4

Working with the Client

WE HAVE NOTED that the OD consultant does not come to the tasks at hand as a "blank page," nor, one may hope, as an automaton simply purveying a set of techniques. As in all professions—and more so than most—the OD consultant brings forth his or her humanness in the very process of doing the work. Often there is implicit readiness for the OD task. As OD consultants—with genuine understanding of self—we often know more than we think we do. We may make many decisions based on our intuition, and such intuition rests on a bedrock of self, experience, and knowledge that is not always in the forefront of our awareness. Further, the best learning seems to come by trial and error, and mostly the latter. And indeed, learning from mistakes is exactly what we may encourage our clients to do. The dilemma forces us to shed the traditional consulting paradigm of "saving face in front of clients" and instead use our total experiences as models from which our clients may learn.

A previous experience by co-author Marissa Pei-Carpenter highlights this point.

▶ CASE IN POINT

We teach our clients to resolve differences openly in the present process of communication, as opposed to talking later behind others' backs. And yet in years of my engagements with other consultants and clients, we all adamantly agreed not to disagree with each other in front of the client. On one project, my colleague disagreed with my suggestion and argued that the clients would learn much more if they witnessed a disagreement. I reluctantly agreed to take a risk (I realize that for a change agent I am not very thrilled with change), and the results were phenomenal! The client not only learned that conflict was normal and necessary, but that working through the discomfort openly resulted in a very rewarding end product. ◀

Some Thoughts About Technique

Technique—given the OD profession's value position—*should not* (and this is a value term) dominate. What the OD consultant brings to each meeting with the client is really the total self, within which is integrated an eclectic collection of theories, models, experiences, orientations, personal values, principles, beliefs, and long-term characterological patterns. However, if the consultant uses only one particular model, theory, or tool for most every engagement, the self becomes but a shadow, and the intervention relies primarily on the theories and techniques that underlie the model, for example, MBTI (Myers-Briggs Type Indicator), coaching, Schutz' Element B, TQM (total quality management), MBO (management by objectives), diversity, 360-degree feedback. This may be effective when the circumstances of the nine Cs truly are a fit with the proposed model. But even then the Self is a factor, affecting the way in which the intervention is implemented.

The range of techniques available has come to be legion, and herein lies the danger. Specialization becomes vogue. It has become attractive to highlight application of a particular technique by a particular OD consultant and/or the corporate/partnership provider of an intervention. Yet, while value may be provided, questions such as these need to be posed:

- Is this the *right* technique under the circumstances?
- Will the application of the technique likely have lasting impact? Or is it a "quick fix" with short-term euphoria or less, and not much else?

- Is the technique integral to the Self, to the *person* who is the OD consultant, or is it purely a mechanistic appendage, run "by the numbers"?

These questions need to be addressed in *every* instance. One technique does not fit all, even if it is sellable and superficially attractive, or even if the client "buys in"! A dedicated process is required to consider all these elements and to proceed with the engagement, but also to provide the option of saying "no" when professional judgment counsels caution and suspects significant dissonance in line with the nine Cs. Of course, this is difficult when economic considerations become paramount. "Should I go ahead with accepting this contract? I have some professional doubts, but everyone, including the potential client, thinks it's a great idea." And, of course, the money would help.

Ethics and conscience need to be principal guides, which as in similar cases beyond OD, necessarily constitutes a troublesome internal conflict. Organization development consultants, through informal support groups, "kitchen cabinets," and simply purposeful colleagueship, are helped and helpful in addressing these matters.

▶ THE CONSULTANT'S INNER CAULDRON

The client CEO, Dr. Arthur Prolief, at Procom.com has no doubts: "We need a survey to check out morale and to help our human resources people do a better job. We need to confirm the benefits program and working condition upgrades that we're planning. Will you guys do that for us?

