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The New Manager – **Management**

Self-deception and the consultant's dilemma

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Organisations often summarily dismiss consultant reports, refusing to read beyond the obvious so as to gain an understanding of what is left unsaid.



There have been many occasions when I have been called in by either the HR person or the CEO to help correct what in their opinion is 'an apparent wrong' in the organisation.

The CEO or HR person will invariably say something like, "there is a lack of ownership in our organisation"; or "there is little openness and transparency"; or "there is no team work". All these are genuine concerns and must be addressed.

Yet, what follows this admission is also important to understand. The consultant comes in, sometimes does a sensing exercise or, perhaps, designs an intervention, and delivers the same.



A document is prepared by the consultant and shared with the sponsor. However rudimentary it may be, it is a perspective, an outsider's view of the situation and, therefore, merits consideration. However, what inevitably happens when the document is received by the sponsor is he first says, "I already know much of what you have captured and that is why I called you in; you are not saying anything new."

This is really the first aspect of self-deception. What is being missed is not 'the obviousness' of what is being presented, but the underlying sub-text of the unsaid. When consultants surface known data, they are helping the sponsor quickly dismiss the clutter and delve deeper.

Typically, the sponsor reacts by saying, “It is too obvious, so there is no point of going further with this consultant”; or, he may say, “I will socialise the document internally and get back”. In both cases, it means the document may be ignored.

Unfortunately, sponsors are looking for logical responses and when they don't see them, they dismiss the findings as pedestrian. This results in:

Ignoring the problem: ‘It is nothing, just business as usual’ — acting, therefore, as though the problem doesn't truly exist, and hoping it will go away on its own.

Convincing themselves there is nothing they can do: ‘This is the reality of our organisation’ — dismissing people problems as part of the organisation's life and the best they can do is minimise them.

Pretend they are not their problems: ‘It is not my problem’ — friction is seen as the problem of the individual and, therefore, is not an organisational issue.

When the document is ignored it actually means:

One is unaware of how others see us: Assumptions are made about how people view us.

Making up stories about what is going on: Since real information is being ignored, it is assumed that people don't care and one tends to put this down to ‘this is how people are’.

Getting defensive: Confronted by the truth that must be surfaced and might become uncomfortable, CEOs and HR persons criticise people within the organisation for creating the impasse. Denial, owing to lack of evidence, results in sweeping the issue under the carpet.

What is critical is for the sponsor to invite the consultant for a dialogue. However, consultants must also be aware that they should not sound knowledgeable or appear to push their point. In so doing, they deceive themselves also, for there is no openness to examine the conclusions arrived at.

The task for the sponsor and the consultant is to approach the issues tentatively, perhaps, setting aside the document as having been examined and begin a dialogue. In so doing, a process of co-creation is resorted to which helps:

Promote awareness of self and others: An understanding of the logic of human behaviour and motivation helps you understand the dynamics of human interaction and allows for resolution of the issue in a methodical way.

Speak honestly: Telling one's own truth — one's personal experience — directly to each other helps build trust.

Talk about the ‘undiscussables’: Bringing to light the unspoken interpersonal issues and discussing them directly helps work past seemingly impenetrable blocks.

Build experience with each other: There is no substitute for contact and honest interaction.

When the sponsor and the consultant are willing to look at the issue jointly, one with an insider view and the other from the external perspective, there are innumerable opportunities to examine the issue at hand. Not only do they dwell on current reality but are also able to focus on future possibilities. Thus, together, a resolution can be attempted and, thereafter, interventions designed to tackle the distracting issues.