and yet we keep operating out of habit rather than changing the technology to better meet our purpose. We base our meetings on the thought that when someone is confused or anxious about what we say, our response should be to repeat it again louder, as if turning up the volume will solve the confusion.

As participants, we go to meetings expecting something to happen to us. We show up as consumers. We are programmed for entertainment and wonder how good a meeting *they* are going to run. The forms we use to evaluate a meeting ask questions about its leaders: Were they prepared? Were their objectives clear and well met? What was the quality of the visual aids? How many evaluation forms have you filled out that asked you about your contribution to the meeting? Meeting leaders always say, "What we get out of the meeting is up to all of us." Most often we don't believe it—and few really act on it.



I was in a bar once and the entertainers began by saying, “We are the Southern County Rounders . . . and you are the audience.” I thought that they understood something profound about the relationship between them up front and us in the cheap seats. By calling us out, they declared that we, the audience, had a job to do also: we had to join in creating the performance.

### **Try this**

Try asking questions like these, and note the last one:

- How valuable an experience do you plan to have in this session or this effort—not what kind of experience you want, but what kind of value do you plan to have?
- How engaged and active do you plan to be?
- How much risk are you willing to take?
- How invested are you in the quality of the experience of those around you? What is your level of concern about the well-being of the larger group?

Have participants rate these questions on a five-point scale: 1 low, 5 high. Then break into groups of three to share their answers with each other. Ask them not to rate high for the sake of being a good team player. Give them 15 minutes.

You may be thinking that the importance of the simple balance between presentation and participation is being overstated. It has more meaning than we have realized. As straightforward as the concept is, most of the times when we come together, we put great energy on presentation and attend to participation as an afterthought. Plus, question-and-answer is not engagement. It is clarifying at best, persuasion too often.

The passive contract between leader and participant needs to be renegotiated early and dramatically. When this is designed into the time, something always changes. There is more life in the room. People ask more questions. Some people get irritated. Some would rather keep talking to their neighbor than return to the speaker. All are signs of life.

How to do this is begun in what follows and outlined in more detail on the website.

Visit [www.flawlessconsulting.com](http://www.flawlessconsulting.com) for more detail on questions to ask to renegotiate expectations about participation.



## ***Rearrange the Room***

The shape of the meeting room and how we arrange the chairs shouts the message of our intentions. If we place participants in a circle, use a round table if tables are truly necessary, and do not have a clear front or podium, we make the point from the start that participation among peers is important. You may ask: Why make such a big thing out of a small activity like rearranging the room? The reason is that these particular activities carry the message about the change in vision and culture that we have in mind. We are talking about them here as means of engagement, but they could easily be called the means of transformation or a change in culture. If we can change the room, and the way we inhabit it, we can also change the institution and the way we inhabit it.

The important point here is that there is not a right structure. There is no right way to arrange a room. Tables or not. Circle or square, or lined up like a chapel. Centralization or decentralization, functional or matrix or geographical organization. Is the leader at the front, behind a podium, on a stage, sitting in a circle? They all can work.

What matters is that everyone is engaged in adapting the structure to the task at hand. When we know that each of us can make the shifts to fit our own purpose and still serve the purpose of the larger organization, the world has shifted. We no longer need to live by the rules of the economist and engineer. We become the architects, designers, and authors of the institution in which we live. We have chosen to be accountable for the institution and no longer have to be held bound to it. This meeting is an example that there's "something happening here."

Visit [www.flawlessconsulting.com](http://www.flawlessconsulting.com) for more on the rationale for caring about the spaces in which we meet and things to do to make rearranging the room a metaphor for the change we have in mind.

## ***Create a Platform for Openness and Doubt***

Freedom of speech and the right to assembly are constitutional guarantees. What is true for the streets, however, is less true for the offices and meeting rooms and technologies of our institutions. Part of our task as consultants is to bring more open conversations into organizational life. In practical terms, this means creating assemblies where there is an opportunity for all voices and points of view to be heard. Reality in



the words of the audience becomes as important as the reality spoken from leaders—perhaps more important. Both are needed to talk honestly about failure and uncertainty.

People do voice their doubts and tell their version in organizations; it is just that they do it in private: in restrooms, at water-coolers, over a meal or a drink. If honest conversation stays private, the public conversations will be unreal and ultimately discouraging. The same is true in a large group meeting. If all the real discussions take place only as side events, little faith will be built in the larger community.

The point: the right distribution of power and accountability happens when honest conversations take place in public settings. There is a political power in having a wide range of viewpoints heard by everybody in the room, in meetings virtual or live, groups of 6 or 20, and in larger group assemblies. If we believe the redistribution of power is critical to a shift in accountability, the shift will begin when the public conversations shift.

The key conversation that needs to go public is about people's doubts and reservations. If doubt and even cynicism cannot be publicly expressed, then internal commitment cannot be offered freely. Some doubts give guidance for improvement; others don't. The engineer in us wants to answer every doubt. When you are building a bridge or airplane, you need to know that all the doubts and questions have been answered. Human systems are not so orderly, and many doubts go unanswered. In creating high engagement, it is the expression of doubt that counts, not its resolution. We cannot construct a plan that eliminates all doubts, but we can always acknowledge them. We can acknowledge cynicism and make room for it without being paralyzed by it. The fact that the most alienated people in the organization are given a platform to speak does more to build commitment from those watching the conversation than any compelling presentation or financial incentive program ever can.