Josie Parker, the OD principal consultant, hears this loud and clear. She discusses the possibility of doing this survey with her three associates in a small OD service firm, JRC Development Associates. Among them is Wayne Pelter. Wayne knows the client firm well, having done some work for Procom.com six months ago when he was employed by another organization, Insight/Inside Partners. He recalls that there was a great deal of conflict in the firm's top management team focused around some "tricky behavior" by Dr. Prolief. It seems, Wayne notes, that Prolief is something of an "activity freak." "Some people think he is well-intentioned; others seriously doubt this. Indeed," says Wayne, "Arthur is always looking for something to do that 'plays,' but I think he doesn't have a clue on what really matters." Josie Parker listens well, but she also knows that her firm does surveys very well . . . and they *need* the revenue!

Wayne argues heartily: "Those guys don't need a survey; the top management team needs to get together and begin to work out some of their problems. People all over the organization know there is something wrong at the top." An animated discussion ensues among the several consultants in JRC.

"Of course, the survey probably wouldn't do any harm," Wayne concedes. By this time, Josie is wondering, "Maybe we should go for coaching, heading toward conflict resolution of some kind; maybe we shouldn't do a survey now." What is Arthur going to say? Wayne remains ambivalent about the survey and eventually both Wayne and Josie agree . . .

On what do they agree? And why is this so? ◀

► CASE IN POINT

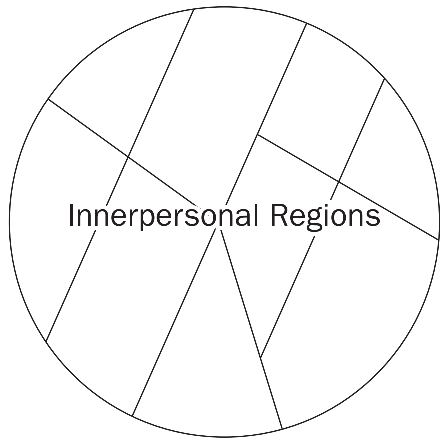
Let's say your expertise is in team building, and you have developed a particular method to create and operate effective teams, which has worked particularly well in the past. You are asked to help an organization that is suffering in morale, and at which in the last year production has dropped considerably. There are no existing teams, and there is little communication both within and between departments. The CEO has heard of your expertise in teams and has called you specifically to "do your magic" with your team tool. The short answer is to please the client and implement a team solution. Those areas that are suffering from "no teamwork" do progress spectacularly. You look good and the client is happy, but the employees are still uneasy, sort of.

Why? In the long run, even more important problems—unclear roles and responsibilities, micro-managers, and a racist culture—are left untouched and eventually deter any long-term benefits that might have resulted from the teaming effort. Your short-term goals, and your unwillingness as self to engage with and consider the broader issues, have limited your effectiveness as an OD consultant. ◀

The Client/Consultant Relationship

It is evident that conflicting considerations co-act. What about the money? And will (all who matter) accept a possible shift from survey to coaching? Or from team building to something else? Everyone's unique personalities, positions, and motivations are at work in the process of reaching a decision. There are no quick answers; each case involves a variety of unique considerations. As a basis for next steps it becomes useful to provide a general framework, focusing on each person as self. From the standpoint of the consultant, Figure 4.1 serves as a starting point[11].

Figure 4.1. The First Circle: The OD Consultant as Total Self



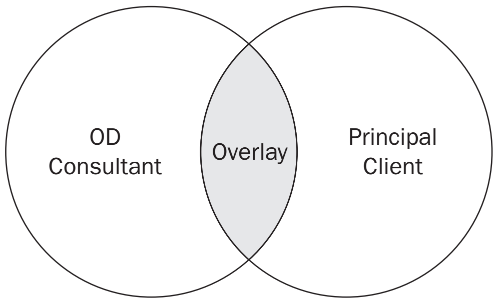
The "first circle" is a metaphor for "the total personality," the self. In Lewin's terms, this includes the "innerpersonal regions" of the person, the "psychologic material," the various characteristics, motivations, and social relationships generally as subsumed in the literature under the rubric of Personality Theory (Lewin, 1935; Argyris, 1957; see also Hall et al., 1985). This is, however, far too broad and complex a topic to allow present substantive review. Yet, the metaphor points to the following: Whoever you are, whatever you see within yourself, and whatever you do not see (including the unconscious and the archetypal) makes a difference . . . when you are yourself and by yourself and when you are with others. And what *you* think about what the others think, now or later, is clearly of great significance.

