Preentry Issues Revisited

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It has been over 20 years since I first wrote about preentry issues in consultation (Cherniss, 1976). I argued then that consultants should address three questions before they begin a consultation: (1) Should I consult in this situation? (2) If I do consult, whose interests will I serve? (3) What will be my primary focus? I believed then that many consultants fail to adequately address these questions, and this adversely affects their work.

I still believe that it’s important for consultants to think through these issues before they agree to work with a client, but I’m now aware of other preentry issues that I had not discussed in my original paper.

1. CONSULTANTS, CLIENTS, AND CONFLICT

When I first wrote about preentry issues, I implicitly assumed that conflict is common in consulting relationships. I now recognize this fact even more clearly than I did before. Consultants and clients almost always disagree about some issues when they first come together. Consultation theory, however, glosses over this reality. By definition, consultation relationships are supposed to be collaborative, but this is a misleading truism, for there usually are areas of disagreement between any would-be consultant and a client. Even when the initial contacts are amicable, the goals, values, and perceptions are never totally compatible.

One potential conflict that consultants and clients should explore during the preentry phase concerns their definitions of the problem. The consultant needs to find out how her or his definition of the problem differs from the client’s. Once the difference is clear, the consultant must decide how to deal with it. There are several options: discuss the difference with the client and look for a mutually agreeable resolution, go with the client’s preferences, or don’t consult. Many consultants get into trouble because they agree to consult without identifying how their definition of the problem differs from the client’s.

Failure to understand how a consultant and client differed in their definition of the problem contributed to the demise of a consultation in a school district. The preentry phase began when the consultant gave a talk on job enrichment and motivation at a conference for school administrators. (An example of job enrichment applied to public school teaching would be to give teachers opportunities for developing their own minicourses on new subjects of special interest to them.) A school superintendent came up after the talk and said, “How would you like to try out some of your ideas in my district?” The superintendent liked the consultant’s presentation because the superintendent had studied job enrichment as part of his doctoral dissertation. He had even written an article on the topic for a professional journal. There seemed to be much common ground between consultant and client.
The superintendent said, "I've got a lot of teachers in my district who have spent 10 to 15 years in the classroom. Most of these people were good, dynamic teachers in the beginning. But now many of them are just going through the motions. They're stagnating." The superintendent thought that job enrichment was a way to rejuvenate these teachers. The consultant agreed.

The consultant proposed that they set up a steering committee made up of teachers and administrators. The consultant would administer a survey to the teaching staff and interview a sample of teachers and administrators. Then the consultant would present the results of this assessment to the committee, and the committee would use the results to design a program. The consultant accepted this proposal and secured the school board's approval.

The consultant believed that stress and job dissatisfaction contributed to midcareer stagnation. The survey questionnaire thus was a standard measure of teacher morale, and in the interviews the consultant concentrated on what teachers found most frustrating in their jobs. The steering committee also focused on problems that most directly concerned teacher morale—"lack of resources" and "insufficient teacher involvement in decision making"—were two of the three problems that they ultimately chose to work on.

The consultant took a long time to realize that the client in this case did not share the consultant's beliefs about the importance of staff morale, but he began to suspect that there might be a discrepancy in their views when a teacher complained, "The superintendent is a cold, ambitious autocrat who's more interested in creating flashy programs than he is in making the school a good place to work." Other teachers expressed the same opinion. They also doubted whether the school board had any interest in making their working lives better. The school board president, who wielded a great deal of power, had been notably unsympathetic to the teachers' concerns in the past. The superintendent, however, raised no objections to the consultant's plan of action or to the steering committee's initial work.

A new superintendent took over midway through the year when the original superintendent accepted a job in another district. The new superintendent supported the project. In fact, he seemed to sympathize with the teachers more than his predecessor had.

The school board requested a progress report at the end of the first year. When he heard the report, the board president said, "I didn't realize this project was about improving teacher morale. I never would have agreed to it if I had. I don't think we should be doing things like this here." He then convinced the rest of the board to terminate the project.