### **Try this**

Try asking questions like these to get things started:

- What doubts and reservations do you have about what is on the table?
- What personal impact will the change have on me/us?
- What have we said “yes” to that we no longer think will work?
- What is the “no” we have been postponing?

People will also not know whether they are getting a straight story until they have joined in the discussion. Too often in the effort to sell a strategy, problems are softened and positioned to promote confidence and win support. People's trust in management



comes down not so much to whether management is right, but to whether it is willing to tell the whole and vulnerable story.

The whole story expressed in small or large group settings, spoken in public, is too rare a commodity in most institutions. The success of an implementation strategy will depend on the quality of the conversation that begins it. And the more public the setting is, the more powerful is the impact.

Go to [www.flawlessconsulting.com](http://www.flawlessconsulting.com) for more on the practice of creating a platform for truth and doubt.

### ***Ask “What Do We Want to Create Together?”***

There is no more profound question than this one, and none more difficult to answer in any meaningful way. It is the question on which real accountability hinges. There are two parts to the question: the question of creation and the question of together.

1. *Create?* “Do we want to create?” is the dangerous part of the question. If I answer “yes,” I am no longer reacting to what has been handed to me. I am now beginning to define a future that ultimately I will be responsible for. When we decide that we want to create, we are emotionally joining our workplace in defining its future and in that we are producing an alternative to the patriarchal part of the culture and our own habits. This may be why, when we ask people to define their vision, the first try is quite predictable: More. Better. Faster. Win. When the question is: “What do we want to create?” the demand is for an answer that is unique to this group. That is the work: to ask each group to construct a unique future that is right for their function. This is another way we confront people with their freedom: asking them what they want to create forces the issue, even if the response may initially be pale.
2. *Together?* The second part of the question, “Do we want to create something together?” is also difficult to answer. We may be used to creating something on our own or in our unit, but when you ask, in effect, “What can we create together that we cannot create alone?” you are asking for another level of collaboration. Most of the time when I have asked groups what they can create together, they return with a list of cooperative actions that each group can do alone and simply want others to support. Not a bad thing. But not the point.



To create something together, we have to cross boundaries and possibly yield territory. Most change efforts and implementation steps require this, and it is hard to do with any depth. This question opens us to the possibility and confronts us with the reluctance of attending to the larger institution first and our own unit second.

For a process and tip on asking “What do we want to create together?” visit [www.flawlessconsulting.com](http://www.flawlessconsulting.com).

### ***Create a New Conversation***

A change in action is preceded by a change in the conversation.\* Predictable conversations lead to old actions. The challenge is to have a task-related conversation that people have not had before. Holding on to the old conversation, the old way of naming problems or describing possibilities, is a way of seeking safety and maintaining control.

Traditional conversations are a way of holding to a position that we know we can defend. We want people to take positions that they cannot defend. Then we know we are in new territory. Plus, optimism is born the moment we are surprised by what we say or what we hear.

For more on the telltale signs and costs of continuing old conversations, plus an activity for creating a new conversation, visit [www.flawlessconsulting.com](http://www.flawlessconsulting.com).

The real cost of our habitual conversations is the cynicism they breed. It's not that the questions they raise have not been answered. They are about problems, targets, and blueprints. Rather, it is the staleness of the discussion that drains energy. Old conversations become a refuge, a way for us to find safety. Every question in this book has this point in mind. Each question has embedded in it an invitation to those answering to be agents of the future. Players. Activists. Doubters. People with wants. Speakers of vulnerability and gifts.

If changing the conversation does nothing else, it gives hope that each time we come together, we have the capacity to transform our experience. This is how culture

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\*Joel Henning was a friend and teacher of mine in understanding that you change the culture by changing the conversation.



changes in the moment, and if we do it often enough, we learn more, risk more, and move more quickly. Change and its cousins, surprise and unrest, are always within our reach. They are just waiting for us to design them into existence.

### ***Choose Commitment and Accountability***

We build capacity when commitment and accountability are chosen, not driven. In society today, we have lost faith in our willingness to choose to be accountable. Holding others accountable is what is common in the workplace and the larger culture.

The alternative is to have faith that there are conditions in which people want to be accountable: they want to set high goals, care for the well-being of the larger organization, and know how they are doing. One of those conditions is a crisis. In a crisis the rules are suspended, status and self-interest are put aside, and the task and purpose override habit. The challenge is to find the same willingness without a crisis.

There are two conditions of accountability that support high-commitment implementation strategies. The first is that we need to be accountable to our peers first and our boss next. The second is that we need to commit without negotiation, barter, or expectation of personal gain. We commit for the sake of collective outcomes.

**Peer Accountability** There is a power among peers that bosses can never approach. For one thing, we have a lifetime of practice in managing bosses. It begins with our parents. As children, we may have felt that our parents were in charge, but once we become parents, we know that was not true. Parents can give orders and administer consequences, but at the end of the day, the children decide when to clean their room or put the dishes away. We work hard at managing, and at times manipulating, those who have power over us. Over the years we become maze bright. We learn how to handle our parents, teachers, and finally bosses, so that we can do what we want and not have to pay a price for it. When our bosses are upset with us, we have learned how to say, “Thank you for the feedback,” as a way of defending against their disappointment and not really having to change.

