The new practice of organisational consulting
Reframing the consulting process

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In this article, I explore the implications for organisational consultants of working from a 'process' perspective on organisations. I start with a brief overview of this perspective, and then explore its implications for OD practitioners in terms of three kinds of 'shift' in approach: the shift in role; the shift in what we pay attention to, and the shift in the consulting process. I argue throughout that, in order to make a noticeable and sustainable difference for the 'better' in an 'organisation', we - clients and consultants - must work as fully-embodied human beings with what is actually happening in the moment in our local situation.

I am indebted to Dr Hartmut Stuelten with whom I worked to elaborate on these ideas in an unpublished article, and will be using the pronoun 'we' on a number of occasions to denote our shared view.

Keywords

social process, communicative interaction, self-organising, 'relational'

Adopting a process perspective

The prevailing way of viewing organisations is to think about them as if they are somewhat like machines to be engineered. If we listen to the discourse in most organisations we will hear such words as 'engineering', 'driving', 'leveraging' rather frequently. Such words betoken an instrumental mindset, as if an organisation is a 'thing' which can be 'engineered' or 'driven' from A to B. This leads to an over-emphasis on the felt need to control the legitimate system, through structural, procedural and programmatic solutions.

An alternative way of thinking about organisations - and one that I believe is closer to our lived experience, and supported by the emerging study of complexity - is to view them as complex *social processes*, in which people create priorities, strategies, plans and so forth, by interacting with one another (see YouTube [video]). This phenomenon that we call an 'organisation' could more aptly be described as an on-going process of 'communicative interaction' or *conversation.*

Research into organisations as 'complex social processes' suggests that they are characterised by patterns of stability and instability *at the same time.* Stable patterns of interaction tend to be maintained through designed, legitimate networks of roles and accountabilities through which people pursue official goals and policies. Instability, and hence the possibility of novelty and transformation, emerges in the simultaneous

operation of many informal networks in which significant political, social and other processes are at work that contribute in vitally important ways to the effectiveness of the organisation.

The radical process perspective suggests that organisations continually emerge in an unpredictable way, as they evolve into the unknown, where what emerges is always potential, but unpredictable transformation. One of the main insights that emerged from the work of complexity scientists is that 'order', in the form of pattern, emerges naturally through the interaction of competition and collaboration, order and disorder at the same time; there is an inherent process of what came to be known as 'self-organisation'. As Stuart Kauffman puts it in his book, At Home in the Universe (1996) "order emerges for free".

Broad implications of emergent order

Organisations require good enough, minimalist structures, to manage short term performance. However, these self-organising dynamics are not widely appreciated, and in many organisations with a bureaucratic history, the capacity for people to self-manage their own contributions - individually and collectively - is largely suppressed. As a result, all change is seen to need detailed planning and the development of complicated blueprints before anything can happen. This focus on getting the 'right structure' is often not only painfully slow, it can also have the opposite effect to that which was intended. I work with clients to recognise where structure is inhibiting the possibilities of innovation and experimentation.

I see the role of the OD practitioner as seeding and encouraging more widespread collaboration and self-management, while working at the same time with senior managers to discover a leadership role that is powerful and influential without being oppressive. I do this by focusing on senior managers' paradoxical role of sustaining the formal procedures necessary for operational effectiveness, while stimulating and promoting the less formal emergent processes in the organisation which are the source of innovation, healthy problem solving and, ultimately, quality and service. In this article I elaborate on what this might consist of in practice.

Changing how we conceive the role of OD consultant

In proposing this change to a **process** perspective of an 'organisation' I see three major shifts in how we conceive our role as OD consultants.

First shift: from objective, positivist intervener to relational, participative inquirer.

Positivist action assumes that organisations are 'things' that have intrinsic attributes, such as hierarchy, structure, strategies, rules, procedures, and culture, and that improving, changing or 're-engineering' these are the focus of a conventional consulting intervention that one might call the *working on* approach.

Because we understand an 'organisation' as an ongoing process of communicative interaction between people, through a process perspective we shift our focus towards the patterns and quality of this interactive process and our way of engaging and relating in it. From this perspective we no longer construct our role as *working on something*, but as *relating with someone.* In other words, we consciously use the difference we bring (e.g. in background, experience, perspective, presence) to provoke a process of inquiry *amongst and with* clients.

Second shift: from solution to transformation

The second shift in our role as organisation consultants is from delivering *instrumental, problem-focussed interventions* (which clients sometimes refer to as *turn-key solutions*) based on linear-causal assumptions, to one which supports an emergent and unpredictable process of *transformation of relational patterns*. Traditionally, consultants are brought in to solve a problem within the client's organisation, which the clients are unable to solve by themselves, or to provide some expertise which the organisation lacks. The implicit expectation is that the consultant leads the organisation 'out of the wilderness' into 'the promised land'. This implies a role for the consultant in which current problems are highlighted and analysed, a better future is defined, a rational step-by-step process for achieving 'it' is designed, and finally, a carefully managed implementation process is executed by assembling and connecting the right parts and the right intelligence.