The failure of this consultation points to the importance of exploring potential conflicts in perceptions, goals, and values before the entry process begins. The consultant made a major mistake in assuming that his thinking was compatible with the superintendent's and board's. The superintendent wanted to make teachers more enthusiastic and committed. The consultant wanted to improve the teachers' working conditions and morale. In the consultant's mind, these two goals were compatible: improved working conditions and morale would make teachers more enthusiastic and committed. Unfortunately, the client didn't share this view. The superintendent was willing to redefine job content but not alter authority relationships. Also, a history of stormy labor-management relations in the district had hardened attitudes and made the board unwilling to do anything that gave aid and comfort to teachers.

Some kind of helpful consultation might have been possible if the consultant had asked before entering the system, "What are the differences in perceptions, goals, and values that might affect the consultation, and how should these be handled?" Having recognized the differences, he either could have modified his approach so that it was more congruent with the administration's, or he could have pointed out the differences to the superintendent and negotiated a mutually agreeable resolution. If the consultant and superintendent could not reach agreement, then the consultant should not have consulted in this situation. The fatal error was assuming greater agreement than there actually was.

Even if there is no conflict in goals or values, consultants need to consider what the client is asking for and whether it is the best solution to the client's problem. Consultants should ask, "Should I give the client what he wants or expects?" For instance, if the client requests a workshop on "stress management," should the consultant agree to provide this? I have found that clients rarely know the best way to solve their problems. An administrator troubled by low morale, weak commit-

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ment, and conflict among staff may think that a stress management workshop is a good solution, but it usually isn’t; in fact, it may make things even worse.

Goodstein and Boyer (1972) described a case in which the client’s initial idea about how to solve the problem was unwise. A deputy health commissioner was concerned about staff morale and conflicts with the administration in the local health department. He thought that “communications workshops” would help clear the air, and he asked Goodstein and Boyer to conduct them.

Goodstein and Boyer demurred until they had a chance to do some preentry assessment. After talking to some informants and reviewing articles in the local newspapers, they realized that communications workshops were unwise. They returned to the client and offered an alternative. They would conduct an assessment of the health department and then present recommendations on how to deal with the problems. The client accepted the proposal, probably with relief.

I have often found that potential clients are relieved when I politely suggest a course of action different from what they initially proposed. They rarely seem disappointed or miffed. I suspect that clients usually are unsure about their initial ideas, and they’re reassured by a consultant who seems to know enough to suggest an alternative, but even if the clients were to become annoyed when the consultant suggested a different course of action, consultants shouldn’t assume that what the client wants is what the client should get. There will almost always be a discrepancy between what the client proposes doing and what the consultant feels is best, and consultants need to address this discrepancy during the preentry phase.

If the differences between consultant and client are not great, consultants probably can ignore them and still be successful, but there is no way of knowing how great the differences are without exploring them, and this should occur as early as possible—preferably before the consultant agrees to consult.

It may sound elementary to advise that consultants explore potential conflicts during the preentry phase. Nevertheless, I have seen many consultants fail to do so. Most consultants don’t want to irritate potential clients, and raising possible differences in perceptions, goals, or values during the preentry phase may irritate. The client may even decide not to hire the consultant. But if the consultant and client are able to tolerate the discomfort and resolve the conflicts, the chances of success will be much improved.

In my original formulation, I recognized that consultants might choose not to consult with a client because their values differed, but I now also realize how important it is to confront differences in perceptions, goals, or values during the preentry phase. Confronting differences between client and consultant is an essential task of the preentry phase.

II. CONFLICTS WITHIN THE SYSTEM

Conflicts between the consultant and the client are not the only ones that consultants need to consider during the preentry phase. In my original paper, I pointed out that social systems are made up of different groups, and their interests aren’t totally congruent. In schools, for instance, the teachers’ interests differ in some ways from the students’. I wrote that consultants need to become aware of these differences during the preentry phase and decide whose interests they ultimately will serve.

I now realize that this issue is even more complex than I originally thought. It is not enough for consultants to decide whose interests they will serve. They also must think through how they will deal with the conflicts when they encounter them. A family therapist, for instance, may decide that ultimately she will serve the interests of the parent, for the family’s well-being requires that parents feel comfortable and that their authority be maintained. Nevertheless, the therapist still must figure out how to “join with” the rebellious teenager and help parent and teenager work through the conflicts that divide them.

