What is Consultation? That's an interesting question!

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Abstract: Seven consulting psychologists representing a broad spectrum of consulting activities and interests respond to the following question. What is your definition of consultation, and, how does the consultation process differ from the primary activities of many consultants (i.e., psychotherapy, counseling, reaching, training, research, etc.).

Editor's Foreword: Skipton Leonard

The genesis for this series of essays was a comment by President-elect and Associate Editor, Alan Barclay, at the recent midwinter executive board meeting for the division. In the process of discussing the appropriateness of a manuscript for publication in this journal, Alan commented, "Well, it depends upon what you consider consultation." Those words reverberated in my mind for the next few hours as I tried to compose a response to Alan's comment. As I thought about the great diversity of consulting activities of division members, I had difficulty developing a definition of consultation that most members would be willing to embrace. I wondered if a consensus was possible regarding the professional activities and functions that would be considered psychological consultation.

This problem, defining psychological consultation, was to be a primary mission for Clyde Crego's proposed national conference on psychological consultation. I hope that Clyde's idea comes to fruition in the near future.

In the meantime, I hope that the essays that follow help that process along a bit. I have asked seven authorities on various areas of psychological consultation to answer the following question. "What is your definition of consultation, and, how does the consultation process differ from the primary activities of many consultants (i.e., psychotherapy, counseling, teaching, training, research, etc.)."

Consulting Psychology -- The Organizational Side Thomas E. Backer

In my response to the question "what is consultation?," I will focus on consulting with organizations, both because this is what I know the most about, and because this is the area of consultation which typically differs most significantly from the primary work activities of most psychologists - psychotherapy, teaching, etc.

A brief definition is: "Organizational consultation involves a professional service of providing information, advice or help to an organization in meeting its objectives or solving its problems." Within this definition, the consulting psychologist may fulfill a diversity of roles, all of which include attention both to organizations and the individuals who work in them.

The consulting psychologist working with organizations might be a clinician who works with a state mental hospital on the development of a special treatment program; an industrial/organizational psychologist who has a full-time practice providing organization development services to private industry and public agencies; or a school psychologist who works with a board of education to help develop a plan for managing the process of change during heavy budget cutbacks.

Sometimes the focus of the consultation is on technical content (how to start up a head injury rehabilitation program); sometimes it may be on process in terms of how individuals work together in an organizational setting (how to deal with conflict among the owners of a family-run business); sometimes both technical and process issues may be involved (how to develop a strategic plan for a large services agency, including involvement of the major "stakeholders" inside and outside).

Psychological skills and knowledge contribute heavily to these varied and distinctive roles consulting psychologists can play with organizations, at both the content and process levels. Clinical or research skills may play a part, too, as well as understanding of organizational functioning (including input from both industrial/organizational psychology and management sciences), or of specific activities in which organizations engage.

What is Consultation? Alan Barclay

I am offering the following comments on the definition of consultation. These are highly personal, not data-based, and meant to be heuristic rather than oracular. I am offering the following comments on the definition of consultation. These are highly personal, not data-based, and meant to be heuristic rather than oracular.

Dictionaries state that consultation is "to seek advice, or information of another..."; or, also, "to give
expert advice as a professional...". In my opinion, the dictionaries admirably state the mutuality of the basic paradigm of consultation, that it is a process of seeking and giving expert opinion, with a view directed to some future course of action.

Of course, there is the other definition of an expert consultant—a person who owns a briefcase and is more than 200 miles from home.

In some ways, consultation is analogous to what in internist in medicine does; i.e., you provide the internist with a statement of a problem, and a diagnosis and course of action is then provided. It is also analogous, in my mind, to what a clinical psychologist does in treatment planning, i.e., define a problem, and a plan for correcting it.

So, for me, the definition of a consultant is straightforward. It is in the process of consultation, and in the populations to be served, that it confuses things as to what is consultation, as opposed to simple advice. I believe the consultant, who is outside the system, can bring an over-view, or Gestalt, that is the unique contribution of the consultant.