Our peers, however, are less likely to tolerate this sort of maneuvering. They see us more clearly, and they are around more, so they are harder to manipulate. This is one reason that being accountable to peers is a demanding proposition. Also, our interdependence rests with our peers, not our boss. It is their work that is accelerated when we do well and made difficult when we do poorly. They have to pick up the slack and



operationally live with our mistakes. Peers are the ones we are functionally accountable to, no matter who conducts our performance review.

We already recognize this interdependence in our attention to teams, team building, and team pay schemes. The next step is to initiate more formal peer conversations about commitments and consequences. We want to adhere to the principle that accountability needs to be a voluntary act, and this has more power with peers.

Peer accountability also means that it is up to peers to speak for the well-being of the organization. It is not just the bosses' function. Peers need to tell us whether we have committed enough to meet the promises of the unit and larger system. This requirement to think of the interests of the whole system has as much impact on the peers who are listening to the commitments as on the person who is making them.

**Commitment without Barter** A second element of implementation by consent is to explore what commitment and promise really mean. We are very much a negotiating culture. We like to bargain for goods and have the concept of *quid pro quo* deeply embedded in our relationships. The ideas about contracting outlined earlier in this book are a good example. There is an important distinction, though, between living up to our contractual agreements and making an emotional or personal commitment.

A personal commitment means that we agree to do something that is not conditional on the response of someone else. That is why the word *promise* is so appropriate. If we make our commitments conditional on the response from another, they are really not commitments; they are contracts or some other form of barter. They become conditional agreements that can be withdrawn if the other side does not deliver. Throughout the flawless consulting process, we have been seeking the internal commitment required to get past the rhetoric and cosmetic change that surround us.

A commitment is a promise or a pledge to do something. Even in its dictionary definition, there is no mention of anything the person making the pledge receives; it is only about the choice to be made.

### **Try this**

Ask people to answer these questions:

- What promise am I willing to make to this enterprise with no expectation of return?
- What price am I willing to pay for the success of the whole effort?
- What is the promise or commitment I am unwilling to make at this moment?



If we commit in this spirit, the discussion about how the top needs to change, how other departments and people stand in the way, how systems and practices don't support the change—all that disappears. At the moment of commitment, the institution becomes ours to create, and in that act of committing, we can find our freedom with all of its risks. We now proceed on our own and with others we have chosen to join. Something has shifted for us and the institution.

There will still be obstacles and disappointments, but they will not breed cynicism, for we were not choosing on the basis of another's action. If there is an affirmation or loss of faith, it will not be in others but in ourselves, which we can do something about, after a period of irritation and complaint.

Visit [www.flawlessconsulting.com](http://www.flawlessconsulting.com) for an activity that confronts and cements people's will to proceed.

### ***Focus on Gifts***

There is a need to bring closure to each meeting that acknowledges the effort and care brought into the room. One good way to finish is to focus on the gifts and value each participant brought to the proceedings. We tell others what gifts we have received from them in this gathering. We live in a world that is much more interested in our weaknesses and deficiencies than in our strengths and gifts. This is so common that we have even come to believe that it is useful. Not so.

If negative feedback were so useful, we would have it together by now, and we don't. The primary impact of focusing on weaknesses is that it breeds self-doubt and makes us easier to control. That is why it is so compelling and popular. We fear that if everyone really understood their strength and value, the system might not hold together. Everyone might exploit their free agency, become too expensive, and hit the road—or stay and become unbearable. If they stayed, what would they demand? And as employees, we are so used to looking at our weaknesses that it has become a comfort to us.

As a result, we are blind to and embarrassed by our gifts, our capacity to forgive ourselves, our affirmation of the value we bring. Despite our shyness and the discomfort we feel in talking about gifts, transformation—sustainable change—comes more quickly from capitalizing on our strengths. The conversation of gifts is how this happens. This is true for an organization as well as for an individual.



**Try this**

To create space for a discussion of what gifts have been exchanged in the meeting, ask questions like these:

- What gift have you received from another in this room? Tell the person in specific terms.
- What has someone in this meeting done today that has touched you or moved you or been of value to you?
- In what way did a particular person engage you in a way that had meaning?
- If someone says something nice to you, just say, “Thank you, I like hearing that.” Period.

Go to [www.flawlessconsulting.com](http://www.flawlessconsulting.com) for an activity to use to stimulate a new conversation to close a meeting in a way that acknowledges the gifts and values brought into the room.

**The Point**

These structures and techniques are both a methodology and a metaphor for a more universal possibility. Each symbolizes the larger intent and in that way has more meaning than its momentary effect. Implementation is not a universal, clear path stretched out before us. It is more complex than the phases of contracting and discovery, for it is more particular to each situation. It is more emergent than amenable to a blueprint. The structures here are more a menu, not the meal. A starting point more than a series of steps to follow, and each is an example of how to treat engagement as the central issue in implementation. We all wish for a simpler path, as if decision were followed immediately by action, so we could see corrective action taken and then measured. This rational problem-solving conception of how ideas get embodied into a living system presents a world that does not exist.

People choose to commit to a decision based on emotion, feelings, intuition, trust, and faith. These become the playing field for change. Even the most concrete changes—such as restructuring, using a new information system, cutting costs—happen when individuals decide to support the recommendations and decisions



and make the adjustments that are required at every step along the way. The decision to support change is not just based on logic and reason; we need to help our clients deal with attitudes and feelings as well. That is at the core of consultation as described in this book.\*

At the risk of repetition, leadership behavior is not as vital as membership behavior. It is difficult for a patriarchal society such as ours to accept this reality. We tenaciously hold on to the belief that leaders can induce others to act. Leaders can no more induce action on the part of their followers than consultants can induce action on the part of their clients.

