

The Internal Consultant and the External Struggle

Maybe you can have it all—if you're an internal consultant. Internal and external consulting roles carry distinct advantages and disadvantages, but the internal consultant can take steps to maximize the benefits of both.

By VIRGINIA E. BIANCO

Among human resource and organization development professionals, the consensus is that the role of the internal consultant is more difficult than that of his or her external counterpart. Corporate nature seems to prefer the mystique and genius of the outside organization development guru.

Peter Block explains that being a "prophet in your own land" is difficult because line managers often view the internal consultant as being subject to the same forces and limitations that impinge on them.¹ Managers might be slow to trust and recognize the expertise of the internal HRD or OD person. The internal consultant is trapped in a Catch-22. If actions are too cautious, the internal person is seen merely as an extra pair of hands. If actions challenge the status quo, the internal consultant can be perceived as disloyal and insensitive to company operations.

Block humorously compares the two: The internal wears dark suits, the external wears sweaters and turtlenecks; the internal uses words such as "measurement," "quick" and "background" while the external says "issues," "work through," "model" and "process"; the internal's life is relatively stable and the external's life is "like Hiroshima right after the bomb." No one's ever satisfied: The internal wishes for the freedom of the external, and the external wishes for the continuity of the internal.

The Lippitts discuss internal vs. external roles using a six-step consulting process, beginning with contact and entry

and ending with termination.² The internal consultant usually has more knowledge and access to inside resources, power figures, history and data. On the other hand, the external consultant is in a better position to introduce new strategies and perspectives, and to confront barriers and resistance.

Gluckstern and Packard propose inside-outside consultant teams that balance the strengths and weaknesses within each role by forming a viable working relationship.³ Such a relationship evolves through three stages. First, the external consultant establishes communication and credibility. The internal consultant acts as a learner, observer, monitor, helper, mediator and change agent. In the second stage, the external consultant implements, teaches and involves the internal consultant in the skills and techniques necessary for handling the intervention. The internal consultant learns, practices and provides knowledge of inside power relationships, when and how hard to push, priorities and politics. In the final stage, roles are exchanged. The external consultant becomes an advisor. The internal consultant, equipped with new knowledge and status, continues independently.

Together, the two consultants can effect a level of change not possible when each works alone. This takes time and the awareness that trust and exchange are necessary. The best relationship is one in which the consultants' skills are complementary and their liabilities are cancelled by their strengths. Another benefit is that a team approach lessens the loneliness and frustration inherent in a consulting role. Members of the consulting team can share experiences, discuss problems and check judgments.

Ideally, the team relationship models the very behavior being encouraged in the client organization—participation, openness, trust, cooperation and problem solving.

Steele emphasizes the importance of conscious role shaping for the internal consultant. Through careful planning and actions, an internal consultant can build on his or her strengths and acquire many of the advantages usually associated with the external consultant, including:⁴

- Identify your security with your professional expertise, not your position.
- Position yourself to negotiate and use distinct role-shaping activities with bosses, clients and associates.
- Keep an image of objectivity, and avoid becoming connected with only one part of the organization.
- Set clear expectations in the beginning and end of each project.
- Form inside-outside teams that capitalize on both the image of distance and specialness, and the savvy of knowing the system.
- Structure your relationship to appear external (not corporate), with offices at another physical location, no administrative links to the executive structure, separate mission and goals.

These tips are by no means new, but a different perspective can give extra insight in a time of need.

Beware

As an internal consultant, "one of the family," your motives often are viewed with distrust. Your image, talent and role may be pegged into a monotonous slot over time. As you walk that fine line between identification and risk taking, you realize that one slip can doom you to the political lions.

When a colleague in a major organization was ordered by her CEO to implement a succession planning system within three months, she realized immediately that imposing such a system on the executive staff within that time frame would generate upheaval and resistance. She pleaded for more time in order to conduct interviews, organize a task force and develop ownership and participation, but the deadline prevailed. When the product was introduced, my colleague prepared herself for being nailed to the cross. She was.

Given ideal circumstances, preparing the target audience and enlisting their participation is always the best strategy. Realistically, time constraints or politics often require that the vehicle, program or

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change is shoved down an organization's throat without adequate preparation. In the age of the one-minute manager, executives are looking for quick fixes, the instant oatmeal of corporate America.

Prepare yourself. You may become a scapegoat. Once the dust has settled, brush yourself off and begin implementing your best consulting practices "in reverse." The remedy (bomb) has already been delivered. Use this untimely vehicle as a starting point for discussion, revision, participation and reactions. My colleague eventually organized a task force to review the succession plan and recommend changes. In the end, there were few changes and much support.

According to Margulies and Raia, a political perspective is both useful and necessary for the internal consultant.⁵ Unfortunately, politics often appear to run counter to consultants' underlying values. Nothing could be further from the truth. Political behavior per se is neither good nor bad. Political behavior, depending on how it is used, can either help or hinder organizational processes and effectiveness. Since organization and human resource development usually requires redistributing power, the internal consultant is involved inextricably in the dynamics of power.

Effective consultants recognize and understand the political threads of organizational life.⁶ Expanding one's power base, developing support networks and managing one's image build political awareness. Build a professional reputation, focus on small projects with a high probability of success, establish as many allies as possible and respond to the organization's needs and problems.

