

Rumination: Some post-conference reflections

[A reflection on the conference ‘What Makes Consultancy Work’ at the South Bank University in January 1994, and published in the conference proceedings by the South Bank University Press]

So what **does** make consultancy work? That all depends on what you mean by “**work**”. Desired outcome drives the evaluative framework within which the underlying dynamics can be understood and assessed. Where definitions of desired outcome are themselves in conflict, the same consultancy exercise may be subject to a wide variety of judgement ranging from “**It worked brilliantly!**” to “**It was an unmitigated and destructive disaster!**”. A smoothly collaborative engagement between consultant and client may be seen from a different perspective as a dysfunctional exercise in collusion, reinforcing the defences of the management and encouraging the scapegoating of some of the most creative elements of the organisation.

A retrospective evaluation of the conference is subject to similar difficulty. The question "Did it **work**?" depends for answer on the intended outcome. The definition of outcome depends in turn on the perspective of the person or group concerned and in any case the outcome definition is likely to be complex and “fuzzy”. The conference itself was an extremely complex and fuzzy event so any overall evaluation is likely to be too simplistic. The backgrounds, needs and current level of understanding and competence differed for each participant, as did the experience of the conference as a whole. The distillation of reflexive evaluation from this primeval soup of meaning is inevitably an exercise in subjective creativity. It offers an interplay between the reality of the conference and the autobiography, selectivity and projected fantasy of the author.

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The conference can be described as a model organisation. It had an entrepreneurial founder who identified a market niche and brought together a management group. In order to realise its task it negotiated a relationship with a host institution which took the financial risk and profit and provided accommodation and support staff. The product was marketed and potential customers identified. A group of professionals was recruited to deliver the product within a pre-planned organisational framework. Management engaged a consultant to help them optimise performance.

The advertised product which attracted so many customers and for which they paid was a combination of information and insight: answers to the question "What makes consultancy work?" and deeper understanding of the dynamics in play. Product was delivered to the customers via the conduct of a two-day educational event involving plenary lectures, parallel-track workshops and small review groups. At another level the process of the conference as a whole provided opportunities for experiential learning about the dynamics of consultancy as each person took up a member role within a temporary organisation undergoing consultant input.

An examination of the processes, structures, boundaries, dynamics, implicit assumptions, emergent symbols and underlying paradigm of the conference provides a rich range of

alternatives which could be woven in to the fabric of any future event of its kind. The cognitive framework, organisational design and operating procedures of any learning system provide both the facilitating environment and the boundary constraints of the learning possible within that system. At a deeper level the dominant anxiety defences and the collusional mechanisms to which they give rise set the limits of tolerance beyond which the learning raises too much anxiety and is repressed, both individually and corporately.

The opening invitation was to explore and integrate the theory and practice of consultancy at a dynamic level in a process of double-loop learning, within the dynamics of the conference as a whole. One of the marks of effective learning systems is the high quality of community within which the learning takes place. The planning group gave some evidence of formation as a learning community over the nine months from conception to delivery of the conference but almost no attention was given to the task of community formation of the total conference membership. As a result learning was essentially individual. Except in the review groups (of which more anon), interaction between members was minimal. Even interaction between members and presenters was prohibited in the plenary sessions. Passive listening generates minimal learning. Increasing the quality of learning calls for frequent opportunities for interaction with peers, articulation, questioning, challenging, developing new ideas and testing out their relevance to practical working situations.

Then there is the issue of learning style. Verbal learning is not the only mode! Dominant learning mode is different for different people. It may also be visual, activity-based or emotive. Indeed current research into the most effective processes of communication indicates the necessity for integrating all four dimensions of words, images, actions and feelings. A few presenters did use the overhead projector, but only to display words (even though one presenter called them "pictures"!). The almost exclusive verbal dominance created an impoverished learning environment which could have been so much more effective. The ancient Chinese proverb: "I hear and I forget, I see and I remember, I do and I understand" can be enlarged to include "I feel and it becomes part of me".

