Process Consultation Revisited

Building the Helping Relationship

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Process Consultation and the Helping Relationship in Perspective

In this chapter I want to summarize, comment on and reflect on what has come before. Some of the questions I want to address were stimulated by the detailed feedback from my colleague, Otto Scharmer and his wife Katryn who read the manuscript carefully and thoughtfully. I am grateful for their suggestions. I also benefited greatly from the reviews of four colleagues – Dick Beckhard, Warner Burke, Michael Brimm, and David Coghlan. Their thoughts and suggestions have been incorporated into this volume and have strengthened it greatly. What then is to be said in a concluding chapter? First, I want to revisit the ten principles of process consultation because I find them increasingly helpful as a diagnostic of where I have gone wrong when things do not work out as I expected them to. Then, I want to take up some remaining issues, especially pertaining to the teaching of process consultation.

Ten Principles as the Essence of Process Consultation

In reflecting on process consultation and the building of a "helping relationship," the question arises: where is the emphasis or the essence that makes this philosophy of helping "different"? Why bother to learn all of this stuff. In my reflections on some 40 years of practicing "this stuff," I have concluded that the essence is in the *word relationship*. To put it bluntly, I have come to believe that *the decisive factor as to whether or not help will occur in human situations involving personality, group dynamics, and culture is the relationship between the helper and the person, group, or organization that needs help*. From that point of view, every action I take, from the beginning contact with a client, should be an intervention that simultaneously allows both the client and me to diagnose what is going on and that builds a relationship between us. When all is said and done, I measure my success in every contact by whether or not I fell the relationship has been helpful and whether or not the client fells helped. Furthermore, from that point of view, the principles, guidelines, practical tips, call them what you like, fall-out as the kinds of that kind of helping relationship. Let us review the principles from that point of view.

1. ***Always try to be careful***.

Obviously, if I have no intention of being helpful and hardworking at it, it is unlike to lead to a helping relationship. I have found in all human relationships that the intention to be helpful is the best guarantee of a relationship that is rewarding and leads to mutual learning.

2. ***Always stay in touch with the current reality***.

I cannot be helpful if I cannot decipher what is going on in myself, in the situation, and in the client.

3. **Access your ignorance**.

The only way I can discover my own inner reality is to learn to distinguish what I know from what I assume I know, from what I truly do not know. And I have learned from experience that it is generally most helpful to work on those areas where I truly do not know. Accessing is the key, in the sense that I have learned that to overcome expectations and assumptions I must make an effort to locate within myself what I really do not know and should be asking about. It is like scanning my own inner database and gaining access to empty compartments. If I truly do not know the answer I am more likely to sound congruent and sincere when I ask about it.

4. ***Everything you do is an intervention***.

Just as every interaction reveals diagnostic information, so does every interaction have consequences both for the client and me. I therefore have to own everything I do and assess the consequences to be sure that they fit my goals of creating a helping relationship.

5. ***It is the client who owns the problem and the solution***.

My job is to create a relationship in which the client can get help. It is not my job to take the client's problems onto my own shoulders, nor is it my job to offer advice and solutions in a situation that I do not live in myself.

6. ***Go with the flow***.

Inasmuch as I do not know the client's reality, I must respect as much as possible the natural flow in that reality and not impose my own sense of flow on an unknown situation. Once the relationship reaches a certain level of trust, and once the client and helper have a shared set of insights into what is going on, flow itself becomes a shared process.

7. ***Timing is crucial***.

Over and over I have learned that the introduction of my perspective, the asking of a clarifying question, the suggestion of alternatives, or whatever else I want to introduce from my own point of view has to be tined to those moments when the client's attention is available. The sane remark uttered at two different tines can have completely different results.

8. ***Be constructively opportunistic with confrontive interventions***.

When the client signals a moment of openness, a moment when his or her attention to a new input appears to be available, I find I seize those moments and try to make the most of them. In listening for those moments, I find it most important to look for areas in which I can build on the client's strengths and positive motivations. Those moments also occur when the client has revealed some data signifying readiness to pay attention to a new point of view.