The Self is an organized whole, with inner relationships among the various elements, both in their convergence and congruence and in their inconsistencies and doubts, as well as that which is not known to the conscious. All this is relevant when the OD consultant moves through the cauldron of determining what should happen in a given client situation, as well as in life in general.

The identical metaphor holds for each person in the client system and for each person in the set of stakeholders actually or potentially affected by a particular OD engagement.

Let us examine the "second circle," partaking of the identical conceptual characteristics—but involving different constellations of elements relative to the principal client. Let us superimpose, with only arbitrary overlap at this point, the "first circle" (the OD consultant) and the "second circle" (the principal client). (See Figure 4.2.)

Figure 4.2. Overlap of First and Second Circles: Congruence



The nature and extent of the overlay is defined by the congruence of styles, needs, objectives, and values between the OD consultant and the principal client. Overlay points to the necessary congruence between the OD consultant on one hand and the client on other. Indeed, the second circle might be expanded to synthesize a kind of shared vector of forces generated by the broader client system. This overlay could serve as a heuristic criterion for whether the engagement should proceed. If there is no significant overlap, there probably isn't anything to talk about. Complete overlay is highly unlikely. However, substantial congruence for key dimensions of self/selves, however measured, undoubtedly is an important prerequisite for a successful OD process, linking consultant and client.

And, finally in this sequence, one stipulates that a given level of congruence is not necessarily fixed. As Figure 4.3 shows, there are alternatives.

Figure 4.3. Altering OD Consultant/Client Congruence

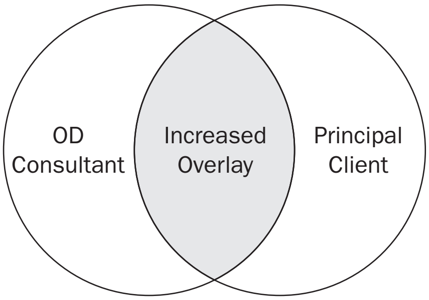


Figure 4.3 points to increased congruence between OD consultant and principal client, as contrasted with Figure 4.2, and serves as a metaphor for rapprochement, conflict resolution, or reduction of dissonance between consultant and client. Alternatively, it constitutes a symbolic representation of shared approaches of "working things out," as the consulting arrangement is considered.

To widen the field of overlap, either or both of the "circles" may put out energy to "get it together." But in the negative sense, either or both may be responsible for "pulling it apart" or concluding that "this just isn't going to work out!" Particularly to get it together, to make it work out, *mutual* effort is called for. As a practical matter, often the OD consultant is particularly equipped by training and background to initiate forces—by way of shifts in relationship style and other interpersonal means—to strive for increased congruence. Sometimes neurotic tendencies in either or both OD consultant and client can split things apart further, suggesting that the engagement will not prove satisfactory and should be terminated at a preliminary or early stage.

The Lesson? The above analysis points to the essential importance of the *total* personalities of all involved in the OD consultation process—and particularly to the "fit" between consultant and client. It is appropriate to address these relationships explicitly, taking nothing for granted and making no unwarranted assumptions, either about the OD consultant's self nor the client's self individually or collectively. A purposeful process is required, focusing on these selves, while considering as well the other external variables among the nine Cs in planning strategy and estimating the chances for success of a given OD effort.

We have just spent considerable time reviewing the concept of self as it applies to both consultants and consultant/client relationships. In the next section, we'll focus our energies on the client.

The Client, Never Singular

So far we often have had occasion to refer to consultant and client, singular. Yet while the OD consultant, in work in progress, is involved necessarily in a relationship with a client, this is never the whole story. The words "a client" in the singular necessarily constitute a misnomer. There never is a single client, even in instances in which one observes what appears to be an exclusive one-to-one relationship[12]. The concept of "client system" perhaps is more descriptive, yet even this formulation does not provide much of a guideline for untangling what is often a complex network of relationships. We need to recall the Gestalt viewpoint: The consultant faces a *pattern* within which a particular client person or client group is most prominent in salience, while the remainder at any one time are background. Patterns and prominence may shift, but a principal client normally (but not always) perseveres in salience throughout an engagement.

