

Occasional Paper #6¹
Consulting Practice Guidelines©: Moving Beyond Answers
Barry B. Grossman, PHD, MBA
drbbg@hsod.net

Organization consulting has over the years become the fall back profession of most folks between jobs, without jobs or without purpose. Indeed, you can be an OD consultant with just the simple act of printing up cards announcing your professional transformation. But there are those who treat the role with more care and attention. While some may still seek temporary shelter under the banner of consulting, many more are choosing it as their primary profession.

Once the decision is made, there are other challenges and requirements. First, of course, is having something to consult about. A topic, a service, an expertise has to have some draw in the marketplace. But as others have noted elsewhere, there is more to the role than expertise. *Ironically, expertise does not equal impact.* Expertise is only one component that consultants must master if they are to succeed in their chosen role.

Hector's Dilemma

Hector has been consulting to businesses on the topic of inventory control and just in time delivery. He had been working as a Director of Inventory Control at a "big box" retailer for 18 years when he was reorganized out of his job. Hector decided to look around some and thought consulting would be an excellent way to market himself. He has been consulting for 18 months, and has made more money than he would have earned in three years as a Director. His old firm has hired him back and he has had several referrals to other businesses out of the retail sector. As he has gone farther a field, he has been less successful, even though he has given the same advice that has worked very well with his big box clients. Hector is vaguely uncomfortable, since he does not know why he has not succeeded recently. He has begun to think that maybe this consulting stuff is not quite so easy as he first thought.

¹ A series of short papers published regularly on topics of interest to organization consultants.

Hector's dilemma is not uncommon. Why will the very same piece of advice work in one setting and fail badly in another? The advice is good, Hector asserts. And, there is evidence he is correct. So, how can these very different outcomes be explained?

Hector, like many of us, is confusing the means and ends of consulting. Hector is very clear about what needs to happen and goes straight to that action. It is just that the folks with whom Hector works, his clients, are not ready to go there with him. They prefer to stick with what they know, *even* though it may be failing. Better to stick with what is known, then to take on something they do not trust from some latter day prophet. At first this might be confusing and just plain illogical. And it is. But it is also characteristic of clients who will act only when they are confident in the source as well as the content of advice.

Hector's Answer

Consulting demands more than expertise. It also must include all the preparation leading up to an intervention and closing down the engagement once the work is complete. To give an answer is not enough. To give advice is not enough. Consultants must surround their advice with enough *context*, so that what will happen and how it will happen becomes understandable and manageable for the client.

If Hector's answer is not an answer, what is he to do? He knows his advice is good, but he fears he will fail because his clients are not listening. Hector is now faced with finding out more about consulting. And he does. He reads books and goes to workshops. He now knows about contracts and resistance and interventions.

Specifically, Hector learns that there are definite stages or steps that must be addressed to prepare clients to take action and make changes. He has learned the Stages of Consulting©, their purpose and what they achieve:

- Entry
 - * Scan for work and work relationship information
 - * Outcome: Go/No-go decision
 - * Product: Hope
- Contracting
 - * Agree on work tasks and work relationship
 - * Outcome: Project clarity
 - * Product: Written agreement
- Data-Gathering
 - * Collect information
 - * Outcome: Problem identified
 - * Product: Data based evidence
- Action Decision

- * Review possible actions
- * Outcome: Select intervention
- * Product: Plan of action for improvement

- Intervention
 - * Carry out agreed on activities
 - * Outcome: Improved performance
 - * Product: Changes in operation

- Ending
 - * Review and assess the consulting project
 - * Outcome: Closure
 - * Product: Follow-up and new work relationship

Hector now feels he has the keys to the kingdom. If he follow the steps and THEN gives his advice, he will succeed.

Hector meets with his current client, but rather than talk about inventory control, he begins talking about having a contract and roles and deliverables. He explains to his client that he needs these things so he can do his job. He talks about their working relationship and, finally, how they would work together. His client after hearing all this is surprised. He thought he was getting information on how to control just in time delivery through scheduled shipment software. Now, he is unexpectedly hearing about contracts and roles. So, he stops Hector and ask him, “just why are we talking about this stuff when I want to talk about my freight shipment scheduling?” Hector gets ready to respond and realizes, his only answer is that this is what he has read in books and heard in workshops.

Consulting Practice Guidelines©

Hector is caught between theory and practice. In theory, he believed that knowing the Stages of the Consulting would help him overcome the short fall he experienced in previous consulting efforts. What he has encountered is the realization that knowledge of the steps and understanding why he needs to follow them are two different questions. Hector’s knowledge of the Stages helps him understand how he might approach consulting engagements: actions to focus on, sequencing of events and establishing a framework for his client work. What the knowledge of the Stages does not provide is why he needs to follow them. While Hector knows what to do, he has not addressed why he approaches his work in this way. Once he can answer the reason for using the Stages and *how the client benefits*, then he has begun to build his Practice Guidelines. Practice Guidelines are the specific reasons and rationale explaining consultant behavior. Hector might know the Stages, but until he can explain clearly to himself and his client the reasons for such action, both he and his client will remain confused.