What is Consulting? Judith Blanton

The WHAT of consulting is the content area of expertise. A consultant has a professional area of expertise, a technical competence which is not available in the client organization. Organizations bring in content area consultants to fill in knowledge/skill gaps. But what psychologists generally mean by organizational consulting is different from a content matter expert. The practitioner of organizational consultation has a special expertise in the process of consultation that supplements or (in some situations) even transcends the need for other subject matter knowledge. A content area consultant focuses almost totally on the WHAT. Organizational consultants work from a position which involves a theory of process (HOW) and a theory of organizational functioning (WHERE and WHEN). They also face special challenges in determining exactly WHO is the client and must struggle with more complex ethical issues (WHY?) than the content area consultant.

The HOW is skill in the process of consultation. In most situations just "telling" isn't the most effective way to transfer knowledge. The organizational consultant needs a theory of process. We have created a valuable body of knowledge on process consultation, facilitation, coaching, etc. Like the best teachers, the organizational consultant creates a climate and environment in which learning and change can take place. Consultants may not have the knowledge themselves but they can create a situation where the knowledge emerges from the group. The more skilled the consultant is in the "how", the simpler the process looks. It is very easy to underestimate the skill level of a highly competent consultant because the process seems to flow by itself.

The WHERE & WHEN are also important. An organizational consultant needs a theory of organizational functioning in order to know where, within that organization the intervention needs to be made and the best timing for that intervention. No matter how knowledgeable the consultant or how skilled the intervention method, excellent projects can fail because they were not leveraged at the proper level in the organization or were ill timed.

WHO is the client? Organizational consultants may differ from a content area consultant in their definition of and relation to the client. The person who brings the consultant in (sponsor), the person who is in charge (decision maker) or the person or group with the presenting problem (problem stakeholder) may be different people with different interests and needs. Defining the organization as the client rather than any particular individual is one of the marks of an organizational consultant.

WHY is this consultant doing this intervention with this problem at this time in this organization in this way? Although the content area consultant faces ethical issues, these are amplified in consulting relationships which involve the multiple associations and often ambiguous goals and motives of organizational consultation.

A Sketch of Consultation as I See It

Robert T. Golembiewski

Shop-talk about consultants is often unkind. You've probably heard this scabrous view: "A consultant steals your watch, and then tells you the time of day."

My kind of consultants have a different orientation. To extend the metaphor, they alert client to the needs for, and the uses of, different kinds of watches in the service of diverse client needs. Moreover, such consultants help clients learn how to read various watches -- better, faster, with more valid interpretations -- and also help motivate reasonable reliance on them.

In sum, for me, "consultation" encompasses variable loadings of five modalities. Thus, consultant's behaviors and attitudes can be

- facilitative, as in the development or empowerment of client resources applicable to diagnosis and problem-solving;
- gatekeeping, as in value-loaded guidance that can inhere in the code of ethics of a profession, or in
such value-sets as that associated with Organization Development;
- **diagnostic**, as in the very broad continuum of activities anchored at one end by observation using one’s “warm body,” as variously informed by theoretical perspectives, and as tethered at the other end of the continuum by elaborate surveys and their interpretations;
- **architectural**, as in diverse design activities -- from specific learning modules to complexes of human and technical relationships;
- **mobilizing**, especially via interventions that “let it happen” but occasionally via those that “make it happen”

Details are available elsewhere (e.g., Golembiewski, 1992, esp. pp. 373-378) but, for present purposes, the modalities cover much of the conceptual territory involved in the long-standing discussions, debates, and even struggles about consultant roles and their consequences. For example, the latter extreme of the mobilizing dimension attracted unfavorable attention because of the high psychiatric casualty rates in personal-growth designs associated with “aggressive stimulators,” whose coercive charisma can precipitate learners into seriously uncomfortable and even unwanted learning situations (e.g., Lieberman, Yalom, and Miles, 1973).