While in fact a principal client relationship may constitute a continuing thread, the simultaneous existence of multiple clients creates challenges for the OD consultant. It can prove seductive for the consultant, as well as for the client(s), to assume that this is indeed an exclusive one-to-one association. Inevitably, however, numbers of others co-act within the inevitable network of a consultant/client relationship. Who are these others?

First, there are the specific *organizational others*—superiors, peers, and subordinates—who surround the presenting client. While these may be visible in specific meetings focused on the OD engagement, they are indeed simultaneously present as well even though the principal client and the consultant *seem* to be involved in a one-to-one conversation, for example, in discussing what has happened during a given intervention, what should happen next, and so forth. These others make their presence known within the "psychological field" of the principal client and thus constitute *shadow clients,* sometimes as, or more, influential than the principal client.

Then there are *peripheral clients* within the framework of the organization who variously may support, oppose, or ignore the particular OD effort in process. Previously, we have spoken of various types of support, from top management downward, and in various constellations from enthusiastic involvement to passive acceptance to active opposition that whirl about the implementation of an OD program. These remote client sets may include individuals and subgroups at levels of management other than the one in which the principal client operates. Here the political process within the organization becomes manifest—a sometimes invisible dragon that can spout flames unexpectedly—and surely people with multiple "axes" to grind emerge. It becomes necessary here for the OD consultant to consider or to map these less obvious client sets and to identify their points of relevance to the OD process.

Beyond, there are *stakeholder constellations* not directly linked to client groups. These are constellations of individuals and groups of groups that are affected—immediately, short term, or long term—by the consequences of the OD program. For instance, there are employees at distant locations of a large organization who *may* eventually be impacted. There are unions who *may* have negative or mixed feelings about what is going on in OD. There are the people in communities within which particular companies are located. All these, and often others, need to be considered in the client matrix.

The Client Matrix

- Principal Client(s)
- Shadow Client(s)
- Peripheral Clients
- Stakeholder Constellations

Presently, clients may fall within one or another of the first three categories. We have also included a fourth category of people on the "client side" influencing OD. In addition to these categories there is the personal "people world" of the principal client and, in turn, the personal worlds of all others actually or potentially affected—their families and their friends outside the organization whose opinions matter. This is the world of informal support, of close-in reality testing, of exploration of anxieties and fears perhaps associated with undesired OD outcomes, and of the proverbial "kitchen cabinets" outside the organization's formal structure. Indeed, in the Internet world such constellations go beyond the face-to-face, although this most intensive exposure to feelings of self and relationships with others remains primary.

Again it becomes useful for the OD consultant to consider, map, or otherwise identify these interpersonal patterns by means of ethnographic inquiry, or in informal conversation and purposeful interviews. We turn to an example involving multiple clients.

► PLYMOUTH-ROCKHILL REAL ESTATE DEVELOPMENT

This is a family-owned business. It is a fairly small company with fifty-five permanent employees, located mainly at a headquarters office in a prosperous suburb of Boston, Kelpholm. The company develops real estate, primarily single-family dwelling units; these are sold to junior executives and other upwardly mobile population groups on the northeastern seaboard. Some redevelopment is part of the company's mission. The normal operations appear to be in good order, and the company is profitable—and, as noted, privately held.

The company's head is a former lawyer with some additional background in investments—mainly conservative debt instruments. As a young man he briefly worked in a regional brokerage firm. He is the company's founder and chairman of the board. His name is Herman Perando, but he is known to one and all as Hermy.

Hermy, realizing that he "can't do it all alone," has hired a real estate executive as president. (It turns out that the president, Alex Axter, long before there had been a business association between him and Hermy, had dated a girl in high school who eventually became Hermy's wife.)