I have talked throughout this book about how to bring responsibility and accountability into the interaction between ourselves and our client. The skills of expressing our wants, dealing with resistance, and navigating the contracting meeting are all ways of building responsibility. Creating high interaction among your clients is how to bring responsibility into the implementation phase.

If the goal is to build internal commitment, the means is to create connection, tell it all, have new conversations in habitable spaces, and finally offer people a choice over how they do business. The choice we give people is critical and argues against our wish to package the future. Effective implementation most often entails the redistribution of power. And this is much more subtle than redoing the matrix describing which people decide who advises, who offers input, at each point in the work process. A chart of decision rules does not shift power; it restrains it.

The redistribution of power needs to be present in how we live, not just in how we decide. That is the point of these structures.

For downloadable copies of Checklists #9 and #10 visit [www.flawlessconsulting.com](http://www.flawlessconsulting.com)

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\*I acknowledge how much I have learned about engagement from colleagues, who were part of the School for Managing and Leading Change. In particular, Dick Axelrod and the late Kathie Dannemiller understood engagement long before I took it seriously. They have been part of the whole world of large-group methodology. Dick created The Conference Model with Emily Axelrod, and Kathie was a mentor for all in the realm of real-time, high-interaction strategic change. See also in the Further Reading section the works of Juanita Brown and Harrison Owen. They all are still unrecognized for the methodologies they imagined.



**CHECKLIST #9: PREPARING FOR IMPLEMENTATION**

Here are some reminders on working the elements of engagement into a gathering during the implementation phase or any time in the consulting process.

1. What will you do during each gathering to tilt the balance away from presentation and more toward participation?
2. How are you planning to provide the space for people to voice their concerns and opinions? What will you do to promote openness and telling the truth?
3. Consider how you may be able to help define choices for the client. How could you help open opportunities for real choice at many levels of the organization? How can you structure time for serious dialogue on how things will change?
4. What will you do to help people get unstuck from the same old conversations and begin new ones about the hopes and doubts the proposed change generates?
5. How will you bring the power of place into your design for each event?

**CHECKLIST #10: REVIEWING AN IMPLEMENTATION EVENT**

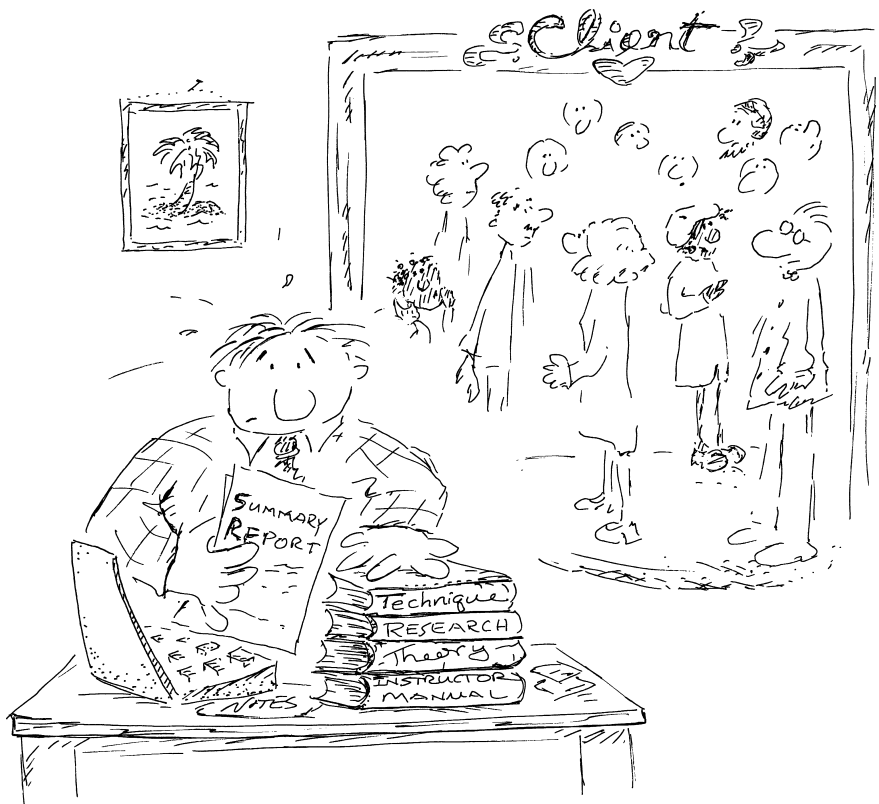
Here are some questions to ask yourself after any meeting. Use them to assess your own learning from the meeting and to prepare for the next one.

1. Did the meeting produce energy in the participants or drain energy?
2. How was it alike or different from what you expected?
3. How did people choose to engage in the process? How active were they? What kind of risk taking did you observe?
4. If you rearranged the room, what difference did this make?
5. What doubts and reservations were expressed? How was the discussion handled?  
A rush to agreement? A search for solutions? Was it possible for the group to postpone decision making? Anyone spend a lot of time explaining or defending themselves? How did you handle that?
6. How did the group determine what they wanted to create together?
7. What did people do to make new conversations occur? How did you help? What did they learn?
8. What promises were people willing to make? Were they enough?
9. What did you do to end the meeting so that each participant's effort and contributions were acknowledged?
10. What effect on your relationship with the client did this meeting have?