Consultants to organizations face a similar dilemma, and deciding whose interests they will serve goes only part way toward resolving it. They also must think through the consequences of that decision. How will those whose interests are not being served react to the consultant? How will the consultant deal with conflict between different groups within the client system? How will that conflict impinge on the consulting effort?
Another failed consultation in a school district helps illustrate what I mean. There had been a history of low teacher morale in this particular district, and the school board asked a new superintendent to make things better. The superintendent asked a consultant to help him. After conducting a survey, the consultant recommended that the school district establish a “cooperative decision-making committee,” made up of teachers, board members, and administrators. He also recommended that the committee use a highly structured problem-solving process in which all decisions would be made by consent.

The superintendent and board accepted the consultant’s recommendations. The committee was formed and the consultant trained its members in how to use the cooperative decision-making process. The committee then met once a month. The consultant served as “facilitator.”

It soon became clear that the committee included representatives of three different groups, and each had a different agenda. The teachers welcomed the committee. They were eager to communicate directly with central office administrators and board members. They wanted a chance to tell them about all of their frustrations. They also appreciated the fact that decisions would be made by consensus. They believed that this would give them more power.

Most of the administrators thought the committee was unnecessary. They believed that mechanisms already existed for dealing with the problems that came up in the committee. They also were uncomfortable with consensus decision making, they preferred making decisions unilaterally without having to obtain the approval of the teachers. They also wanted to get things done as efficiently as possible; when a problem was identified, they wanted to solve it quickly rather than spend so much time discussing and analyzing it in committee.

The board had still a different agenda. Board members hoped that the committee would make the teachers less cantankerous and more willing to take on additional burdens. They also wanted the committee to work on significant educational problems.

Although the superintendent was part of the administrative group, he was more sympathetic to the teachers’ position than were any of the other administrators, but he also sympathized with the agendas of the other stakeholders. The consultant, like the superintendent, tried to be neutral.

The committee met for over a year and had few tangible accomplishments. The administrators and board members became frustrated and impatient with the turgid pace and lack of clear results, but the teachers felt that the committee was worthwhile. They had been able to air their grievances and gain perspective on some of their problems, and they felt that the consensus decision-making requirement safeguarded their interests.

The consultant realized that dissatisfaction was mounting within the group. He wanted primarily to serve the superintendent’s interests; but the superintendent was ambivalent. The consultant also was in a quandary because his highly structured prescriptive model did not permit open airing of differences concerning the process itself. There was no built-in mechanism for periodically evaluating the committee and working through conflicts. The consultant had believed that the highly structured problem-solving process would resolve underlying conflicts in values and goals.

Just before one of the monthly meetings, the superintendent said to the consultant, “A number of people on the committee have told me that they are really unhappy with the way things are going. If things don’t improve, the committee will be dissolved.” When the consultant began the meeting, he unilaterally decided to set aside the regular process so that the members could evaluate the committee. The teachers were upset that the process was not being followed. They also felt threatened when administrators and board members expressed their frustrations. The consultant, trying vainly to find a resolution to the conflicts, ultimately became the victim; the teachers, administrators, and board members decided that the consultant was to blame for the group’s problems, and they asked him to leave.

In this example, the consultant dutifully addressed the preentry question of whose interests to serve. He chose to align himself with the superintendent. He even anticipated that there would be conflicts among the other stakeholders, just as Kouzes and Mico (1979) predict in their paper on domain theory. Alderfer (1987) also has recognized the importance of such conflicts in his intergroup theory. The consultant was familiar with these works and realized that conflicts lurked beneath the surface, but he failed to anticipate how much the conflicts would produce tension and dissatisfaction. He also had not worked out a way of addressing this tension when it did emerge. He believed that
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his highly structured "collaborative decision-making model" would help the committee resolve conflicts and keep tension manageable.

The consultant made a mistake that, according to Sarason (1972), others have made when creating "new settings"—he did not adequately anticipate interpersonal conflicts or create viable mechanisms for dealing with them. Sarason has argued that this failure contributes to the demise of many collaborations, from marriages to national governments.

What Sarason wrote about other settings applies equally well to consulting relationships. Consultants must think through how they will be affected by the underlying conflicts that exist within the client system and how they will deal with those conflicts during the consultation. Consultants need to consider how groups with different agendas will respond to them. Consultants also need to think about how they will make those conflicts work for them rather than against them, and they should do this as early as possible—preferably while they still are trying to decide whether or not to consult, for there may be situations in which the conflicts among different stakeholders make consultation unwise.