Alex had attended a management seminar at Boston University. There he learned something about "accountability" and, wanting to be up-to-date, went looking for a consultant who might help in setting up accountability charts for the company.

At the time that Alex was looking for a consultant to help in this matter, Plymouth-Rockhill was involved in a contentious proceeding involving property owners and the Kelpholm City Council regarding rezoning required by Plymouth-Rockhill for a future development.

Eventually Alex locates an independent consulting firm, Organization Facilitation Partners, and meets with its managing partner, Phil Marks.

Organization Facilitation at one time had done a project on accountability for the Kelpholm City Council.

As Phil meets with Alex, it becomes clear to Phil that accountability is not the major problem. He proceeds with careful diagnosis of company issues and of its community and environment settings, as well as internal factors, and concludes that two sets of problems prevail: (1) internal organization, particularly delegation, with Hermy having major difficulties in letting go; and (2) different visions of Plymouth-Rockhill's future as seen by Hermy, who aspires to quantum leaps in company growth, and Alex, who would like to see rapid short-term development and possibly (unbeknown to Hermy!) the sale of the entire company to a nationwide real estate conglomerate, Turtle Place Imperial, whose top executive, on the golf course, has expressed interest in acquiring Plymouth-Rockhill.

To complicate matters, Hermy has a son, Marc, who has graduated from a liberal arts college with a major in English literature and communication and who is looking forward to a career at Plymouth-Rockhill. Marc knows little about real estate, but he is interested in computers and in their application to the analysis of Shakespeare's plays.

Marc also contacts Phil to talk about the situation at Plymouth-Rockhill. (At the time, Marc had been given a nominal job title by Hermy: "Assistant to the Chairman.") Soon Marc develops evident ambition to succeed Alex as president and eventually his father as chairman as well. Marc does not like Alex, and vice versa. Alex keeps pushing "accountability" and offers Organization Facilitation a substantial contract to do the job.

The Kelpholm City Council tightens zoning regulations as agitated home owners protest Plymouth-Rockhill proposals.

Phil is meeting with his associates at Organization Facilitation. The discussion focuses on identifying the principal client and the structure of the client system as a whole, plus key stakeholders potentially affected by outcomes of an eventual OD intervention. ◀

If you were to map or describe this client system, how would you see it, particularly in terms of a Client Matrix? In this instance, who is the principal client? Hermy? Alex? What about the "presenting client," Alex, the person who has directly approached the OD consultant offering a contract? Was he ever the principal client?

Is Marc a shadow client? Is the Kelpholm City Council a stakeholder? And what about the homeowners who are protesting? Are the Plymouth-Rockhill employees peripheral clients, for example, part of the client system? The questions proliferate.

At any rate, at the outset an *initial problem* is defined: "accountability." This problem definition needs to come from the *presenting client* and not be constructed by the OD consultant. Indeed, even at this early stage, the consultant may feel ready to "jump ahead" for a variety of reasons; perhaps because he or she really thinks he or she knows what the problem is or how the client *ought* to see the problem or who the "real" principal client *ought* to be.

In the process of sorting out the shape and scope of the Client Matrix, the OD consultant may want to show professional expertise, to demonstrate insight and competence, and/or to establish rapport or to strengthen an early relationship. This stage may involve a mutual verbal sparring between the client(s) and the OD consultant; each may want to demonstrate awareness of the issues—part of a symbolic "feeling out" and sensing process. Of course, either or both may decide that it's not a good mix and terminate the interaction.

In more desirable circumstances, the OD consultant acts as a caring and intense listener, in a facilitative role to assist the presenting client and eventually the principal client in formulating the problem (or problems) and its detailed ramifications. Whether identified simply as a conversation or "depth interview," or the more sophisticated "phenomenological interview" (see Massarik, 1981), the consultant creates an open forum for exploration of ideas phrased in words, which carry both overt and covert meanings for all concerned.

For the moment we note that this initial contact provides a verbal "open space" into which the presenting client may pour her or his technical and programmatic definition of what this is all about and, more importantly, which may provide a suitable entry or exit point for the OD consultant.

