

**The Concept of Client from a Process
Consultation
Perspective: A Guide for Change Agents**

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Working Paper #3946

March 1997

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Any helping or change process always has a target or a client. In most discussions of consultation we refer to "clients" as if they were always clearly identifiable, but in reality, the question of who is actually the client can be ambiguous and problematical. One can find oneself not knowing whom one is working for, or working with several clients whose goals are in conflict with each other. One can identify "targets" of change, others whose problems we can see clearly but who do not see their own problems and would resist being seen as "clients." One can be working with an individual, with a small or large group, or with a slice of a total organization in a large meeting. One can be working with the same individual but in different roles, at one time counseling her as an individual manager, and at another time, helping her design a large scale intervention to bring two of her divisions into a collaborative relationship with each other. In this paper I would like to provide 1) some simplifying models to help us understand types of clients and types of client relationships, 2) some general principles that apply to all of them, and 3) some illustrations of issues that arise with each of the different client types.

Simplifying Model 1: Basic Types of Clients

1. Contact Clients--The individual(s) who first contact the consultant with a request, question, or issue.

¹ This paper is based on the Distinguished Speaker presentation made to the Consultation Division of the Academy of Management, Cincinnati, Aug. 12, 1996. I wish to thank Katrin Kaeufer and Otto Scharmer for their editorial and conceptual help with this paper.

2. **Intermediate Clients**--The individuals or groups that get involved in various interviews, meetings, and other activities as the project evolves.
3. **Primary Clients**--The individual(s) who ultimately "own" the problem or issue being worked on; they are typically also the ones who pay the consulting bills or whose budget covers the consultation project.
4. **Unwitting Clients**--Members of the organization or client system above, below, and in lateral relationships to the primary clients who will be affected by interventions but who are not aware that they will be impacted.
5. **Indirect Clients**--Members of the organization who are aware that they will be affected by the interventions but who are unknown to the consultant and who may feel either positively or negatively about these effects.²
6. **Ultimate Clients**--The community, the total organization, an occupational group, or any other group that the consultant cares about and whose welfare must be considered in any intervention that the consultant makes.

The contact client, the person who initially contacted the consultant, usually introduces the consultant to other people in the organization who, in turn, may work with the consultant to plan activities for still others in the organization. As the project proceeds, the consultant must be careful to distinguish between the client types, especially between primary clients who pay for the work and the unwitting and ultimate clients who will be affected by it. The definition of what is helpful may change as one deals with intermediate, primary, unwitting and ultimate clients, requiring of the consultant broader mental models that permit thinking about social systems, networks, lines of influence, power relations and other socio-psychological concepts.

² The concept of indirect client was contributed by Otto Scharmer.

One of the ethical dilemmas of helping, whether we are talking about a consultant, a manager helping a subordinate, or a friend helping another friend, derives from the fact that the helper is always dealing with more than one part of the client system, and some parts may not have the same needs or expectations as others (Schein, 1966). In the managerial context we think of these as different "stakeholders" and acknowledge that it is central to the managerial role to balance the interests of these groups. Managers and consultants, therefore, have something to learn from each other on how such multiple relationships can be conceptualized and managed when one intervenes in complex systems.

Simplifying Model 2: Types of Clients by Levels of Issues

As the helping process unfolds, the consultant must also think about a different classification of clients based on the nature of the problem being addressed. This has been argued most clearly by Rashford and Coghlan in their 1994 book on "The Dynamics of Organizational Levels." Based on their framework we can distinguish six levels of problems or issues, each of which involves somewhat different individuals or groups as clients.

1. Individual Level--The individual level can be thought of as the "intra-psychic" issues that a given person has for which the relevant intervention is some form of individual counseling but also involves what Rashford and Coghlan identify as the fundamental problem of bonding with others, of membership in an organization or community. Interventions such as career counseling become relevant and helping an individual employee to become more effective as a participant in the organization would also fall into this category, thus subsuming various forms of coaching, mentoring, and training. Individual help in any of these forms could be provided to the contact client, to

individuals in the intermediate or primary client system, or even to members of the unwitting or ultimate client populations.