The graphically-oriented reader can “draw a picture” of any consultant’s activities during some time interval by using these five modalities. You can begin with a circle, and from its center draw vectors every 72° to represent the space of each modality. Then you can indulge yourself. Each modality-space can be variously rated: as high, medium, or low by global observation; or as some fraction of 100 percent, as estimated in terms of complex rating scales; and so on. Shading the appropriate proportion of each modality completes the picture.

These modalities will have variable loadings in different consultative roles. In part, this will depend on the **situation**. For example, a client informed in the ways of Organization Development will have institutionalized a culture that does much of the appropriate gatekeeping. I also have had clients -- usually for a short time! -- where consultant gatekeeping is continuous, because of client’s freebooting in ethical and value senses. In larger part, the specific profile of loadings will vary with the **kind of consultation**. I often serve as a process consultant, where the umbrella modality is gatekeeping in the service of OD values, and the primary operating modalities are diagnostic and facilitative. But I also serve in expert roles, where architectural and mobilizing modalities often will be more prominent. In a specific consultation, or even during a minute, I also might flash between facilitative and expert roles.

Hence I see consultation as an ineluctably-mixed model, and that requires careful attention to the normative and ethical boundaries for my actions as well as for client expectations. It is easy to **advocate** a pure model -- as facilitator, or as expert -- as many observers do, and perhaps even most of them. However, for me, no pure model provides sufficient guidance in large systems, where I usually work.

This reliance on a mixed model has its costs, I recognize, one of which is to inspire deep and heated concern among advocates of pure models. For example, facilitative-only consultants may be able to commit to absolute confidentiality, which has a pleasing simplicity about it, at least on the surface. In a mixed model, however, absolute confidentiality has major limits, both practical and ideal (e.g., Golembiewski, 1989, pp. 165-172). There, both client and consultant have to mutually learn about how, when, and why to energize less-bounded confidentiality, and this is never easy.

**Consultation: A Collaborative, Whole Systems Definition DeWayne J. Kurpius**

The definition of consultation and the role of the consultant has changed significantly since its inception. Early definitions presented the consultant primarily as a one-on-one content expert. Later developments influenced by Caplan (1970) conandSchein (1969) suggested that the consultant must also be a process helper. From these beginnings emerged present day definitions of process helping and collaborative consultation. Being a process helper and helping consultees to be collaborative is powerful but it does require that the problem definition and proposed solution become system connected. Following the systems approach Weisbord (1990) suggests there are three primary phases of consultation and that each phase is represented by a changing role definition for consultants moving from experts who solve individual problems to skilled systems collaborators. The three phases and emergent role changes suggested for consultants are: 1900-1950 “experts to solve problems”, 1950-1965 “experts improve whole systems” and 1965-2000 “everybody improves whole systems.” Micro consultation such as one-on-one helping will continue and can be helpful to many consultee’s but the tendency and clearly the greatest payoff for all is for consultants to help their consultees to think of the larger system and to not only understand how problems are solved, but to also understand how they were caused, maintained, or avoided.
Although consultation has changed and will continue to do so, some aspects of the definition have not changed. First, consultation continues to be triadic, work related and issue focused. It is also considered to be voluntary and non-judgmental. And as already mentioned, consultation is collaborative and system oriented. It is triadic, work related and issue focused when consultant help is requested by the consultee who is having difficulty at work that usually involves a third party issue. Being voluntary and non-judgmental is what makes consultation so unique because judging people as needing change and then requiring them to grow, develop and change is futile.

In practice, consultation has a strong interpersonal relationship aspect and like any other helping relationship, it requires a strong facilitative process. As a helping process consultation is first and foremost a conceptual process but followed closely by an operational process. Being conceptual as a consultant means helping the consultee to become aware of the internal frame of reference and mental images that they are using to observe, define and bring the problem forward for help. It is to engage the consultee in a mental process to rehearse different scenarios and to look at things differently. Ultimately it is to view a single situation from multiple perspectives.