Behind the scenes

We are not all destined to be famous, honored or applauded, at least not for every consulting effort. Much of what we do is behind the scenes. Sometimes our role is only to bring two different parties in contact with one another, linking clients and resources. Or we may serve merely to introduce, identify or plant a seed, then step away to let someone else take credit for such a marvelous idea. As the oriental adage goes: A true leader is one whose people say, "We did it ourselves." Many consultants get so wrapped up in the excitement of working with top executives and implementing dramatic changes, that they forget the tools of their trade. The appropriate positioning of the consultant's role, however,

often includes working on tedious details, analyzing volumes of data and organizing paperwork.

Consultants have varied motivations for offering help: to improve others' performance, obtain gratitude, control others, make someone happy, gain credit, achieve corporate objectives, punish others, give meaning to his or her own life.⁷ Be cautious. A successful consultant needs to balance professional needs with personal (ego) needs to produce gain and growth on all sides.

High frustration . . . low expectations

An internal consultant is comfortable with ambiguity and frustration. Change takes time. Some efforts do not show signs of success for three or four years. Many consultants leave their companies because things did not move fast enough and they were not able to practice their ideal forms of organization expertise. If you require tangible signs of success and fast results, the world of internal consulting may not be for you.

Ideal scenarios exist in textbooks that describe applications of models using boxes and arrows, but people don't move that way. In fact, they bite, kick and fight back. Most people don't like change, and they certainly don't need you to tell them to do so. Real life requires patience and time, and an appreciation for the change process. Every chip in the wall is helping eventually to tumble the fortress. This heightened level of frustration usually precedes increased awareness for both individuals and organizations.

A few companies move successfully from the old "military" style of management to a more participative style, but most corporations still struggle with the concept of change as a new way of life. If you don't have the stomach for this, move on.

Educating managers and other organization members in the use of concepts to conduct diagnosis and plan action is part of the internal consultant's role. The consultant helps an organization learn the techniques necessary to solve problems and cope with change. Without a transfer of skills and knowledge, the client becomes dependent on the consultant and does not experience growth.

Lippitt says that the initiation of new organizational methods (MBO, strategic planning, participative management) often fails because the consultant and organizational leaders do not pay enough

attention to the training process.⁸ If people in an organization lack the skills for a new process, an innovation will not work. I have seen the failure of a major strategic planning effort where top executives were introduced to the process, but the actual managers responsible for the work were never trained. I also witnessed the struggle of a corporate-wide survey where the mechanics were designed and implemented beautifully, but group leaders and facilitators were not trained.

To help an organization help itself, an internal consultant needs skills in both organizational psychology and educational psychology. Burke and Schmidt believe that consultants should make a deliberate attempt to learn while in the process of solving problems, and to solve problems while in the process of learning.⁹ Don't hold those models and techniques you carry in your head as secrets for creating an aura of expertise and control. Share your models and road maps, and help your clients reach their goals by showing them how.

The newest management books on change and culture emphasize this learning component of the consultative process. Working closely with managers helps internal consultants learn continually, thus creating a learning environment throughout the organization.¹⁰ Given the rapid pace of organizational change and shifts in culture, technology and restructuring, constant learning is survival. The internal consultant can model and transfer the continual process of learning, growth, achievement and, ultimately, personal and organization success.

Practice what you preach

Keep the following guidelines in mind, and you will move your role closer to that of the optimally positioned internal consultant:

- Listen to the expertise and good ideas of others.
- Be flexible. Don't use the same technique over and over if it is not appropriate. Realize that models can be modified to fit different situations. Certain efforts require a process approach; others demand a content approach; some require reactive strategies; and others require proactive tactics.
- Admit your mistakes. Admit you lack knowledge in certain areas and suggest other resources if necessary.
- Be a model for the type of behavior you are trying to instill. Conduct team-building and problem-solving sessions

with your colleagues and staff when problems arise. I was part of a staff that taught team building, personal practices, performance appraisal and participative management. Within one week, an employee was fired without proper notification; another employee was hired without proper introduction; the staff was divided on issues of training and organization development; two staff members were engaged in a cold war; short and unproductive staff meetings were held; and no one on the staff ever received a formal performance appraisal. That the team's efforts were not respected or supported within the organization is no surprise.

■ Take risks, challenge and confront, all with careful timing and balance.

■ Grow continually. Know thyself. Recognize your limitations and understand that you have as much to learn from each situation as the client does. Develop "shadows" with whom you can discuss your projects, try out ideas, test strategies and exchange critical feedback.

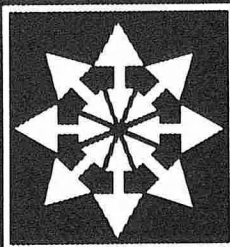
■ Evaluate your efforts. Don't get caught in the process-of-consulting-cannot-be-measured trap. Establish goals, no matter how small, and assess progress continually.

■ Keep up with new trends and techniques. Read the books and journals on your desk, and try to study or work with people who can teach you something new. Attend workshops, conferences, occasional university courses, and take on challenging assignments. Stretch yourself.

The position of the internal consultant is a valuable one, and I disagree with those who believe it is confining or limited. As in any situation, limitations can be opportunities. Opportunities and conscious role shaping, together, can produce results that are as good or better than those achieved using external consultants.

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“The greatest discovery in our generation is that human beings, by changing the inner attitudes of their minds, can change the outer aspects of their lives.” William James

You can tell people to change their behavior; you can tell them to improve their job skills. But, until they decide to make the change from within, not much will happen.

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