III. CHOOSING A PRIMARY FOCUS

My thinking also has changed concerning the last preentry issue. In my original paper, I noted that consultants can focus on (1) organizational problems, such as poor communication or low morale; (2) technological problems, such as ineffective teaching strategies; (3) mental health problems of individuals within the system; and (4) problems between the client system and its host environment or the larger community. Originally I was concerned because many consultants were not clear about their primary focus, and the resulting ambiguity interfered with consultation. An example would be a mental health consultant who wanted to work on organizational problems as well as, or instead of, mental health problems. I advocated that consultants decide on a single primary focus during the preentry phase and that they be clear about it.

I still believe that consultants should think about their focus during the preentry stage, but I no longer think that consultants should restrict themselves prematurely to a single focus. In fact, one problem with consultation practice is that consultants often become wedded to one primary focus. Ideally, a would-be consultant should ask, "What does the client really need? What is the most appropriate primary focus in this situation?"

An example illustrates how important it is for consultants to be flexible about the primary focus. A superintendent of a large institution for mentally retarded people asked a consultant for help with some organizational problems. "I'm concerned," she said, "about the lack of support that I'm getting from my five unit directors. They're undermining my efforts to bring about reform." The client had approached this consultant because she knew that he was an organizational specialist, and not surprisingly, the consultant initially adopted an organizational focus.

The consultant and his team began by interviewing a cross section of institution staff. After a few hours, the superintendent came in and asked, "How would all of you like to take a little break and go on a tour of the facility?" The consultants agreed and walked through several of the cottages with the superintendent. They saw how barren life was for the residents, and the superintendent mentioned that there had been reports of patient abuse by staff. The tour made the consultants aware that there were serious problems relating to the provision of care—the absence of stimulating activity for the residents, the custodial orientation of the direct care staff, and physical abuse.

However, these problems concerning direct care of the residents were not part of the primary focus. The consultants were there to work on conflict within the top management group, and they never questioned whether that was the best place—or the only place—to direct their energies.

I am not suggesting that the consultants' primary focus in this case was wrong. One could certainly argue that without support from the unit directors, the superintendent would find it hard to improve the quality of care. What was wrong with the consultants' approach was that they never considered any alternatives to their organizational focus. The consultants were like an orthopedist who automatically does orthopedic surgery on every patient who comes into her office, no matter what the patient needs. There is nothing wrong with physicians deciding to specialize—if a physi-
cian's competence is in orthopedics, she should not practice beyond her competence—but we expect that when orthopedic specialists approach new patients, they will consider that the patients might need something other than, or in addition to, orthopedic work. Yet many behavioral science consultants fail to consider alternatives in practicing their own specialties.

In my original paper, I was concerned about the pernicious effects of not having a clear focus in consultation. Now I am equally concerned about the pernicious effects of adopting the wrong focus. Considering alternative foci during the preentry phase would make consultation practice more effective—and more responsible.

IV. CONCLUSION

From the preceding ideas, I have gleaned the following four action principles for would-be consultants:

1. Confront potential conflicts between consultant and client during the preentry phase.
2. Do not automatically give clients what they request.
3. Identify the conflicting stakeholder interests within the system and consider how those conflicts will affect the consultation. If consultation seems viable in spite of those conflicts, decide on what mechanisms are needed to manage those conflicts during the consultation.
4. Do not become overly committed to a single primary focus in consultation. Think about what type of consulting focus will be most helpful. Consider that more than one primary focus may be useful.

Even though my thinking about the preentry issues has changed, I still believe in the basic premise: consultants should face certain issues even before they agree to consult with a client. Whether or not consultants consciously address those issues, they inevitably make choices. Those choices subsequently influence the outcome of consultation. Consultants who are aware of those preentry issues and think through their choices before starting the consultation will ultimately be more effective.

The preentry issues remind us that consultation is a subtle and complex enterprise. Technicians do not have to deal with subtle and complex problems, but craftsmen do. Consultation is a craft, and those who confront the preentry issues will be giving consultation the care and diligence that a true craft deserves.

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