The operational process is the minute to minute and session to session activities that the consultant, consultee, or consultee system engage in. It is all that occurs from entry to termination. When the conceptual and operational processes become one process we have a fully functioning consultant/consultee team where the consultant is helping an individual, group or organization to ask the right questions and seek the best solutions. It is helping them gather good data and to interpret it correctly. It joins the conceptual process by helping them to reframe the present situation in preparation for improvement toward the desired situation. Question asking and other forms for finding good data does not mean just finding and defining the problem, but to do it in a way that will build commitment for owning the problem and acting upon it. If we succeed in integrating our conceptual and operational processes into one process we will not only help consultees to learn how to solve the present problem but also help them to learn how the problem was caused and the multiple views that were associated with the initial definition and proposed solution. Helping consultees to learn how to be collaborative and to understand that everybody can help to improve whole systems is the ultimate goal for consultation.

The second question posed by the editor Skip Leonard was, “how does the consultation process differ from the primary activities of many consultant interpersonal dynamics may be of a therapeutic nature and may sound like therapy but the difference is in the purpose and focus. In consultation the purpose is to help the executive to learn how to become a better manager first, even though learning about self can be an important step in the process. If this helping process becomes more person focused then issue focused, it is quite possible that some form of referral or contract change should take place.

Lastly, a comment about the context and future of consultation. Consultation occurs mainly in the work setting where people learn and grow in a cooperative, productive and life-sustaining manner. Consultation, because of the basic principles surrounding it, has the potential to become a major force within the broad domain of the helping professions. That is not to say that consultation has a clear and easily understood definition. In some ways consultation suffers from an identity crisis such as lack of a theoretical framework or a clear understanding of the core components that define it as a distinct service. Nevertheless, consultation is a powerful helping process that will continue to expand and develop to help selected individuals and small groups, but the ultimate goal is to help whole systems to function in a more collaborative and interdependent fashion.

How Organizational Consultation Differs From Counseling Harry Levinson

Organizational consultation involves the consultant in a much broader and more complex set of phenomena than individual counseling. The organizational consultant has to take into account economic, financial, sociological, social psychological, psychodynamic, and anthropological conceptions, as well as organization theory and the policies and practices of any given organization. He or she must try to understand the interrelationships among these ways of viewing organizational phenomena to arrive at an appropriate diagnosis and a logical intervention. The consultant must see himself or herself as a psychological anthropologist who must be familiar with the culture, behavioral norms, and the psychological foundations of policies and practices in order to intervene successfully.

Not only does the consultant have to deal with greater complexity, but also in organizations the consultant must deal with the already established organizational momentum, often a product of many years of evolution through several generations of leadership. That evolution has also led to the entrenchment of policies and practices that themselves are difficult to uproot and change. They
become even more difficult to deal with when the consultant also has to deal with the multiple individual motivations, and differences in group and component cultures. Among the components of a given organization there may well be vastly different norms, cultures, and required behaviors, especially if those components are regional or national.

In contemporary business organization, there is frequently rapid and continuous change, fluctuating direction, transient leadership, and foci which range from the hazy to those that are repetitively reformulated. All these changes organizational relationships and the sources of affection, support, and ego ideal gratifications that are significant elements in both motivation and adaptation. Repetitive change requires coping with the repetitive decomposition and reconstitution of work groups in a context of changing conceptions of appropriate leadership styles. Thus, there is repetitive stress and the exacerbation of feelings of helplessness and paranoia.

To cope with all this, the organizational consultant does not have the security of his or her own office as a frame of reference. Instead, he or she must be in the middle of the organization’s turmoil where he or she must maintain a certain equanimity, stability, and self-confidence, while concomitantly maintaining appropriate psychological distance from the turmoil. Thus, one must deal with the turmoil, while being constantly immersed in it, as contrasted with dealing with a client’s individual turmoil for an hour or so per session. Indeed, organizational consultation differs significantly from individual counseling.

