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Choosing a Consulting Role

Consultants wear many hats. Here's a method for selecting the most appropriate role for an internal or external consultant on any given project.

You've been asked to help an organization to manage a task force charged with designing some new procedures as part of an overall OD plan. The organization has never had a task force, but you've been told that your role is simply to "sit in from time to time and make comments" as needed. You don't think that provides enough support to ensure success in this important aspect of the change process.

You've been asked to provide some "listening training" to a work group with a history of conflict and dissension. You suspect that training at this point may not be well received by the group and that the causes of the problem are deeper than skill deficits.

Both of the above situations illustrate a common dilemma. In both, the consultant's initial view of the relationship and the intervention that will be effective differs from what the client thinks is needed or wanted. Such situations are likely to end with disappointing results.

Consultants—internal and external—often talk about getting "burned." Usually, it happens when the way the consultant's role has been structured leads to no-win situations.

Much good advice is available to new and practicing consultants on how to be effective OD practitioners, but not much of it is focused on the special problem of role definition. There isn't much clear guidance for the consultant and client as to whether the role being played is the right one.

In order to do this kind of practical assessment and to facilitate collaborative agreements between clients and consultants, we need three things:

- a clear understanding of the purposes of a consulting relationship;
- a language for talking about consulting roles;
- criteria for determining which role is appropriate in a given situation.

Goals and roles

In any consultation, the clients will have two types of needs:

- **The need for results** refers to concrete outcomes associated with a project. These might include changes in the bottom line, organizational structure, information transmitted, skills learned, or behavior and attitudes.
- **The need for growth** means increased capacity to perform new functions or behaviors on a continuing basis. In other words, if a high level of growth is achieved in the consultation, then the client will be able to do the job next time with less or no outside help.

The need for results and the need for growth will vary depending on the nature of the consulting project. For example, in performing a one-time service with which the client is unfamiliar, the consultant's major focus is likely to be "getting the job done" for the client.

However, in helping the client perform an important and recurring—but new—task, the appropriate emphasis is on helping the client learn how to perform that task over the long haul, instead of merely producing an immediate result.

Figure 1—Typical roles statements for the consulting role grid

Counselor "You do it; I will be your sounding board."	**Coach** "You did well; you can add this next time."	**Partner** "We will do it together and learn from each other."
Facilitator "You do it; I will attend to the process."	**Teacher** "Here are some principles you can use to solve problems of this type."	**Modeler** "I will do it; you watch so you can learn from me."
Reflective observer "You do it; I will watch and tell you what I see and hear."	**Technical adviser** "I will answer your questions as you go along."	**Hands-on expert** "I will do it for you; I will tell you what to do."

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When project outcomes are specified in that way, it is easier to determine what services are needed from the consultant and what contributions are needed from the client system to bring about the desired changes.

By constructing a grid model of consulting, using as the two axes consultant responsibility for growth and consultant responsibility for results, we can identify the specific consulting roles appropriate for the mix of services that the consultant is expected to provide.

The nine roles of the consulting role grid (figures 1 and 2) reflect the options the consultant has in a given situation. Presumably, if a consultant correctly assesses the situation, he or she is likely to choose the role that will be the most effective.

Nine roles

The consultant who takes on the hands-on expert role (9,1) actually undertakes the task on behalf of the client. In this role the consultant has most, if not all, of the responsibility for producing good results. The client is not expected to grow in capacity very much. He or she will need the consultant again next time in order to perform the task equally well.

The modeler role (9,5) implies that the consultant is highly responsible for results in the current project, but also that there is some value in the client system building its own capacity. The modeler carries out the task for the client system, but does so in a way that makes his or her approaches and techniques apparent. The consultant is available for answering questions about what he or she is doing, and why. The implication is that sometime in the future the client may carry out the task.

The partner role (9,9) implies high responsibility for results and growth. It assumes that both the client and the consultant have the capacity to successfully perform aspects of the task and that both will share responsibility for the results. It also assumes that a big jump in the client's capacity to do the task is an important goal. The partner role means that the client is ready to learn in a hands-on way and that the consultant can teach effectively in this mode, as well as guide the task to successful completion.

In the coach role (5,9), the consultant does not have direct responsibility for performing the task. Instead, he or she may observe the performance of the task and provide feedback. The coach uses highly directed instructional techniques to improve the client's performance: providing feedback, prescribing and observing practice sequences, and giving advice and support during actual job performance. The coach is indirectly involved in carrying out the task, but highly involved with the client and his or her growth.

