

Getting the best out of consultants

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A couple of months ago I was invited by an internal consultant to meet the Managing Director of a large infrastructure organisation, who ostensibly was grappling with people issues. On being introduced to the prospective client, I was asked by the client to recount the consultant's brief to me. My attempt was to lay bare what I had assimilated and also suggest our manner of engagement.

Yet even as I began the conversation I sensed I was misaligned with the prospect. All that I was saying did not find favour with him and he kept correcting me. Shortly into the meeting I realised that I was attempting to make meaning, based on inputs received, and this was not resonating with the client.

I paused and asked the client to tell me what he wanted from me. The client was a little confused and told me that I had to tell him what I could offer.

The conversation ran aground and I departed sans the assignment.

My realisation as I left his office was the uncomfortable truth that I as consultant had failed to assess client need. However, more importantly I realised that the client was unclear on what he wanted from me and this left both of us floundering. I have recently been retained by two organisations, one a large manufacturing company and another, an NGO, supporting a school project.

To both these organisations I have been invited to assess, diagnose and explain the phenomena which the organisation is coping with. While the obvious invitation is to understand, explain and interpret, clients perhaps do not recognise that such a process can be reductive, narrow the context of the true meaning, and sometimes encourage consultants to retrofit their previous knowledge into the current explanation.

What the client must understand is that if a consultant takes such an approach he tries to explain the phenomena, not necessarily understand it.

His attempt will be to take the phenomena apart, to atomize them, in order to reconnect them into something that carries a consultant's meaning rather than the client's.

Linear progression

It is by broadening the context that a fuller understanding of the troubling phenomena is reached; then the consultant becomes a co-creator whose aim is only to assist in clarification. The context is always the client's and it is therefore his interpretation that is likely to increase understanding. A consultant cannot be an expert on the client's situations. The consultant can only ask to enable the client who is in need of help to establish a place in which the understanding of the situation is possible. Understanding grows not by narrowing it to a cause and effect linear progression but by extending the range of questioning and broadening the area of discovery into a web of possibilities. The consultant, the client must understand, is no expert in deciphering phenomena. The consultant, however, can help clients to open up to the phenomena without trying to decipher them. Therefore, it is for the client to know what to ask and expect of the consultant. Typically, a client can employ the consultant to mirror back what he is saying, to ask the consultant to be a listening post, a pressure release valve and a raconteur. Likewise a consultant may recognise that the manner in which he asks questions, the grammar that he employs, tone of voice, the use of words and the direction of the enquiry will cause the client to respond accordingly.

Clients therefore must encourage consultants to elicit from them responses to questions like 'What is?' 'What might be?' and 'What should be?' They must give the consultant the freedom, the support and the encouragement to help them see the whole than the sum of its parts, help them see connections and relationships, enquire into assumptions and create a shared meaning with the consultant.

Voice into the system

Unless consultants know, think and feel that they are being accepted unconditionally, with positive orientation, appreciated for what they bring and are well disposed to, consultants will tend to become guarded, perhaps less open and most often prescriptive.

Clients should not lull themselves into believing that consultants can offer prescriptions. They must realise that the consultant only brings to the relationship and engagement eclectic wisdom gained over several contacts that he has made and the ability to look at the situation dispassionately. Clients should not employ consultants to 'voice into the system' their anxieties nor use consultants to mouth their directives.

Consultants must have the latitude and freedom, much like a coach to be able to say it as it is and it is for the client to glean meaning and essence.

When clients hire a consultant with faith and belief in their competence and trust that the consultant means well and is sincere, the ensuing collaboration will be rich and fruitful.

Anything short of an unconditional, positive, appreciative and acknowledging engagement of the consultant will not achieve what the relationship was set out to do.

(The writer is an organisational and behavioural consultant.)