## PART 7

# Extension, Recycle, or Termination









# Transformation Will Not Be Televised, Livestreamed, or Managed

**I**N A SENSE, THE JOB OF CONSULTING is to be a learning architect. At our best, we design social settings that lead to insight, resolution of differences, change and transformation, which is a shift in story that opens the portal to a different future. What follows are some ideas that support conditions under which learning and transformation are more likely to happen. None is fail-safe; each contains elements of adventure, and all flow against the stream of the conventional wisdom and the dominant culture. If we think we can manage change, then we make it predictable, which is making the world a little better, but not unique. Imagining an alternative story or narrative is what makes our work most powerful. And useful.

## Choosing Learning over Teaching

While we usually claim that we are in the business of helping our clients learn, most traditional educational and consulting efforts are more about teaching than learning. If you ask who is really learning at any meeting, communication session, or training event, the answer is usually, “The person in charge.”

The dominant models for learning come from our educational system. If you look at most of our classrooms, the teacher stands in front, and students line up behind or around tables, facing the front. The agenda, the objectives, and the method of learning



are all specified by the teacher or the state legislature. The teacher is in effect the supervisor of learning. Sometimes legislated by a political chamber, enforced by standardized testing. This is the world that Ward Mailliard, in Chapter 15, is chipping away at. Similarly in consulting, the consultant is expected to be the change manager, even the change agent. The task of the client is to absorb what the consultant has to offer.

The classroom or consulting project run on this model is based on the need for predictability and control. Our need is to make the teacher or consultant or leader central to the learning. It is partly a question of pedagogy and our desire to prescribe for others what we wish them to do. But we are not the only ones lured into an all-eyes-front approach. This classroom or meeting model is also demanded by the learners. If you decide to invite clients to define the agenda, create the learning process, and evaluate their own performance, you will probably face a mild revolt. Clients and employees are so conditioned to be passive in the teaching-and-learning process that given the choice to manage their own learning, they will pass and turn the floor back to the consultant. Employees are so conditioned to be who the leaders are looking for, they too will pass and turn the floor back to the consultant.

The result is that the teacher/consultant/leader conspires with the participant or client or employee to keep the teacher/consultant/leader central and the student/client/employee reactive. And one effect is that too often the consultant, the one standing, or the one on speaker view on Zoom, the one sharing content, is the one who learns the most. Some of this is inevitable, for when we are forced to explain ourselves or teach others, we invest in the subject matter in a way that the client is not required to do. But some of it comes from our need to control what is presented and to specify what is learned and accepted. The symbol of this for me is the way we do much of our training. We have a passion for modeling videos in training, with predictable outcomes for participants. We promise a right way, make the way explicit by headlining the milestones and learning points, and then declare that the outcomes are predictable from the outset. We call it “good planning.” Good instructional design. Good asynchronous learning.

The cost is that we rarely see people engage their full capacity to learn. Just as Tim Gallwey, author and creator of the Inner Game method of learning, has suggested, in most training and instruction, there is a great deal of teaching and very little learning. In teacher-centered formats, the real learner is the trainer, and the participant is engaged in a sophisticated form of imitation and absorption.

The real learning is in the act of creating the online course, the modeling tape, the headlined points, the lesson plan. It is in the struggle to create that we find value. It is



in the effort to understand and create ideas and practices that the learning resides. The container for that teaching, the participant, often leaves the session little changed. We know this, which is why we talk so much about measurement. The talk is an expression of our anxiety about the relevance of the process.

## All Learning Is Social

To bring value to the participant or the client, we need to design our efforts to support learning at the expense of teaching. This means we need to build elements of surprise, discovery, and not knowing into our interaction with clients. Perhaps “not knowing” is a core leadership stance.

Mostly we need to design for peer interaction. We need to allow risk in the room. Provide questions that are ambiguous and personal. Raise the stakes, engage in caring confrontation, offer strong support, and ensure affirmation of what each of us knows. These are what create learning.

Packaging an answer, putting it online, as we do with so many of our ideas and programs, interferes with learning. Granted, packaged consultation or training is faster, more digestible, more visible and predictable, and therefore more salable; it is a good short-term business strategy. *If high-control, predetermined thinking is the client's problem, we cannot fix it with high-control, predetermined answers.*

To summarize: since learning and change are truly our intent, a slower approach and more partnering are required. We have to value questions over answers, tension over certainty, and capacities and gifts over needs and deficiencies. We have to ask questions that invite connection and raise the possibility of living into a different future rather than problem-solving the past, such as:

- Why is it important for you to be here today?
- What is the crossroads where you find yourself at this stage of the project we are engaged in?
- What can we create together that we cannot create alone?

## We Are Responsible for Each Other's Learning

The notion that every person's learning is every person's business is a radical thought. Why? Because we have such a history of competition that it has become the air we breathe. In our first exposure to institutional life, at school, our success came at the



expense of others. I needed to get a D so someone else could get an A. If I got the A, then it needed to be balanced by another's failure. Being a B student, I might have thanked the low performers for making my B more accessible. If you don't believe this, think what would happen if a teacher gave all A's. The teacher would have a problem. What happens if a boss thinks everyone is an outstanding performer? Think again, boss.