The "opener" is a setting for gauging first impressions. Here, as in other human encounters, much importance rests on a sense of the hot/cold character of interaction, possible fit, or incompatibility. At the content level, organizational issues are clarified and technical strengths and limitations are sensed that may speak for or against the acceptance of the engagement by the OD consultant.

Also there are *shadow clients* that the presenting client carries along, explicitly or by implication, to be determined (or at least hypothesized) by the OD consultant in this initial exploration. By this time the initial presenting problem may have begun to metamorphose into something quite different.

Eventually, a client core emerges and the identity/identities of principal client(s) is/are clarified. Here we find the key people who are in fact likely to be centrally involved in the OD engagement. Ironically, it may turn out that the presenting client is not one of them; this exclusion may be related to lack of influence, characteristics that are seen as abrasive or irrelevant by others who *do* wield influence in the organization, or, in some instances, a voluntary withdrawal for tactical or strategic reasons. The constellation of potentially relevant people, beyond those met in the initial encounter, needs to be conscientiously considered by the OD consultant through interview data or for that matter by secondary information such as working memoranda, e-mail shared by the presenting client, or other documentation.

When the client core has been specified, always *tentatively* and *subject to revision,* the OD consultant must recall that indeed the *internal structure* of this client core is of great importance. Political forces, common thrust and alliances, jealousies, personal and organizational hidden agendas, as well as technical and structural issues need to be considered. Positioned within this configuration is the *principal client,* who may or may not be (have been) the same as the presenting client.

Of course, the client core does not exist in isolation; rather, it is linked to other entities within the organization's framework. The client core constitutes both a structure, embodying formal and informal relationships, and a force field of its own devising. In turn, it is associated with wider force fields of various kinds and shapes, all subject to their own internal forces and reciprocally affecting the client core.

Of further import (related to peripheral clients and stakeholders) are *internal influence groups.* In most every instance, numerous groups, named or unnamed, coexist. *Within* the organization's framework there are structured divisions or departments, identified by function (information technology, operations, finance, engineering, strategic planning, human resources, marketing, Internet, and so on) or perhaps by geographic designation (American operations, the European Union marketing, South Eastasia, and so forth). The structures, and relative import among these, are ever subject to de facto change, often extraneous to the OD engagement.

In labor-intensive concerns, unions and other industrial and trade categories may be of importance. And still at another level, there are corporate boards, especially in large organizations, and committees of such boards. In Europe and in other countries, various board types may exist, including non-executive advisory boards and policy-setting boards. *Professional constellations* within any one organization are another set of groups to be taken into account, such as software developers, trainers, systems engineers, e-commerce marketers—the variety is infinite.

External influence groups too must be taken into account. There are numerous groupings that are for the most part external to a particular organization within which the OD engagement takes place, including government and regulatory bodies, people within a given geographic community, members of a particular ethnic group, interest groups, and a plethora of others.

The Lesson? While it is often convenient to focus on consultant and client, singular, on further consideration it turns out that "client" is never singular. In OD practice, multiple clients form a rather complex picture like that of a rapidly moving and unpredictable dragon and are subject to review. These include the presenting client, who may or may not emerge as principal client. The Client Matrix also includes shadow client(s), peripheral client(s), and stakeholder constellations. Then there are organizational others, a client core, and various internal and external influence groups. All constitute an ever-changing panorama that needs to be scanned and understood throughout the engagement.

The Who Is the Client? worksheet on the next page can help you to organize your thoughts about client systems.

Normally the client is a prime focus for change, with change of some kind indeed pervasive at all levels. It is of importance not to take change for granted, as though it were a simple, self-evident, homogeneous concept. Rather, we need to rethink the nature of change in wide perspective.

Who Is the Client?

Instructions: Consider an OD consultation that you think is or has been particularly complex and list, in the appropriate spaces below, the various client system members.

- Presenting Client

- Organizational Others

- Principal Client(s)

- Shadow Client(s)

- Peripheral Client(s)

- Stakeholder Constellations

- Internal Influence Groups

- External Influence Groups

During this consultation, what major shifts in the above occurred?