- 2. Inter-personal Level**--This level contains problems or issues that pertain to the relationship between the individual and other members of the organization or client system. The consultant would, in these cases, be working with more than one person at a time, or, if working with individuals one at a time, would be working on the relationship rather than just the individual's intra-psychic issues. The one-on-one context may remain the same, but the focus of the inquiry would be on the relationship being explored, on the client's roles in various groups, and his or her effectiveness as a team member. The interventions described for the individual level might well overlap with the interventions most appropriate to this level, but in the individual case the consultant would focus more on the impact of relationships on the individual, and in the latter case more on the impact of the individual's behavior on others.
- 3. Face-to-Face Group Level**--This level shifts to problems or issues that are lodged in how a group or team functions as a group. "Face-to-face" implies that the group is conscious of itself as a group even if it is not co-located or meets physically on a regular basis. Electronic connections can serve as a surrogate for face-to-face communication if the members define themselves as working together. In these cases the consultant plays a variety of helping roles from being a non-directive facilitator of meetings to managing the agenda or even helping to structure the work of the group. The consultant may meet with members individually for purposes of identifying issues or agenda concerns, and those individuals can come from any of the above client types, but the focus is on how the group works as a group.
- 4. Inter-group Level**--This level focuses on problems or issues that derive from the way in which groups, teams, departments, and other kinds of

organizational units relate to each other and coordinate their work on behalf of the organization or larger client system. The consultant now has to intervene at the system level and be able to think in terms of large multi-unit interventions.³ Blake's Intergroup Exercises (Blake et al, 1989) and Beckhard's Confrontation Meeting (Beckhard, 1967) would be examples where whole units are involved. Alternatively the consultant may work with the individual leaders of the various departments or groups or with a group in which the members function as representatives of their units. The configuration of the clients will vary, but the issues addressed at this level will always pertain to improving the coordination of the organizational units involved.

5. Organizational Level--This level pertains to problems or issues that concern the mission, strategy, and total welfare of the whole client system whether that be a family unit, a department, an organization or a whole community. Again, whether or not the consultant is working with individual leaders, groups or "inter-groups" will vary, but the focus will be on total systems level problems. Examples would be some of the total organizational Survey Feedback Projects (Likert, 1961, 1967), Weisbord's Future Search Conferences (Weisbord & Janoff, 1995), Open Systems Planning (Beckhard & Harris, 1987), Blake and Mouton's Grid OD (1969, 1989), Integrated Strategic Change (Worley, Hitchin & Ross, 1996) and some forms of cultural analysis if pursued by top management (Schein, 1992).

6. Inter-Organizational Level--This level deals with important interventions that influence organizational sets, consortia, industry groups, and other systems where the members of the system are themselves complete organizational units but are working in some kind of alliance or joint venture

³ An excellent review of such interventions has recently been published by Bunker and Alban (1997).

with each other. Many of the same kinds of interventions as are used in the organizational or inter-group level would also apply here.

7. Larger System Level--Finally, this level would pertain to problems or issues that involve the wider community or society where the consultant may be working with social networks, with organizational sets, or with community groups that involve a wide variety of issues pertaining to the health of larger systems, even the planet in the case of environmentally oriented projects such as "The Natural Step" (Robert, 1996).

My purpose in presenting both of these typologies is to focus us on the inherent complexity of client identification and to note that even though the consultant may be working most of the time in one-on-one or small group situations, it will make a difference whether or not the person or group is a contact, intermediate, or primary client and whether the problem focus is individual, group or organizational. However, the psycho-dynamics of the relationship between consultant and client remain essentially the same even though the problem focus may shift levels. Given those psycho-dynamics, are there broad principles that characterize the consulting relationship?

Process Consultation Principles in Regard to Clients

Does being a process consultant as contrasted with being an expert or a doctor makes a difference in how one conceives of the client relationship or are there general principles that govern that relationship regardless of type of client or level of intervention (Schein, 1987, 1988)? I believe there are such general principles and that they apply to all forms of consultation but especially in the process consultation role.

PRINCIPLE 1: ALWAYS BE HELPFUL

CONSULTATION IS PROVIDING HELP; THEREFORE, EVERY CONTACT SHOULD BE PERCEIVED AS HELPFUL.