The teacher or trainer role (5,5) is even more removed from the scene of the action. The trainer or teacher, unlike the coach, is concerned with general performance rather than performance in a specific situation. For example, the teacher is concerned that the client knows the basic principles and has mastered the skills of managing a meeting, while the coach may actually observe the client leading meetings and discuss the results afterward.

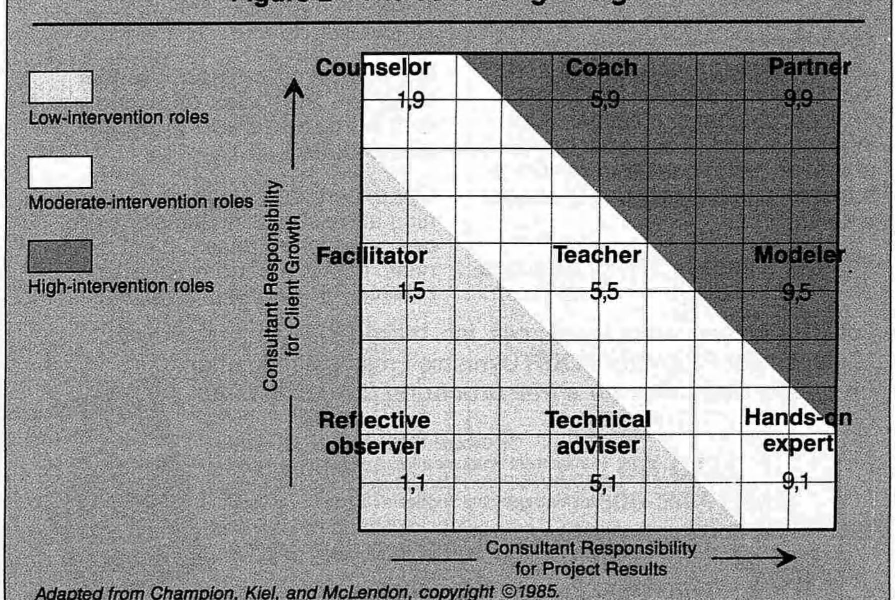
The technical adviser role (5,1) is a back-up role. In this role, the consultant has moderate responsibility for results; the client uses the adviser's expertise for specific purposes. The technical advisor may have close or distant personal relations with the client, but his or her concern is not the growth of client capacity, except in an incidental sense. The focus is on helping the client get over a specific problem that the technical adviser's knowledge and experience can solve.

In the counselor role (9,1), the consultant's concern is almost entirely for the capacity of the client to perform the task. The counselor tries constantly to help the client clarify and set goals, maintain positive motivation, and develop and implement effective plans. The counselor often is removed from the performance of the situation. He or she may have to rely on the client's data about what is happening in the project. Hence much of the counselor's skill is in helping the client to gather, analyze, and develop conclusions from his or her own experience.

The facilitator role (5,1) consists largely of helpful but process-oriented activities such as convening, agenda building, recording, collating and displaying data, providing techniques such as problem analysis or brainstorming, and planning and leading meetings. Through the facilitator's intervention, clients may absorb the helpful techniques and processes the facilitator uses. That leads to moderate growth of the client's capacity in these areas. One main reason the consultant is an effective facilitator is that he or she has a low stake in the task at hand and is neutral within the client group. This is a low task-responsibility role.

With the reflective observer role (1,1), the client is most responsible for results and capacity building; the consultant is least responsible. The consultant's task is limited to feeding back observations and impressions. In spite of the low activity level of the consultant, this role can have a dynamic effect on a client system that is skilled in using such assistance. The reflective

Figure 2—The consulting role grid



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observer can help clients monitor themselves on such ambiguous but crucial indicators as trust, teamwork, and openness.

Roles versus jobs

We shouldn't proceed much further before distinguishing the nine consulting roles outlined above from job titles. A person may have the job title "technical adviser" or "trainer," but he or she may still take on any or all of the above roles on a temporary, situational basis. For example, a trainer may leave the classroom and "coach" the student, or be the expert in designing a curriculum or course.

Similarly, a consultant may play multiple roles simultaneously within a client system, but with different clients. He or she might be a counselor to one manager, a trainer for the team the manager leads, and a coach for a task force of other managers. In this framework, the consulting role is always defined situationally with a specific client or client group.

Ideally, roles will be defined and clearly understood by both the client and consultant. Many consulting errors arise from the consultant's attempt to play more than one role simultaneously with the same client without a clear contract to do so.