It always surprises me when I hear managers speak for the well-being of the whole and then see them participate in fostering competition among the parts. The challenge of organizational life is to connect people in common effort. Understanding my interdependence with all others connects me to the whole. And when each is responsible for the learning of the whole, then each shares a deeper sense of purpose with all members. Accepting this challenge demands cooperation and a willingness to acknowledge our connectedness. It is no small feat, but worth trying, for it is a significant way to ensure lasting learning. It begins with questions that have the capacity to shift the ownership of the room. Three examples:

- To what extent are you invested in the well-being of the whole?
- How participative do you plan to be?
- How much risk do you plan to take?

If our goal as consultants is learning and change, we need to act as if all are responsible for it. This simple shift in thinking leads us to be more inclusive and to see that learning needs to come from all directions. If we are working in systems that breathe competition, we may not be able to change that, but at a minimum, we can refuse to reinforce it.

## **Nothing to Wait For**

*Every moment needs to be an example of the future we want to create.* This is a tricky and potentially very powerful idea. In every encounter with the client and with each other, we hear concern about what will happen tomorrow. We rarely end a meeting without someone expressing doubts about whether their agreements will last and their optimism will endure. We can't leave if we don't have a list. In the first hour of our training sessions, someone will ask whether the world will be any different when we leave the session.

If we want to see change, we had better not wait to leave this session for it to happen. How can we have hope in tomorrow if today is not different? Each moment has



to carry within it an element of the destination. This is why the way we come together is so important. It offers hope—at this minute—about how the future might look. It leads us to give great attention to how we design this moment, this meeting, this virtual gathering.

The moment also instructs us in methods. If we learn to watch what is happening now, this reflection will tell us what works and what doesn't. As a discovery method, it is understanding the universe in a grain of sand. It is understanding the organizational culture in the nature of this meeting or conversation. If you see nothing new happening, either you are not watching or maybe there is “no thing” happening. To witness the absence of life, or action, or dialogue is as descriptive of a system as seeing the presence of what we came to create. If we would trust the moment, we would learn the power of designing, in this moment, the way we want to be together in the future.

In this idea, elusive as it is, we can see that we can implement the future without having to wait for it. How long does change take? Well, are we ready to begin it at this moment? Want to bring trust, honesty, more or less structure, cooperation between units, clearer focus, alignment into the organization? Every meeting, contact point, Zoom, or call is the time to begin. Our action plan includes what we do in the next hour. It is designed every time to build stronger connection. This meeting becomes the tablet on which the future is written. Each intention of cultural change needs to find expression in the present, or it loses its credibility.

The challenge is to frame every conversation with questions that encourage each person, in the room or virtual, to act as co-creators, partners, agents in how we create the future. How we implement a process or program. How the culture shifts to one of greater collective accountability. Again, sorry for the repetition: it is an essential element of changing habits.

At the center of this reframing effort is to look for conversational threads that matter. A key one is to legitimize doubt and dissent. Some examples are to have people answer questions like these. If there are more than five people in the conversation, answer them in small groups of three:

- What doubts or reservations do you have?
- What have you said “yes” to that you no longer really mean?
- What forgiveness are you withholding?
- What “no” are you postponing?



We encourage listeners to not give advice. To not have an opinion. Simply to be curious. Ask each other: Why does that matter to you? The moment fails us when we think we know what is best for someone else.

Again, we also fail to move the action forward when our conversation is about those not in this conversation. Those “someone else’s” cannot be changed in the moment if they are not in the room, not with us. If whoever is in the room are always the wrong people, it produces futility.

Treating this moment as an example of what we seek in the future requires us to forsake the past, to let go of our guilt or resentment and our stories about others. Victims do not do well in the moment, and we have all been wounded. We create too little space in organizational life for forgiveness—of ourselves and others. I have seen few learning exercises that are about forgiveness. Maybe this is one of the reasons we are so focused on weaknesses; they remind us of our unfinished business with our own history. If we have not forgiven the past, we will keep trying to fix it. Changing this moment, giving it importance, honoring it as a prediction of the future may be the way to heal the wounds and urge us into an alternative future.

## **If Change Is Necessary, Who Goes First?**

All change, transformation, and hope are self-inflicted. Change faces us with human questions, and dealing with them is dependent on a certain kind of integrity and willingness to participate in what we have chosen for the larger system. We colonize each other when we define others as the problem. And the higher in the institution we go, the more we are cut off from our own need to change.

When we run an organization or achieve real success, we begin to think of ourselves as a finished product. The institution expects so much, and the employees project so strongly on its management, that people at the top begin to believe their own press. They begin to think there is no room for them not to know, and they too each take the stance of certainty. When this occurs, faith is weakened. They become the godfather, and their lot is to dispense justice to others, not to be the ones who strive for justice within themselves.

If you look at the great leaders through history, you see a consciousness of their own limitations that was essential to their greatness. From Confucius, Buddha, and Christ, to Lincoln, Gandhi, and Martin Luther King Jr.—all walked in the wilderness and touched the lives of others because of their presence more than their position.



They became archetypes for the right use of power, and one source of their power was their own humility.

Power that is used to distance ourselves from our prescriptions is power abused. In seeking a partnership with school administrators and communities, Robert Chase, past president of the National Education Association, often has said that the union has to be the one to blink first. It is an observation that we would be wise to take to heart. It would make us credible and offer an antidote to the patriarchy embedded in our strategies of change.