What this means in practice is that consultants must be very clear about their own motives. Sometimes the need to maintain the relationship and obtain additional income leads to interventions that may not be helpful. The consultant must be willing to do less if that will be more helpful. Similarly, the need to gather data often serves the consultant's need more than the client's. The process consultant should create the conditions where the client will learn how to gather her own data with the consultant's help rather than waiting for the consultant to complete "data gathering."

PRINCIPLE 2: ALWAYS DEAL WITH REALITY

YOU CANNOT BE HELPFUL IF YOU DO NOT KNOW THE REALITIES OF THE CLIENT SYSTEM; THEREFORE, EVERY CONTACT SHOULD SURFACE DIAGNOSTIC INFORMATION ABOUT THE STATE OF THE CLIENT SYSTEM.

There is always a great temptation to define current reality in terms of our own past experience. We "recognize" client problems as being similar to ones we have seen before or have experienced. For every kind of consultant it is essential to engage in a period of exploratory inquiry that identifies as much as is possible the here and now reality that the client is experiencing.

PRINCIPLE 3: ACCESS YOUR IGNORANCE

YOU CANNOT DETERMINE WHAT IS THE CURRENT REALITY IF YOU DO NOT GET IN TOUCH WITH WHAT YOU DON'T KNOW

ABOUT THE SITUATION AND HAVE THE WISDOM AND THE COURAGE TO ASK ABOUT IT.

What this means in practice is that consultants, especially process consultants, must learn to always identify and accept what it is that they truly do not know about the client situation. Instead of constantly testing hypotheses by asking rhetorical or leading questions, consultants should ask themselves what it is that they truly do not know and be prepared to engage in genuine exploratory inquiry. Such inquiry if based on true ignorance will be helpful in that both the consultant and client will learn some important new things about the situation as they explore it together. In a sense, ignorance, is the outside consultant's greatest lever in helping the client to figure out what is going on. There is nothing potentially more powerful than the "dumb question" and there is nothing more important for the client to learn than to become a competent and enthusiastic inquirer himself.

PRINCIPLE 4: EVERYTHING YOU DO IS AN INTERVENTION
EVEN THOUGH THE GOAL OF EXPLORATORY INQUIRY THROUGH
ACCESSING IGNORANCE IS DIAGNOSTIC INFORMATION, THE
REALITY IS THAT EVERY QUESTION OR INQUIRY IS AN
INTERVENTION AT THE SAME TIME AND MUST BE TREATED AS
SUCH.

This principle has several implications. First of all, consultants must be aware that everything they do vis-a-vis the client will have some impact on the client and the client system. Even the purest initial exploratory inquiry, even the silence as the consultant listens attentively, is an intervention in that it elicits and structures the client's behavior and thinking along certain lines and creates certain feelings in the client. The consultant's presence, style, and personality

influence clients and must be taken into account. However, the reality is that only the client knows what that impact is so the consultant's initial diagnostic interventions have to be planned in terms of her general understanding of the psycho-dynamics of the helping relationship, and she must be very sensitive to observing client reactions to those initial interventions.

PRINCIPLE 5: THE CLIENT OWNS THE PROBLEM AND THE SOLUTION

THE REALITY IS THAT ONLY THE CLIENT HAS TO LIVE WITH THE CONSEQUENCES OF THE PROBLEM AND THE SOLUTION, SO THE CONSULTANT MUST NOT TAKE THE MONKEY OFF THE CLIENT'S BACK.

Only the client knows deep down whether a given diagnostic formulation, course of action or proposed next step will be helpful to him and to others in the organization in which he operates. However, the consultant's inquiry process may be necessary to help the client to appreciate what those consequences are. The client owns the problem and solution, but the consultant and client jointly own the inquiry process that will reveal what the correct next steps might be. If we have learned anything at all about culture, it is that the outsider can never fully comprehend its nuances and, therefore, must be very careful in the assumptions she makes about what will and will not work in a client's culture. Similarly, if the consultant needs to "gather more data" only the client ultimately knows what impact a particular data gathering method will have on the organizational system. Therefore, clients must always be involved and "own" all the "next steps" that are taken.

