

Why sensing is better than diagnosis in consulting

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In human process consulting, sensing is the way forward for a wholesome understanding of the client and his perspective.

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‘Diagnosing’, often times the beginning of engagement between a consultant and an organisation, has been variously defined as ‘investigating nature and cause of disease,’ ‘opinion derived from evaluation,’ and ‘critical analysis.’ Yet in the current context of organisations, diagnosis may sound controversial as the belief is that it ‘objectifies relationships’. We need to diagnose the person, or what is being presented to us within the situation, taking into account all the relevant conditions that impact the way in which people perceive the situation. We also need to have sufficient awareness of our own processes and biases.

Diagnosis is actually the application of a theoretical construct to create a shorthand picture of how one makes and breaks contact with the world. The very nature of the process of applying a theoretical construct that offers a shorthand picture or hypothesis means that parts of the story get missed.

Constituting sensing

The new term, enabling and gentler is ‘sensing’. Sensing is really ‘to become aware of and ‘grasp’. It involves looking at what is popularly called ‘the figural aspect’ i.e. that which is engaging the other; that which is impacting upon the person’s world and therefore his perspective. Sensing therefore is:

Recognising the person’s experience in the context of his situation

Searching for understanding through what is obvious and/or revealed rather than what is interpreted

Relating with the other in what Martin Buber calls an ‘I-Thou’ position; a relational stance rather than an objectifying stance

In human process consulting, we are exploring how a person reaches out to their world, how they respond to their situation and how past and present situations impact upon their reaching out in the ‘here and now’.

People are constantly adjusting their lives in relation to an ever changing environment and all healthy creative adjustments require making contact with 'what is now' rather than to a past picture of how things were. The focus therefore when we 'sense' a person or situation is to focus on the 'here and now'. Helping people to explore their moment-to-moment awareness in the 'here and now' can provide a platform for them to consider their motivation for making choices and provide an opportunity to reassess whether this motivation fits with their 'here and now' situation.

It is not for us to interpret or explain their behaviour for, in so doing, we move away from the immediacy of the present. Sensing operates on the embedded philosophy and belief that people are fundamentally oriented towards health. It is through increasing awareness of their way of being in the world that they realise that potential by discovering the answers that lie within them and through the creative adjustments that they have made in the past.

From diagnosing to sensing

Diagnosing is like a medical model that takes an atomised view of a person, while sensing takes a holistic view. Sensing emphasises wholeness while diagnosis separateness.

While diagnosis is synonymous with sickness, ailment and disorder, sensing is occupied with dis-ease, i.e. that the organism is ill at ease and responding to the environment from such a position.

Sensing believes, as was popularized by Bluma Zeigarnik, a Russian psychologist, in what is called 'The Zeigarnik Effect'; the natural tendency of human beings to make meaningful wholes from their experience. Thus when we sense, we recognise that our intent is to completely accept the individual's whole personhood, including embracing aspects that the person may wish to amputate, and in so doing help the individual make sense of his world.

While diagnosis looks at resistance as 'grit in the wheels', an attempt to slow down and push back, sensing sees resistance as manifestation of energy which is active. Resistance is viewed as a way of the organism protecting itself from actual or perceived threat or lack of support and this needs to be respected. To recognise the salutary effect of resistance one needs to be open and aware.

Resistance is one end of the continuum with refusal to accommodate, explosion, isolation or deflecting being its attributes. The other end of the continuum is contact, immersion, owning and responding. Sensing recognises that an individual will travel this continuum and will move towards responding only if encouraged to question, assimilate, express, differentiate and be spontaneous. For all these to happen the consultant needs to be aware of how he experiences the client's expectation yet not give solutions or seek to ameliorate unpleasant feelings. Listening is therefore embodied in this experience. When listening to the client we begin by exploring how the client experiences himself in relation to the situation and therefore listen with our whole being.

By recognising the resistance-responding continuum, we assess the client's way of being in the present in relation to their present issue; we identify the issue, we explore the client's expectation, we assess the risks and we also consider whether we are the right people to assist in this effort.

An I-Thou perspective

In sensing, we recognise that an individual responds from an inner world which is 'I feel'; responds to the outer world which is 'I see' and also responds from an in-between world 'I imagine'. Thus when we sense, we focus on sensations and feelings, on intention, on who he thinks he is and finally on the way he identifies with the world.

It is important that in sensing we relate from an 'I-Thou' perspective, which is that you and I are equal, are human and that we co-create our reality and not from a position of 'I-It' which is that we are subject and object. The 'I-Thou' state is one of being, while the 'I-It' state is one of doing.

Finally the whole exercise of sensing is about being present with all our qualities of being authentic, non-judging, accepting and surrendering to the larger good of what we are intending to achieve.

(The writer is an organisational and behavioural consultant.)