The university setting within which the conference took place provided a powerful if largely unexamined framework for the learning experience, with its lectures, seminars and tutor-groups. One of the unexamined polarities was between teachers and students, knowers and learners. It offered a dependence culture which separated the ignorant from the wise. Paying customers were presumed to be the learners who needed to know what makes consultancy work and to understand its dynamics. Management and presenters were presumed to be the experts providing the answers for which the customers had paid. That may be a simplistic parody of what was going on but it does raise questions about the existential integrity of the conference as a learning system. There was an immense reservoir of practical competence and theoretical understanding among the conference members which went almost untapped. Far from offering role-models of fast-track learning, learning rates appeared to drop off rapidly in proportion to the significance of position within the conference organisation.

Perhaps a future conference can seek to avoid the collusion with immature dependence needs and move towards a more mature adult inter-dependency. The resources of all participants need to be recognised and utilised to the full, while the conference culture as a whole would reflect the reality of a gathering of professionals working and learning together to expand the boundaries of understanding and to make more conscious those dynamic processes which remain unconscious even in the practice of the most competent.

The image of "Knowers' Ark" emerged in one workshop as a refuge from drowning in the sea of uncertainty. Certainly there was a shift in the rescuer fantasy from consultancy as offering answers to the question "What shall we do?" to consultancy as providing meaning in the midst of chaos and unpredictability. The rescuer fantasy persists albeit in a different context. If the task of the consultant in conditions of turbulence and chaos is to enable managers "To know what to do when they do not know what to do", then presumably one task of the conference was to meet the same need in the gathered group of customers. Consultancy as revelation is still seduction into immature dependency in which Knower and his family provide a container for the anxieties of the population, reduced to animals in a pairing culture, to be carried securely through the storms of chaos and landed safely on the South Bank when the threatening waters have begun to recede. Fascinatingly in the final plenary, the conference chairman introduced the conference consultant as having the task "To contain our experience".

As a temporary educational system, the primary task of the conference was the imparting of knowledge about the dynamics of consultancy from presenters to customers. Although learning was taking place as an implicit part of the task, that does not qualify the conference as itself a learning system. Single-loop learning would have required mechanisms for examining the way the task of the conference was being carried out together with effective feed-back loops which changed and enhanced the task performance as it was happening. No such mechanisms appeared to be in place. Indeed the procedures of the conference seemed to militate against any possibility of effective feed-back.

For the conference to operate as a double-loop learning system there would have had to be a second level of procedures which monitored and changed those mechanisms by which the task performance was itself being monitored and evolved. The anxieties of the planning Group appeared to be so high that all such procedures were positively suppressed. One early presenter identified avoidance of double-loop learning as evidence of a collusional relationship between consultant and client, so it is likely that the anxiety defences of the customers were also too intense to tolerate participation in an effective double-loop learning system. Triple-loop learning could not even be conceptualised within the conference culture.

One structure did offer some potential as a learning system. All participants had the regular opportunity to work in a review group with eleven other customers and a facilitator. The twenty-seven facilitators also met as a group which was attended by the consultant to the planning Group. One member of the planning Group worked as a review-group facilitator. Presenters were not involved. When asked, the conference convenor described the function of this structure as one of "monitoring only, since the structures and procedures of the conference were rigidly fixed in advance as a defence against input from the large number of aggressive consultants around". The conference consultant had no input to the conference as a whole until after all its formal proceedings had been completed. It is hardly surprising that his initial fantasies were of decapitation by guillotine or execution by firing squad. Sadly it would seem that the corporate paranoia of the planning group in collusion with presenters, facilitators, customers and consultant, aborted all possibility of running the conference as a model learning system.

In a negative kind of way the situation did offer an opportunity to explore the dynamics of consultancy since these powerful defences and intensely collusional processes are endemic in

the consultant-client interaction. It was unfortunate that such learning had to take place in spite of the formal structures of the conference. The analogy of the sugar refinery, introduced by the consultant in the final plenary, was a powerful symbol of conference process. Here customers were described as grains of sugar being polished in a giant machine. They were ground together in corridors and plenaries, separated into batches for further polishing, mixed together and separated by blasts of hot air followed by further batching, mixing and grinding until each grain was polished.