PRINCIPLE 6: GO WITH THE FLOW BUT SEIZE TARGETS OF OPPORTUNITY

ALL SYSTEMS DEVELOP CULTURES AND ATTEMPT TO MAINTAIN THEIR STABILITY THROUGH MAINTENANCE OF THOSE CULTURES. THEREFORE, ONE MUST "GO WITH THE FLOW." AT THE SAME TIME, ALL SYSTEMS HAVE AREAS OF INSTABILITY WHERE MOTIVATION TO CHANGE EXISTS. ONE MUST BUILD ON EXISTING MOTIVATIONS AND CULTURAL STRENGTHS, AND SEIZE TARGETS OF OPPORTUNITY.

It is this principle that is probably hardest to implement if one takes the doctor or expert role because it predisposes one to pre-formulated solutions. In my experience the interventions that have worked best are the ones that have identified and used the current realities that existed in the client system. The consultant should look for cultural strength to draw on and locate areas of motivation that can be drawn on. In this context appreciative inquiry⁴ and other interventions that focus the client on positive aspirations, ideal states, future targets, and the like are critical.

PRINCIPLE 7: BE PREPARED FOR SURPRISES AND LEARN FROM THEM

EVERYTHING THAT HAPPENS IS NEW DATA, AND EVERYTHING YOU THINK YOU KNOW ABOUT THE CLIENT SYSTEM IS ONLY A HYPOTHESIS TO BE TESTED THROUGH FURTHER INTERVENTIONS.

No matter how carefully the consultant plans every intervention, no matter how carefully she constructs her role, accesses her ignorance, tries to involve

⁴ Appreciative inquiry has been described by Barrett (1995) and Cooperrider & Srivastva (1987).

the client, and tries to be perpetually helpful, things will happen that turn out to be mistakes, clients will get upset, reject efforts on the part of the consultant and in other ways mess things up. In other words, the mental model of the client situation that the consultant builds up gradually is always just a hypothesis to be tested further, and new areas of ignorance will constantly be revealed.

Whatever happens is therefore data, grist for the mill to be digested and integrated. This issue surfaces most clearly when the consultant makes a suggestion or offers advice and is flatly turned down. After getting over the shock, what the consultant must do is to ask the question: What have I learned from the "turn down" about the client and about the client's total situation that I must now integrate into my mental model?

In general, it is this principle that makes it difficult to be an expert or doctor in complex human situations. It is perfectly appropriate to float hypotheses, to make suggestions in multiple alternative form, but I seriously question whether the consultant can ever give a firm recommendation. The pride that many consultants display in their ability to not only make the recommendation but to stick by it even if the client rejects it, reveals on their part an area of ignorance and misconception about human systems. I have heard consultants brag about their "integrity" because they will not change their recommendation no matter what the client thinks, but I fear this reveals not integrity so much as megalomania. In my experience, no matter how much I know about a given system, I keep on being surprised by how much I don't know. And certainly when a client rejects a suggestion, I need to know why and what have I missed. This issue leads to the final principle.

PRINCIPLE 8: SHARE THE "PROBLEM"

NEITHER THE CLIENT NOR THE CONSULTANT CAN FULLY UNDERSTAND THE REALITY OF THE SITUATION; DEFINING THAT REALITY IS AN ONGOING JOINT EFFORT IN TERMS OF WHAT TO DO NEXT.

There are several practical implications of this principle. First of all, never accept the initial formulation of "the problem" as what may ultimately become the target of the joint effort between the consultant and the client to make some changes or improve the situation. Sometimes the client will hide "the real problem" because he is testing the consultant to determine whether the relationship is "trustful" enough to reveal what may be personally very intimate information. Sometimes the client thinks he is being completely open but does not have the perception necessary to see the reality. In either case the consultant and client must work together to search out what is really going on.

Second, and more important, as the consultation proceeds there will arise situations where the consultant truly does not know what to do next. It is at this point that we often fall into the expert trap and unilaterally decide the next step instead of "sharing the problem" and "forcing" the client to help us to help her. This point applies especially to process decisions, for example, should we bring the subordinates together into a meeting or interview them separately? Sometimes I think I know what would work best but often I forget that this is only a hypothesis and that I can never understand the client's culture in the same way that he does. At that point I should raise the question with the client and we should jointly inquire into the pro's and con's and make a joint decision. I am not giving up my expertise in that process. I am gathering additional information and using the client's expertise to help us both make a decision that will meet the goals we are after.