9. ***Everything is a source of data; errors are inevitable-learn from them***.

No matter how well I observe the previous principles I will say and do things that produce unexpected and undesirable reactions in the client. I must learn from them and at all costs avoid defensiveness, shame, or guilt, I can never know enough of the client's really to avoid errors, but each error produces reactions from which I can learn a great deal about my own and the client's reality.

10. ***When in doubt share the problem***.

Inevitably, there will be times in the relationship when I run out of gas, don't know what to do next, feel frustrated, and in other ways get paralyzed. In situations like this, I found that the most helpful thing I could do was to share my "problem" with the client. Why should I assume that I always know what to do next? Inasmuch as it is the client's problem and reality we are dealing with, it is entirely appropriate for me to involve the client in my own efforts to be helpful.

These principles do not tell me what to do. Rather, they are reminders of how to think about the situation I am in. They offer guidelines when the situation is a bit ambiguous. Also they remind me of what it is I am trying to do.

Can One Develop a Useful Typology of Interventions?

In previous versions of this book I attempted to categorize interventions. As I reflect on possible ways to do this, I have concluded that such categories are not really useful because they divert one from the more fundamental question of figuring out what will be helpful at any given moment in the evolving relationship. I prefer a general concept of *"Facilitative Intervention"* that implies that the consultant should always select whatever intervention will be most helpful at any given moment, given all one knows about the total situation. Certainly the consultant should be familiar with a variety of questions, exercises, survey-feedback technologies, and other forms of intervention many of which have been illustrated in the previous chapters and well described in other books on organization development.

But knowledge of many different kinds of interventions not substitute for the know-how of sensing what is needed "right now" in terms of facilitating forward movement in the relationship. In fact, having a skill set of interventions "at the ready" makes it harder to stay in the current reality because one is always looking for opportunities to use what one believes oneself to be good at. As the saying goes, if all you have is a hammer, everything in the world looks like a nail. What then is the *essential skill* we are talking about?

Formal Knowledge, Skill, or Tacit Know-How?

When I conduct workshops on process consultation, I am often reminded that much of what I suggest to young consultants may work for *me* because of my experience and stature, but it would not work for them. This issue has two components. What exactly do I have that they assume they do not have? And how much of what is relevant to creating a helping relationship is explicit formal knowledge, skill based on formal training, or tacit know-how based on experience? The reader will have noticed that I did not distinguish these three levels of knowledge throughout the previous text. The reason is that all three are relevant to the creation of a helping relationship. Formal knowledge, such as the simplifying models presented in several of the chapters, is essential. It is especially important for the budding consultant to understand as much as possible about psychology, group dynamics, and organizational dynamics. But formal knowledge is clearly not enough. With workshop training, apprenticeships, and actual trial and error one develops the skill and – most important- the know-how that gradually becomes tacit and automatic. It is in last two categories of knowledge that I clearly have an advantage over the novice, but I always point out that if an essential element of the philosophy is to deal with reality, then the novice must work from his reality, whatever that implies. Let me illustrate. If I am working with a manager who is familiar with my work, I know that she understands that I am supposedly expert in this from of consultation. I must appreciate that set of perceptions and make my interventions accordingly. If a younger, novice consultant goes to that same manager, he knows that the manager is relatively unfamiliar with the consultant's experience or skill, and he must therefore operate from reality. Consequently, we would make quite different interventions, but we each would be trying to build a helping relationship, and we each could succeed. The relationship might evolve differently, but there is nothing in each of our experiences that would automatically determine that I would be more successful than the novice. When I have observed novice in these situations, their lack of success is invariably connected to not sticking to the principles, of trying to be prematurely expert, or of giving advice when none was called for. Of course, those errors themselves are the result of lack of experience; but this does not invalidate the principles. If the novice does staying the helper role, if he stays focused on what has been described here, he will be just as successful as I would be in the same situation.

