Consulting Models and My Consulting Anticipations

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I began the MSOD program thinking that I had zero experience consulting. Peter Block's (2011) definition of consulting as helping without being a participant in a system helped me reevaluate the work I have done that could be considered consulting. With that new perspective, I have taken great pleasure absorbing the theoretical foundation that Edgar Schein provides with his principles of consulting. Using Schein's theory as foundation fits neatly for me with Block's specific and tactical advice as well and together these will provide as much structure as I can get before I start to add significantly to my own consulting experience.

Block and Schein write about consulting with different styles but hold many concepts that are similar or analogous. Block (2011) talks about solving problems through consulting that stay solved while Schein (1998) discusses the ultimate goal of consulting as teaching the client how to solve future problems like the consultant would. They have similar views on the modes, models, or roles that consultants can play or fill. Schein (1998) describes possible consulting roles as the expert who tells clients what to do, the doctor who diagnoses a client, or the role Schein advocates: the process consultant who engages with the client to be helpful. Block (2011) also describes a possible role for consultants as expert, another role as a pair-of-hands, but recommends a similar third ideal role of the consultant as collaborative with the client. Both even offer similar tactical advice when in a situation of doubt or confusion—to share this internal struggle with the client as a useful intervention (Block, 2011; Schein, 1998).

I found the most significant shared concept Block and Schein both advocate for to be the authenticity of the consultant. This concept is connected to several of the core principles of consulting that Schein (1998) describes, most specifically his advice to "always say in touch with the current reality" and that "everything you do is an intervention" (p. 60). I take these principles

to signify that the consultant in her or his full personhood is the core of any client intervention and that being aware and embracing this nature is a fundamental step of consulting. Block (2011) uses the term authenticity more directly in his writing and calls out some implications differently, such as including the consultant's needs as a factor of contracting, but I take his intent to be similar that the whole-person of the consultant is the ultimate factor in any client intervention.

Despite similarities and shared notions, Block and Schein have differences in their views on consulting. Some are merely differences in writing style and scope. Schein seems to write mostly theoretically and give life to his theories with case studies as examples (1998). Block in contrast is generally more detailed and prescriptive in his writing, with specific advice on what to say, how to act, even to the level of detail of providing time-tables for meeting agendas (2011). For example, Schein (1998) clearly advocates for client participation with statements that the client owns the problem and the solution, but Block (2011) goes much further by recommending in contracting discussions for a consultant to ask a client for the number of people and the amount of time that client representatives will work on the project.

Two areas that I find Schein and Block to differ more notably on are on resistance and appreciative inquiry. Schein deals with resistance primarily indirectly in my opinion. Some examples of how he brings resistance into the consulting equation as an ingredient but not primary focus include his discussion of the psychology of a client and the ORJI cycle and the nature of clients and their relationships to problems as being one of lack of understanding problems and possible interventions (Schein, 1998). Block (2011) more directly addresses the concept of resistance in a way that assigns it more significance. Not only does he raise the concept of resistance specifically, he also defines it as the core of any consulting project. I find

this logic compelling, because if there wasn't resistance at the heart of the problem the client is facing they likely would have already solved it.

Another important divergence between Block and Schein comes on their views of appreciative inquiry and thematically similar perspectives. For Block (2011) appreciative inquiry is merely one possible approach to working around certain limitations he sees with problem solving techniques. I don't feel that Block (2011) downplays the significance of an appreciative inquiry perspective, but to me Schein (1998) assigns much more importance to the concept although he starts from the same place. When Schein describes appreciative inquiry as a solution to problem solving approaches, he is doing so to acknowledge that problems are often a source of entry for consultants. Schein seems to feel that transforming a consulting relationship from problem solving to the process consulting that he advocates must involve changing perspectives toward appreciate inquiry. Block (2011), on the other-hand, when mentioning the benefits of an appreciate inquiry approach contextualizes it within the greater structure of his consulting model as one tool of many that can be employed when all else has failed (185). Perhaps Block minimizes his take on appreciative inquiry to make his consulting recommendations appropriate to a broader audience of consultants beyond those who might consult on process as Schein seems focused on.

I feel that Schein (1998) almost avoids the topic of specifically assessing a client in a neat way by focusing so thoroughly on process and the consultant's constant intervening merely by being her or his self. To me, Schein's technique of treating the consulting relationship as a reflection of the greater processes and approaches the client engages in elsewhere and the significance he assigns the interactions between the client and consultant makes this relationship the only topic of assessment and intervention, through which all greater impacts will be made.

Block (2011) to me does another neat but different trick of corralling the idea of assessment into what he feels will be more constructive for the client and consultant alike. In his focus on resistance and bringing awareness of forms of threats that clients might feel, Block makes assessments of client resistance, fear of exposure, and fear of loss of control the key actual assessments for a consultant to make rather than those more simplistically related to the client's initial presenting problem.

I have taken away from Block and Schein some ideas that I suspect clients may not start with. The somewhat indirect approaches to assessing relationships rather than problems and the presumptions that clients do not know what their problems are, how to solve them, or what consultants can do are all ideas that Block and Schein advocate for consultants and identify as obstacles from clients (Block, 2011; Schein 1998). In this way, I suspect the most important challenge for a consultant at entry will be to learn as much as possible as quickly as possible about the client's perspective, needs, desires, and expectations. Immediately after entry I view the contracting phase as one where the critical negotiating and persuading of aligning the client's beginning view with a collaborative stance like that advocated by Block and Schein both as a significant challenge and journey to begin. Deciding how far to push on this path will be a skill.

I am excited by Block's (2011) take on resistance as an indicator of nearing significant intersections and I look forward to resistance in my consulting with great curiosity. When I encounter resistance, I will take it as a positive sign of progress and will seek to be as curious as possible and non-judgmental to maximize my ability to learn about this resistance and how it interacts with the subject of my consulting. Resistance will be a step towards important progress.

I feel that my personal style in the workplace aligns well most of the principles Block and Schein recommend for consulting, although they articulate many finer points beyond what I have

considered. I am encouraged by Block's description that all those who support or seek to influence are consultants (Block, 2011) as this means much of my experience as a Manager qualifies as consulting the many times when I have not had direct responsibility for actions. The intersection where I see the most interaction between my personal experience and consulting models is around the area of role played. I find that professionally I am most often approached by colleagues and direct reports seeking to utilize me as an expert. While I often do respond with expert knowledge or advice, I find myself most effective when I take a collaborative stance instead. My impression is that those I partner with also benefit more when I don't necessarily answer their questions but instead ask about other interpretations of the problem, their analysis, or how they think they might be able to resolve the item they asked me to solve. In this way, I find myself following advice to resist taking the expert role, involving the "client" in both process and solution, and demonstrating some principles such as transparency along the way.

I suspect that I would have the most to gain by participating intentionally in the contracting discussions during our forthcoming intensive. As I currently understand contracting, it carries the weight of the possibility of the consulting relationship and is necessary to gain the breadth of focus that makes significant work possible. Furthermore, I think I have had personal experience where I have not successfully engaged in contracting well that has limited my own achievement and caused me frustration. In the past when I have taken assignments at face value and not asked pointed questions about expectations and alternatives I have found trouble down the road. I'll be paying particular attention to contracting in my time in D.C. for my own growth.

References

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