What is striking about the consequences of this kind of "sharing the problem" is how much we both learn. I learn new things about the organization and how the client thinks about it; the client learns how to think more diagnostically about her own organization; we both learn what would be the most effective next step to take. All of this learning would be cut off if I "suggested" that I should now interview each person and the client agreed because she might assume that I knew what I was doing. Needless to say, this kind of sharing the problem requires not only the correct mental model of how consultation works, but a certain amount of humility and faith in the client. What we then discover is that this faith in the client may become one of the most powerful positive interventions that gives the client the courage to do what needs to be done.

Third, this mental model of the helping process is consistent with the emerging models of the change process in general. Increasingly we are discovering that change can be planned only to a certain degree and that unpredicted events and contingencies make it necessary to think of different kinds of change, as most recently documented by Orlikowski and Hofman (1997): 1) anticipated change which we can plan for; 2) opportunity based change which the consultant and client can develop "on line," and 3) emergent change, which neither the consultant nor the client could have anticipated.

In summary, we can see that as the consultant/helper gets beyond individual counseling or simple group facilitation, the diagnosis of whom to work with, what to focus on, and whose interests to consider in planning next steps or major interventions become very complex. This complexity typically requires one to share these issues with whatever part of the client system the consultant is working with at the time, to anticipate surprises, and to be prepared to deal with targets of opportunity. The consultant rarely would go off and figure out by

herself "what to do next" because she will never know enough about the culture and politics of the larger system to make such decisions. Instead she would involve as much of the intermediate or primary client system as she has access to in planning at what level and by what means to continue to be helpful.

Contact and Intermediate Client Issues

The helping process always starts with a "contact" client who may be thought of as the first person with whom the consultant meets concerning the problem or issue, whether or not that person admits to owning the problem that is to be worked on. If I am to be helpful in terms of the assumptions of process consultation, I need to know as soon as possible what perceptions and expectations this contact client and others in his organization have of me and my consulting philosophy. I especially do not want to be cast into the expert or doctor role prematurely and, at the same time, I want the contact client to feel helped even if we have only had a brief phone conversation. The principle that every conversation must be felt to be helpful by the other person applies even in this early interaction.

Given the above concerns, I must start with broad inquiries that identify the realities in the situation and that reduce my ignorance of what is going on. What is on the client's mind? Why has the person called or come to visit? Why at this particular time? The reasons contact clients give then provide clues as to their perception which I can either reinforce or "correct". As I listen to the answers I calibrate as best I can whether the situation warrants continuing the relationship—that is, will I be able to be helpful in the situation. I have to make an assessment of whether the contact client and others in his organization who may be involved have a willingness and readiness to engage in a joint inquiry and problem solving process. I have to discover whether the client's intent is

constructive or not, so that I do not unwittingly become a pawn in someone's political game. I can only discover the answers to these questions through a process of careful questioning that is simultaneously exploratory and helpful. I always have to operate by the overarching principle that whatever I say or do is an intervention which must be perceived as much as possible as helpful in the immediate situation. My goal is to have the contact client feel that she not only received the information she sought but also got some help in thinking about the problem itself.

The contact client is typically not the person who has a problem that must be worked on. He may even be just an agent for someone else in the organization who either does not want to take the time or is too embarrassed or troubled to seek the help directly. The contact client often just creates access to others who may or may not be the owners of problems. These "intermediate clients" in turn may create contact with the person who becomes the primary client or may themselves turn out to be the primary client. But initially one does not know, once again requiring an inquiry process that is simultaneously revealing and helpful.

My goal in this inquiry process is also to create the correct initial impression of how my consultation will proceed. Hence the questions should also suggest some avenues for the contact client to explore on his own and to help him to structure his next steps with the intermediate client. As the conversation develops, I may suggest alternative steps for the contact client to offer to the intermediate client: a meeting, a direct telephone conversation, or maybe just some further questions to put to him regarding what he may have in mind.