I have observed this over and over again in my classes on managing planned change where project groups are from time to time trying to help each other with their projects. If I play the role of consultant, I can help, but – more importantly – when I encourage fellow students to try their hand at being helpful, the ones who operate by these principles are as or more helpful than I could have been. It is their insight that is crucial, not their length of experience. It is their willingness to give up the expert role and deal with current reality that is crucial, not how many hours of practice they have had. It must also be acknowledged that the helping relationship is a product of two personalities style. Two equalities experienced consultants might produce two quite different kinds of relationships, each of which would be helpful. It is not accidental that a number of my clients did not want to proceed only on the basis of what contact clients had told them about me. They wanted to meet me and test the "chemistry" between us for themselves. From that point of view, in any relationship, a novice with the right chemistry could do as well or better than an experienced consultant with the wrong chemistry.

In conclusion, tacit know-how and skill are important even the novice consultant has some history of human experiences to draw on. Lack of experience is not nearly as predictive of problems as is not understanding what it means to help someone and not doing one's best to operate by those principles.

A Concluding Personal Note

I sometimes ask myself why I am so passionate about preaching the stuff. My experience has taught me some lessons that want others to understand. In watching my own helping efforts, and especially in observing the helping efforts of others, I keep rediscovering the same simple truths. We have learned much about these truths in related fields – psychotherapy, social work, teaching, coaching. Yet we persist in treating organizational consultation as something different. Consultants tell me over how important it is to make a formal diagnosis, to write reports, to make specific recommendations, or they feel they have not done their job. I cannot really figure out why the learning we have acquired in the other helping professions about client involvement, about people having to learn at their own pace, about helping clients to have insights and solve their problems – has not generalized more to the field of management and organizational consulting. If I take a cynical view, I think it is easier to sell products, programs, diagnoses, and sets of recommendations than it is to sell a helping attitude. Consulting firms are businesses and they must survive financially, so there is inevitably a great pressure to have products and services that clients are willing to pay money for. However, once consulting becomes a business, I believe it ceases to be consulting in the sense I mean it. It becomes transformed into the sale of some expert services. Consulting firms sell information, ideas, and recommendations. But do they sell help? For me that is the tough question. Helpers also have to make a living and charge for the services. But therapists and social workers do not define their work at the outset in terms of specific longer-range projects involving formal diagnostic methods and formal programs of therapy. They first build a relationship and only recommend other services as they decide jointly with their client that something else is needed. What I find missing in so much managerial and organizational consulting is that initial relationship-building that would permit clients to own their problems and make sensible decisions about whether or not to do a survey, or have an off-site confrontation meeting, or engage in a two year formal change program run by the consulting firm.

The strength of my feeling about the nee to build a relationship first, derives from the experience of working with organizations that have previously been subjected to expert consultant who had formal programs to implement, even though a great deal of money was spent. As a result, I have to confront again my own reality that help will not happen until the kind of relationship has been built with the various levels of clients we may have to deal with, and that the building of such a relationship takes time and requires a certain kind of attitude from the helper. In the end, then, this book is an attempt to articulate what that attitude is all about.

The latest addition to the author's we loved set of process consultation Book, this new volume builds on the content of the two that precede it and explores the critical area of the helping relationship. Process Consultations, Volume 1 (2nd edition) explains the concept of PC and its role in organization development, focusing on the behavior of the consultant rather than on the design of the OD program itself. Process Consultation, Volume11 reaffirms PC as a viable model for working with human systems and explores additional theories of PC relevant to experienced consultants and managers. Now, Process Consultation Revisited focuses on the interaction between consultant and client, explaining how to achieve the healthy helping relationship so essential to effective consultation. Whether the advisor is an OD consultant, therapist, social worker, manager, parent, or friend, the dynamics between advisor and advisee can be difficult to understand and manage. Drawing on over40 years of experience as a consultant, Schein creates a general theory and methodology of helping that will enable a diverse group of readers to navigate the helping process successfully.

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