But don't think that leaders are alone in thinking others should be the ones to change. The love of patriarchy is as strong in employees as in management. As consultants, we once thought that as soon as management changed, employees would follow. Not necessarily so. Employees create their relationship with bosses. When we, through our projections, create high-control bosses, we give ourselves permission to be entitled, and entitlement means that we are not the problem. Something is due us, and we owe nothing. We hold to the safety of our dependency, just as the boss does, and each of us thinks the other needs to be fixed.

## **The Final Question Is One of Faith**

All of these notions trust that there is a movement toward learning that has its own energy and own intention. The world will provide the events that will force movement. Life provides the disturbance. We do not have to induce change, drive it, or guide it. All we have to do is join it. The consultant is as much a learner as any client. We, in fact, are often more changed by our consultation than the client, and this is as it should be.

To surrender to the change that is already in motion, in almost every case, flawless consulting requires courage. We constantly are confronted with the question: "If this is my purpose, what courage is required of me at this moment?"

Our wish, always, is to find a safe path. Unfortunately, all the safe paths have been taken. Our search for a way to get what we want that seems safer at the moment takes several forms.

- *We have a religious belief in rationality and data.* There is a bit of an engineer in all of us that worships facts, consistency, rules, and predictability. If you can't measure it, it doesn't exist. What you measure is what you manage and what you get. We take refuge in the belief that being right is enough. Attempting to influence others via facts, data, and logical argument is our strategy of preference.



- *We choose imitation as a safe path.* Imitation is the belief that if we strategically design our actions in a way that mirrors what seems to work elsewhere and above, it will give us the future we want. We think that if we use common language, adhere to company norms, merge with the culture, and look in every respect like we belong here, we will get the resources we need to get the job done. We hire consultants to tell us what others are doing and where our survey results compare with industry norms. We look for proof of concept, role models, and methods that have worked in other organizations. These efforts to fit in are not enough and are a form of resistance against having to invent our own future to achieve our goals. A warning: research in General Electric years ago found that the most effective supervisors were the ones who had given up on their chances of being promoted.

It is interesting that so many employees, given a choice, would choose not to come into the workplace. The pandemic gave many a sense of freedom from being watched. Liberty from the need to comply. The possibility of constructing our own days. No small thing.

If our primary commitment is to contribute, be of service to our clients, treat people well, and maintain our integrity, then we are doomed to a course of adventure, uncertainty, and risk. In fact, the very obstacles we fear are there to help us discover our own integrity. It is only when we push kindly against others and they resist that we really know where we stand. This is not telling truth to power. It is not finding an outlet for our anger or disappointment. It is not about self-expression for its own sake. It is simply finding the words that lead to a shared ownership for the situation we are in.

Precipitating the conversations explored in this book opens us to one final list (we will talk about my love of lists some other time):

- *It allows us to stop wasting energy.* We give up our adapting, compromising, positioning ways of coping.
- *It helps us feel less crazy.* Instead of pressuring ourselves to do better, we realize there is something going on here that is deeper and is a shared responsibility.
- *It strengthens us.* Facing reality and acting with courage is a way of valuing ourselves. We know at such moments that our survival is ultimately in our own hands, and we decide not to let the culture we are in distract us.
- *It enhances our chances of getting support for our recommendations and knowing we are not alone.* When we act in personally powerful ways, we communicate to others a humanity and strength that is reassuring to them.



What increases the chances of our clients acting on our recommendations is to be specific about what needs to be said to those who need to hear it. It is true that no one really likes to hear bad news; when we do hear it, our first question is to ask who is at fault. But the fact that we have raised the tension level and put ourselves in an awkward situation is no excuse not to go ahead with our authentic statements.

Flawless consulting calls for authentic statements that name what we see, identify our part in it, and state what we want from others to make things work. The crucial step with others at work is to exchange our wants. In personal relationships, the essence is to exchange feelings, but in consulting flawlessly our most productive moments are when we simply say, “Here is what I want from you. What do you want from me?” Simple conversations using six-year-olds as role models.

In the end, it is our authenticity, the way we manage ourselves, and our connection to our clients that is our methodology, our marketing strategy, and the fruit of our labor. The fact that we show up with a briefcase, a résumé, and a conceptual framework is more a function of habit than necessity. It will be enough if we simply show up. This requires an act of faith. And that may be at the heart of the matter.

“Questions are fateful. They determine destinations. They are the chamber through which destiny calls.”

—*Godwin Hlatshwayo*







## ONLINE APPENDIX

# Handy Checklists You Can Use

**N**OW THAT YOU have finished reading this book, you have a good grasp of consulting concepts and skills. These ideas and techniques offer a methodical, sequential structure for the preliminary events to heighten the probability of successful action. You also have journeyed through the choices in the discovery phase, all designed to help clients fulfill their intentions.

The checklists in the online appendix will be useful to you as a continuing reference on how to do consulting. Suppose you have an appointment to see a prospective client and want to quickly refresh your understanding of what to do in contracting. Turn to the section on contracting there, and use it as an outline of what to cover in your meeting and what to pay attention to.

The appendix at [www.flawlessconsulting.com](http://www.flawlessconsulting.com) is divided into sections: overview, contracting, data collection and discovery, feedback, resistance, and implementation. The checklist in each section is an outline of main points or a summary of the business of that phase and the skills required. You can simply read through the checklists to refresh your knowledge and understanding of the material in the book from time to time. Or you may use them to check off some of the points you may not be completely sure about, that you want to learn more about, or that you want to practice further.