Several issues emerge. The image of a machine is used to describe the conference structure. Its production processes are pre-set and certainly not open for examination or modification by the grains of sugar! The power differential between machine and grain takes the infantilisation of the dependency culture a stage further as customers are reduced in size and treated as inanimate particles. The lapidary action leads to surface polishing without internal change. Customers get their corners knocked off and emerge as somewhat smoother consultants through a learning process that is only skin deep. In response one person took the image further changing it to a toffee-factory. Here the experience is of melt-down and confusion as customers coalesce into an undifferentiated sticky mess with all individual boundaries dissolved.

Such symbols raise disturbing questions about the process of the conference. They may also reflect some of the depersonalising and disempowering dynamics of consultancy as experienced by the mass of employees subject to management implementation of a consultative report. Was the examination of the dynamics of consultancy from the perspective of the workforce really taboo?

Images of regression, infantilisation and oral dependency surfaced at various points, yet always with ambivalence. The conference consultant noted the dynamics of his appointment as oral seduction leading to a compulsive "lunge for the breast" offered by the client. In this symbol the client is the mother and the consultant presents infantile dependence needs for resources and care. A few minutes later he was using the image of a baby relating to its mother as a parallel to the relationship between client and consultant. Here the infantilisation was reversed. The co-dependency or crossed regression also emerged in the use of D.W. Winnicott's concept of the "third space" between consultant and client. Just as a mother provides a safe enough holding environment within which her child can explore in creative play, so the consultant provides containment within which the client can explore creative new ways of being. At another point in the conference the client was described as providing the containment and security for the consultant to engage in creative activity. Ambivalence between container and contained was profound. Perhaps at the heart of the dynamics of consultancy is the mutual projection of unmet foetal and infantile needs and collusion carrying and caring in displacement.

Birth and death provided another polarity. For one member of the planning group the whole process of the conference from conception to delivery was like a pregnancy ending in birth. Ambivalence surfaced in the question as to whether the planning group had given birth to the conference or whether the group was itself the foetal content being forged together in the process into "a forceful tool for change involving both pain and pleasure". For the conference consultant the ending of the conference was coded with the symbols of death as anticipation of crossing the boundary of the event back into the working world. One of the most powerfully perseverant myths is the reversal of birth and death. We have no experience

of death as the ground for such symbolism. What we do have is the experience of birth as a transition across a turbulent boundary from the safety of the known womb to the insecurity of the unknown world beyond. It is a transition accompanied by the fear of death, of annihilation, of discontinuity, which is itself projected to the end of life and fantasised as an image of dying. Symbols of death code, in displacement, the repressed impingement of birth, albeit without the hope of continuity associated with the symbol ground. This confusion is endemic in the Kleinian or object-relations paradigm of psychoanalysis which formed the interpretative framework of the conference.

For those least conscious of the role of the unconscious in human behaviour, the constant drawing on psychoanalytic insight was an unwelcome intrusion. For them the study of the dynamics of consultancy was restricted to the interactive force-fields of conscious activity. However, for those willing to look below the surface, psychoanalysis provided an essential tool for the exploration of the darker side of the corporate process. To be unconscious of the effects of projection and transference is to be caught up in collusion dynamics, whose dysfunctional and destructive potential can be catastrophic in the consultative engagement.

Here, however, we encountered a fundamental constraint on conference learning. During the last twenty-five years there have been major advances in psychoanalytic research with significant bearing on the dynamics of change in large systems. Breakthrough has come through recognition of the powerful part played by very early imprinting in forming the defences and dynamics of the common unconscious. In the USA, in Germany and here in the UK this paradigm shift in understanding is already opening new avenues of consultancy formation and intervention with the power not only to deepen understanding of the dynamics involved but to change them. Several conference participants expressed concern that no account was taken of these developments. It was as if the psychoanalytic paradigm employed had become fixated in the 1950's and subsequently defended against all further insight. Are the British psychoanalytic institutions really that heavily defended? Although it takes time for new research to seep through to the field of practical application, in today's world that is no reason for depriving such an important conference of resources that could enrich the intellectual climate of British consultancy.

Perhaps the next step in understanding the dynamics of consultancy is to become conscious of how unconscious we are of the power of the human unconscious in shaping the dynamics of every aspect of human endeavour.

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