If the contact client and I agree that the next step is for the intermediate client to call me directly or to set up a meeting, my focus shifts to the creation

and management of the intermediate client relationship. This involves setting a schedule, a time for a call or meeting, a decision on where to meet, who should be at the meeting, how long the meeting should be, and what the purpose of the meeting should be. In the ideal situation the contact or intermediate client is the primary client, but primary clients often do not want to expose their issues until the consultant has been "legitimated" by initial contacts. The contact client may be testing whether or not the consultant is the type that would work well with the primary client, and/or the primary client may call for an initial meeting to "test the chemistry" before a commitment to further work is made.

Primary Client Issues

A primary client is a person or group that has a particular problem or issue that has started the process of help seeking. One operational way to define the primary client is to ask whose budget will pay for the consultation. That question often reveals a complexity that the consultant must be careful to diagnose. A specific case, actually my first organizational consulting experience, will illustrate the dilemma.

During my second year as an Assistant Professor at MIT I was asked by my mentor, Douglas McGregor, whether a colleague and I would be willing to take on a consulting assignment at a nearby company. Doug did not have the time himself and was anxious to introduce all of us on the faculty to the experience of consulting. (Doug was, by definition, the contact client because he had been approached by the company).

The assignment was to do an interview survey of the technical personnel in the company's research laboratory. According to the VP of Industrial Relations and Personnel there was a morale problem in the lab and the laboratory director was interested in finding out what the employees thought so that the problems could be fixed. It was this VP

who knew McGregor personally and had asked Doug to either do it or find someone who could. The VP had not only authorized the study but our consulting expenses came out of his budget. He assured Doug that the director of the research labs was on board and was delighted to have the survey done. All of this information came from Doug, our contact client. We never met the VP but we did talk to the director of the lab and learned that he was in favor of doing the interviews and would set up the process with his technical people.

After some months of careful interviewing, my colleague and I collated the data and wrote a fairly complete report on all of the issues that had been identified by the technical staff. As might have been expected, among the complaints registered were many about the managerial style of the director. We noted these complaints in one section of our report. A feedback session was scheduled with the director during which my colleague and I were prepared to go through all of the data that were contained in the report. We had requested two hours since there was a lot of information to cover and we wanted to be very thorough in showing how valid the information really was by showing various statistics.

My colleague and I walked into the director's office, presented him with a copy of the report (he was the first person in the company to see it), and started our presentation while he leafed through the report. He immediately spotted the section in which his management style was mentioned, read it over quickly and then interrupted us in a rather angry manner with a curt "thank you" and dismissed us. We had had no more than 15 minutes with the director and were not invited back either by him or the VP. We never found out what happened to the report which we left with the director.

In retrospect, we had never identified or properly targeted who was our primary client. Was it the VP, was it the Lab Director, or was it even Doug McGregor? Each of them had a stake in the outcome and each had a problem to solve. But by not inquiring further before leaping into action we never found out what problem we were really addressing by our survey. We did not really

know why Doug wanted us to do this assignment. We never found out what the VP who was willing to pay for it really had in mind. For example, might he have been gunning for the director and saw this as an opportunity to put him down? Had he been trying to influence the director's management style and saw the survey as a nice outsider intervention to provide a handle on the situation?

We never knew whether the director really favored the project or whether he was "coerced" into it by the VP. And, most important of all, we never found out what the lab director really wanted from the survey. He clearly did not want to hear about his management style. By not figuring out who the primary client was and involving that primary client in designing the project we fell into a whole series of traps with unknown outcomes. We never found out what happened to the report, to the director, or to the relationship between the VP and McGregor. In retrospect, if we had paid attention to the fact that the project was paid for by the VP, we should have insisted on a session with him to try to learn more about his motives and why he was willing to foot the bill. We should have asked why it was not being charged to the research lab. Our ignorance and our failure to access it, led us to a series of interventions whose impact we could never determine.

Once the primary client is clearly identified, the consultant must engage in a diagnostic active inquiry process with that individual or group. As the above case illustrates one cannot take the word of the contact or intermediate clients on what the primary client might want or need. Getting information directly from the primary client not only guarantees accuracy, but, more importantly, begins to build the relationship that will allow the consultant and the primary client to work together to diagnose the situation and develop further interventions. Remembering the principle that it is the client who owns the problem, it is essential to avoid the trap of the consultant starting to make

suggestions and interventions based on second hand information.