On Consulting  Robert Perloff

Skip Leonard’s charge, asking us to describe what we think consulting consists of and how it differs from such activities as counseling, psychotherapy, teaching, training, and research, is instructive and profound. By positioning consulting athwart these other activities, important distinctions and similarities are revealed.

A consultant, according to Merriam-Webster’s current unabridged magnum opus, is “one who gives professional advice or services regarding matters in the field of his [sic] special knowledge or training...an expert,” concerning which are two observations:

1. Note that we not only give advice, but we may also provide services. We not only dispense wisdom or prescribe psychological medicine for what ails the client, but we may also roll up our sleeves and do the kind of work that a client’s professional employees perform, e.g., developing a training program, constructing a questionnaire, screening employees for sensitive assignments, or whatever. This reminds me the predilection of one of my finest mentors, the late R. J. Wherry. He maintained that it is of greater benefit to clients to teach them to do things themselves rather than do it for them. This may be obvious, but I’ll wager that it’s a practice honored more in the breach than in the observance.

2. Note too that the aforementioned definition specifies explicitly that one provides counsel in his or her special field of training or expertise. This caveat may be viewed as patronizing or superfluous, except that the seasoned consultant knows how easy it is to be lured into a situation where, having been retained to help on problem X, in which one is competent, the situation is transformed into Y, where one is somewhat knowledgeable but by no means an expert. Caveat vendor.

One might view consulting as overarching or generic knowledge transmission whose specific manifestations could be and quite often are counseling with the client, seeking to change the client’s behavior (via, for example, psychotherapy), conducting specific research or development tasks, and teaching or training. Oftentimes consultants deliver these services, albeit desultorily, not unlike the utility infielder picking and choosing where and how to field the ball in the client’s interest. But full-time counselors, psychotherapists, or teachers generally confine their professional hours to one or another of these functions without hopping about, as consultants are wont to do, from one task to the other. Successful consultants, like most executives, deans, and administrators, are not merely adept at juggling many balls at the same instant. They are, what’s more, fulfilled by and even exult in a multitude of heterogeneous tasks. (Behold the exultant consultant!)

And speaking of the consultant as a generic advice-giver, it is neither specious nor an exaggeration to suggest that the consultant has much to say to other professionals, those who in fact are consultants but who identify themselves distinctively as doctors, engineers, or lawyers, to name but three kinds of advice-givers. Indeed, this may be a spanking new market for the psychological consultant, as an advice-giver to other consultants--doctors, lawyers, and engineers--whom he tutors in the general or structural (as opposed to substantive) components of offering medical, legal, or engineering advice. Phrased factor-analytically, consulting, au fond, is a general factor, while consulting in psychology, in medicine, in law, and in engineering are specific factors. Successful consultants are good at consulting per se, as well as in their respective specialties. A fuller essay on what the consultant does should include a taxonomy of the various
dimensions of consulting. One-night stands, so to speak, vs. a long-term commitment to and relationship with the client. Who the client is--profit vs. not-for-profit, private sector vs. public sector clients, and the nature of the client's business (university; hospital; the armed forces; or professional, educational, and scientific societies). Depending on the specific nature of the client, along the dimensions just suggested, the consultation will take one form or another. An example is consulting for a university along with its cadre of prima donna professors, as opposed to the corporation where power and authority are less diffuse than in the university.

Finally, a credo that I'm confident guides the consulting behavior of card-carrying members of Division 13 is the Golden Rule: "Do as you would be done by." This is not to assert that sycophantically you say nice things to or about the client, but rather that our clients deserve the truth (though cosmetically phrased), want enduring and comprehensive, not shallow counsel, and covet consultations which in the long run are in their (the clients') best self-interest, good, bad, or indifferent.

References