Thank you for making it to the end. No small accomplishment for both of us.







## FURTHER READING

Visit [www.flawlessconsulting.com](http://www.flawlessconsulting.com) for more suggested reading, tools, updates, and evolving commentary on the consulting process.

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

It is a treat to have an opportunity to formally express appreciation to those who originally created the concepts expressed in this book.

Conceptually, the role of interpersonal skills in organizations and the key role that authentic behavior plays was pioneered by Chris Argyris. What I learned as a student of his in the now-famous 1960s is still powerful and relevant.

Most of us learn how to consult from watching someone who knows how to do it. I was lucky early in the game to follow around Barry Oshry, Roger Harrison, and Dick Walton. They are the best and gave support to me that was above and beyond the call of duty.

Tony Petrella, my partner in crime from the beginning, and Marv Weisbord have so deeply contributed to my understanding of consulting skills that I can't begin to separate my thoughts from theirs. I can only express appreciation for a valued partnership that was life giving.

Neale Clapp contributed greatly in two ways. He has given unqualified support and friendship, and he recognized the value in the consulting skills workshop and theory long before I did. In conducting many of the early workshops, Neale contributed conceptually to the early sections of the book on the staff or support role and remains a close and dear friend.

The chapters on resistance were clarified by the late Jim Maselko. Through his skill and enthusiasm, Jim helped give life to the approaches to consulting that this book represents.

The first attempt at writing the original version of the book was done collaboratively with Mike Hill. Although the book eventually took a different direction, Mike was key to getting the thing started. His fingerprints remain in portions of the early part of the book.



The basic concepts on contracting are drawn from Gestalt psychology. These were crystallized in a workshop I attended run by Claire Reiker and Mike Reiker. Their ability to present them simply and powerfully was a great gift.

The drawings in the book are by Janis Nowlan. I sent her a very primitive form of the manuscript for the first edition to see whether she could enliven the copy with illustrations. I thought I had given her an impossible task. The drawings Janis sent back were incredible. Her light touch in visually expressing the concepts in many cases is much more perceptive than all the words I have put together.

Thanks go to Ray Bard, who was my publisher when the book was begun. Ray believed a book was possible when I thought all I had were some notes for a workshop participants' workbook.

Continuing thanks go to Beverly Crowell and Jeff Evans, who keep Designed Learning focused on all of these ideas, plus all of the affiliates of Designed Learning. They lead and bring to life the Flawless Consulting Skills Workshops we now conduct around the world. The bulk of this book documents the theory we have been presenting in the workshops. Most of the concepts have emerged as answers to questions from people learning about consulting. Thanks go as well to the workshop participants for their patience when the concepts were confusing and to their willingness to help us articulate the consulting process out of their own experience.

As with the original edition, Leslie Stephen helped with the editing of this revision. This is the tenth book that she has helped edit with me. She supports my voice and gives structure, simple clarity, and deep understanding to whatever she touches. Thanks as always to Maggie Rogers, who makes everything happen. She is the best. And I am grateful to my wonderful daughter, Heather. It's a joy to have your art on the cover of my book.

My thinking on the power of conversation was always influenced by my connection with the late Joel Henning. We ran many workshops together, and I miss him. The chapters on implementation in this edition were greatly influenced by my association with the Association for Quality and Participation's School for Managing and Leading Change. The school was the laboratory where the new ideas were tested. The thoughts about designing group experiences have been influenced by watching Jill Janov do her work so well. I am especially grateful to the late Kathie Dannemiller and her associates at Dannemiller-Tyson Associates. They understood something profound about the heartbeat of large assemblies. Also, Dick Axelrod and Emily Axelrod have created magic in their work with The Conference Model. Dick has written his own books on



engagement, and the material in this book grew out of many conversations with him that have changed my consciousness.

All of us who consult today owe a debt of gratitude to the work of Ed Schein. He was one of the early beacons of light who gave direction and insight to those of us who contemplated working in the field of organizational change. He made understandable and explicit the process consulting path that later became a central part of how I operate, and for that I am very grateful. Finally, there are two voices in this edition, Paul Uhlig and Ward Mailliard, who exemplify partnership in action and bring the thinking behind flawless consulting to life. They are great friends and enormous innovators in healthcare and education, respectively.

Finally, the publishing team at Wiley have been indispensable in bringing this edition into being. Zach Schisgal, the editor, and the rest of the team of Jozette Moses, who has managed the design and production process; Michelle Hacker, managing the text editing; and Barbara Long, a copy editor with a light touch, have been a joy to work with. They are in a delightful hurry, listen carefully, and are committed to the success of this work as much as I am.







## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Peter Block** is an author, consultant, and citizen of Cincinnati, Ohio. His work is about chosen accountability and the reconciliation of community.

Peter is the author of several best-selling books. The most widely known are *Flawless Consulting: A Guide to Getting Your Expertise Used* (1st edition 1980, 3rd edition 2011); *Stewardship: Choosing Service Over Self-Interest* (1993, 2nd edition 2013); and *The Empowered Manager: Positive Political Skills at Work* (1987, 2nd edition 2017). Peter's newest book, co-authored with Peter Koestenbaum, is *Confronting Our Freedom: Leading a Culture of Chosen Accountability and Belonging* (Wiley, 2023). He joined with Walter Brueggemann and John McKnight to write *An Other Kingdom: Departing the Consumer Culture*, published by Wiley in 2016.

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