Furthermore, if the consultant moves ahead on her own, the primary client may be relieved, may become dependent, and create the inappropriate situation of the consultant ending up owning the problem.

Unwitting and Ultimate Client Issues

Unwitting and ultimate clients are the stakeholders whose interests should ultimately be protected even if they are not in direct contact with the consultant. In other words, the helping process should not help a primary client if it will obviously hurt some other group that the consultant should be concerned about. If I am asked to help a manager to win a political battle over another manager, I must ask myself what will ultimately be best for the entire department or organization. Only if I can justify in my own mind that the ultimate client will be better off in terms of my own values can I justify helping this manager.

The distinction here between unwitting and ultimate clients is mostly a matter of degree. The "unwitting" client can be thought of as the peer, the boss, the subordinate of the primary client I am working with so the consequences of what we do must be considered immediately because of their proximity. The "ultimate" client is better thought of as the whole organization, community, even society in the sense that we would not be providing consultation help to potential criminals or terrorists. At the extreme the value issues are simple. But for the proximal unwitting client the situation may be more ambiguous and complex. For example in the case above, my colleague and I never considered seriously the possibility that the lab director was an unwitting client and that an unfavorable survey might lead to his being punished. Nor did we consider what the director might do vis-a-vis his technical staff if he was upset over the

negative comments about his management style. We did keep the interviews anonymous so at some level we were thinking about protecting the employees, but they were not the only unwitting clients in the situation

Primary clients pay for the services directly. Ultimate clients are affected by the outcomes but may not even know that anything is going on. Unwitting and ultimate clients, therefore, must be defined by the consultant in terms of her own professional criteria. For example, should a consultant help a client manager to exploit the workers under him? Should a sales manager help her sales representatives to get better deals at the expense of the customers? Should a consultant help a company close a plant in a community that will clearly be harmed by such an action? There are never easy answers to such questions, but it is important in all helping relationships to recognize the questions. That is, anytime we help someone we are, in effect, allying ourselves with the goals and values they represent. We cannot later abdicate responsibility for the help we may have provided if that help turns out to have bad effects on another part of the organization or other groups.

Illustrations of Client Complexity

To delve deeper into these issues it is necessary to provide somewhat greater detail with the aid of two cases.

Case 1. Client Complexity in the Multi Company

Client complexities in an evolving project can best be illustrated by reviewing some aspects of my work with the Multi Company, a European multi-divisional chemical company in which I ended up doing a variety of consultation activities over a period of several years (Schein, 1985). I was initially called by the director of management development, Dr. Peter Stern, and invited to consider giving a seminar to the top forty-five managers of Multi at their annual meeting six months hence. I tentatively agreed because I had met Stern at a previous seminar where he had

heard me talk. He convinced me that a similar presentation would be very relevant to their company and I became interested because of the opportunity to make contact with a top management group of a large multi-national organization.

Before the assignment was finalized, however, I had to meet the president, Richard Maier, to see if we could agree on the purpose of the presentations and to test whether Maier would be satisfied with my approach to the meeting. A special trip was set up to meet Maier, who now became the intermediate client. We met, reached agreement on goals, established that we could be comfortable with each other, and, therefore, both agreed to go ahead. Maier now became the primary client.

The next step was to meet a month later with the director of training, Mr. Kunz, who designs and manages the annual meetings. He also became a primary client for purposes of developing a detailed plan of when and how I would give my presentations and how this would fit into the structure of the annual meeting. His requirements, however, had to be aligned with what the CEO, Mr. Maier had indicated to me as his basic purpose in having me give the presentations. At the same time Mr. Kunz became a consultant to me in helping me to design my sessions to be relevant to the issues that were salient in Multi at the time and to design a presentation that would fit into the culture of Multi.

At the annual meeting itself I met many other managers. The members of the executive committee were clearly potential primary clients, as were some of the division heads and region heads. In each of these relationships the twin goals of inquiring and simultaneously being helpful were my criteria for how to interact with each new person I met. During the meeting a planning group led by Stern which included the CEO and several other members of the executive committee monitored the meeting and replanned events as needed. They asked me to sit in with them and help them in this process, so they became a primary client for that purpose.