How to choose

The process of role choice and transition is obviously a critical area of judgment and skill for the consultant. What guidelines can we go by to make informed choices?

We can identify four key areas, building on Robert Tannenbaum and Warren Schmidt's classic formulation of criteria in determining behavioral choice for leadership roles ("How To Choose a Leadership Pattern," *Harvard Business Review, March-April 1958). The areas to consider:*

■ **The organizational situation.** The roles in column 9 on the grid (partner, modeler, and hands-on expert) are likely to be appropriate in cases where there is immediate need for results and for client capacity development. If client capacity is already moderate to high, then the low-intervention roles (counselor, facilitator, reflective observer, and technical adviser) may make more sense.

■ **Characteristics of the client.** In determining an acceptable role relationship, the client ought to ask the following questions: Will the proposed consulting relationship be likely to achieve the results that the organization needs? Will I be helped to grow in the process, in a direction that is in my long-term interests? Will the skills that I already possess be used to their fullest extent? Are the skills that the consultant possesses being used in the best way?

■ **Characteristics of the consultant.** The capacity of the consultant is the most obvious limiting factor in determining a consultant role. Consultants cannot take on the more results- or growth-oriented roles if they lack the experience, knowledge, and confidence to do so. But if the consultant is competent to take on various roles, how should he or she choose among them? Willingness, interest, and time are factors. The consultant needs to ask him- or herself, not only "Can I do this?" but "Do I want to serve in this role?" A role that is unwanted will probably not be well performed.

■ **The client/consultant relationship.**

A relationship of trust and openness permits collaborative determination of the appropriate client-consultant role. Too often, the client's unwillingness to ask for help leads to an insufficient consulting role, or the consultant's need for business results leads to an unhealthy dependency. But most relationships don't begin with the necessary trust to permit open discussion and negotiation of roles. The grid model, by providing a common language for clients and consultants, may help overcome some initial barriers.

Role negotiation

Here are five steps for effective role negotiation for the client and consultant.

■ 1. Collaborative clarification of the organization's need for results and capacity for each client or client group.

■ 2. Open discussion of the current capacities of the clients and consultants.

■ 3. Identification of an appropriate match between client needs and consultant capacities relative to the various tasks and client groups, using the consulting role grid.

■ 4. Assurance that all parties have the support they need in the situation to deliver on their accountabilities for results and growth.

■ 5. Commitment of both parties to their respective role responsibilities in the consultation.

With those steps in mind, we can now go back to the two consulting dilemmas posed at the outset of this article. Let's examine how our framework can provide conceptual support for clients and consultants when negotiating the right consulting role is crucial to success of a project.

In the task-force situation, the needs of the system are relatively apparent to both client and consultant, yet the role suggested for the consultant seems inadequate to bring about the results. In such a case, the consultant should discuss with the client the apparent discrepancy between the need for immediate results in the situation and the low-results orientation of the observer role the consultant is being asked to take (step 1).

That discussion would probably result in agreement on more active consultant roles, such as coach to the manager in question, and facilitator to the task force (steps 2 to 5). That would leave the organization and the client more protected against the consequences of project failure.

In the second case—in which the consultant is charged with training a divisive work group in listening skills—the consultant and the client are not in a position to collaboratively diagnose the needs of the organization.

The consultant might point out that the training role assumes a willingness to learn on the part of the group—a willingness that may not exist. It also assumes that listening skills would solve the problem—a claim that may not be true. The consultant cannot safely accept responsibility for results unless the group shows interest in learning. If the group does not, the client's relationship with the group—and the consultant's relationship with the client—could be seriously damaged.

The consultant could suggest an initial phone call or interview with group members. In it, the consultant would help the group clarify its need for results and for capacity-building by assessing the nature and causes of past conflicts and the group's willingness to engage in problem solving or training (step 1).

With those data in hand, the consultant and client can more confidentially negotiate an intervention role (steps 2 to 5).

Successful outcomes

Consultants and clients can do a better job of negotiating roles, and increase their chances for successful project outcomes. But that can only happen if both parties are clear about the outcomes the organization needs and the capacities they both have.

The consulting role grid can help match needed outcomes with appropriate levels of consultant involvement. The five-step model of role negotiation can help ensure that the agreements reached can be successfully carried out.

By using this simple framework, consultants and clients may be able to avoid some of the game playing and misperceptions that can handicap consulting relationships from the early stages. The result is openness about what is needed and about how the client and the consultant can meet those needs. That openness can set the stage for a collaborative relationship for the duration of the project. ▲