In terms of my actual presentation, the whole group of forty-five were my primary clients in the sense that they owned the problems that my seminar addressed. Individual members sought me out during the meeting and subsequently became primary clients concerning particular

issues. After the meeting the CEO, Maier, asked me to continue to consult with the company to make it more innovative. He defined himself, the executive committee, and Stern as primary clients and asked Stern to manage my time during the visits, so Stern once again became the contact client.

As this scenario developed I ended up working with the senior group, various individuals in the executive committee, and with the participants at the next two annual meetings. The company as a whole was clearly one level of the ultimate client and various departments that were impacted by specific projects were unwitting clients, especially as the company began a process of down-sizing in various of its divisions. Dr. Stern and Mr. Kunz continued in the dual roles of contact clients and primary clients in that management development and training issues became one of the prime foci for the later consultation efforts. Various other managers also became contact and primary clients in that they began to communicate with me directly about attending meetings or getting help with specific problems.

In this case I had to constantly re-assess what my relationship was to each of the people I met in Multi and to remain aware of how interventions in one part of the client system could have impact on other parts of the client system. If I was not sure of such impacts I fell back on "sharing the problem" by involving insiders in the questions or issues rather than trying to make decisions by myself.

Case 2. Consulting with Consultants: The Jackson Strategy Consultants

An interesting example of the ultimate client issue came up in a project where I was part of a faculty group helping a strategy consulting firm to become more effective as consultants by participating in developmental seminars for the consultants. A number of faculty members worked with several senior consultants in the company on issues of marketing, finance, human resources, and consulting

technique. The role of the faculty members was to provide research information and to help the consulting group to use this information to improve the tools they used in analyzing their clients' problems.

In my case the research focused more on method and process. In my individual sessions with members of this company and in group seminars we discussed issues such as how to decipher what the client really wants, what the client organization's culture is, and how the consultant can optimally manage the relationships. I provided conceptual maps and they provided case materials which we then used to discuss new analytical tools to be developed for their work with clients.

The ground rules were clear that faculty members would not get directly involved with clients unless there was some very specific reason to do so, so whatever help was provided to ultimate clients, the companies that Jackson works with, was provided through the intermediates, the Jackson consultants. On the surface this appeared to be a clear-cut case, but the unresolved dilemma was whether or not the faculty who was training the consultants had any say whatever over the kinds of clients who were ultimately taken on by Jackson, and whether or not we should have had such a say. I found myself monitoring this process by examining my own reactions to the cases presented by the Jackson consultants. Their cases and the approach they took generally fitted my own criteria of valid help, so the issue was resolved without conflict.

This case differed from the more common situation of functioning as a training consultant or a "shadow consultant" in that the faculty group contracted to help the entire consulting firm to become more effective. If the firm then hired people whose values we did not share or took on clients that we would not have approved of, such actions were entirely out of our control. What I found myself doing was to monitor this process "on line" through getting the Jackson consultants to provide enough case material about their clients to make some assessment possible.

Conclusion and Implications

The most important point to be made about clients is that the consultant must always be clear who the client is at any given moment in time, and must distinguish clearly among contact, intermediate, primary, unwitting and ultimate clients. Especially when the consultant has been working in an organization for some time with different units, it is easy to forget who the client is.

Second, the consultant must be aware at all times that particularly the unwitting and ultimate client may shift according to the level of problem being addressed. Working with the CEO one-on-one can either be counseling on a personal matter with few ramifications for others or can be helping with a major strategic issue that would have implications for everyone in the organization and in the outside community.

Third, in either case, if the consultant feels that the next steps taken will have implications for others that the client may not have considered, it is important to surface those implications and insure that the client is fully aware of them and willing to own them.

Finally, it is crucial to operate in terms of the eight overarching principles: 1) Always be helpful; 2) Always deal with reality; 3) Admit your ignorance; 4) Everything you do is an intervention; 5) It is the client who owns the problem; 6) Go with the flow; 7) Be prepared for surprises and learn from them; and, 8) Share the problem.

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