However, from a complexity perspective, we let go of the image of ourselves as saviours, bearers of best practice, or providers of finely tuned analytical solutions. We therefore understand ourselves neither as solution experts nor as process facilitators (Schein 1988, p. 3 - 12), because both approaches assume a linear process of problem definition, diagnosis, and improvement implementation. In contrast, we see our role as one of *participants in the co-creation of opportunities for people to explore for themselves their individual and collective issues; to make their own meaning and to take thoughtful, individual and joint action in the knowledge that specific outcomes are unpredictable and ultimately unknowable.*

Transforming the quality of organisational functioning

For us, 'communicative interaction' consists of all the communicative gestures, as Mead (1967) describes them, which evoke responses from others and give rise to meaning. His definition goes beyond just verbal gestures, ranging from small physical or vocal moves between individuals, to large-scale gestures. The latter include such things as value statements, re-structuring, or building a new factory in China, as gestures from senior managers to the organisation (and the market) at large. For all practical purposes, we can visualise this process of continuous gestures and responses between people as a 'conversation'. Thus, when we turn up as consultants, we can think of what we are doing as participating in an on-going conversation or "in the everyday art of *going on together*". (Shaw 2002, p. 5)

We are thus using the term 'conversation' in its broadest sense to describe the dynamic process of communicative interaction. This is patterned by power dynamics, conversational themes, norms and values which have emerged over time. As consultants (and, as such, as temporary members of the organisation) we are both enabled and constrained by these patterns. An essential orientation of an organisational consultant is to be curious and interested in these patterns; to pay attention to our own experience of engaging with them; and, as we act into them, to notice what responses we provoke, and how we experience them. Of course, we can never know or understand 'the patterns' fully. But, if we arrive freshly into each situation, we can be more attuned to **refocusing our attention** from concentrating on the problem and its solution, towards focusing on the five qualities of organisational functioning hypothesised by Ralph Stacey (2003, p. 414 – 422).

These are:

- **The quality of engagement:** To what extent are those people within the organisation affected by the topic under consideration, engaged in conversations?

- **The quality of conversation:** How are legitimate themes that organise our client's experience sustained, and how are shadow themes, which are frequently not voiced openly, brought into the public forum?

- **The quality of diversity:** How is diversity fostered and encouraged while at the same time sustaining some measure of necessary stability within the organisation?

- **The quality of holding unpredictability:** How do our clients and we consultants cope with acting into 'the unknown'?

- **The quality of holding anxiety:** How does a particular situation, context or challenge give rise to anxiety and how do our clients and we ourselves cope with this anxiety?

Third shift: reframing the consulting process

Now I want to look at what this way of understanding the phenomenon of organisational life might mean for the consulting process. In essence, we need to let go of the conventional notion by which we think of the consultant as objective diagnostician, and of consulting as a series of sequential steps, each one a necessary precursor to the next.

Instead, consulting simply starts when we turn up. That is, it starts when we first *join* the on-going process of communicative interaction with and within our client's 'organisation'. As our first gestures call forth some response, we are already making some kind of difference - albeit a small one. So, even when we arrive at what conventionally might be framed as a 'sales' or business development meeting, the process of engaging with the client has begun. We therefore use the term 'living inquiry' to denote a methodological form which, while giving some structure to the process of consulting, also conveys a sense of the spirit and nature of our engagement with this continuously emerging conversational process.

Living Inquiry

We are defining this term in relation to our consulting practice very specifically. On the one hand, this is to imply a particular *stance* and, on the other, to describe the discipline, or *methodology*. As a stance it implies an authentic personal orientation towards listening, exploring and making sense *with* our clients, in a way which does not privilege our meaning-making over theirs. It also implies paying rigorous attention to our own experience. By this we mean not just to that which arises in the moment of interaction, but also to our prior assumptions, prejudices, value dispositions and motivations, and how these inform us during the course of the work. This is the discipline of reflective practice.

As regards methodology, we have argued above that consultants *join an ongoing conversation* which, by definition, does not have a beginning or an end. It is helpful for consultants to be mindful of the fact that they always turn up and leave in the middle of something. In our conception of the consulting process, we are therefore trying to dismantle much of the instrumental, predictive, formal structuring which usually surrounds

consulting interventions. At its core, our approach is to *join this ongoing conversation and work with whatever emerges, while paying close attention to the five vital signs of organisation outlined earlier*. At the same time, we offer clients the security of *some* structure, both to satisfy the formal requirements of procurement and budgeting, and also to map for them what our involvement as consultants might look like.

Again, as I said earlier, we can think of this process as a series of gestures and responses. For example, if we are called to a meeting to discuss a problem with which we have been asked to help, there are a range of 'gestures' we could make. We could choose to make a power-point presentation offering our view of the problem and a method for resolving it. Alternatively, we could choose to start by inviting people to say how they experience the problem, and facilitating an explorative conversation. These two examples represent completely different kinds of gestures which will evoke very different responses, and will create very different sorts of relational dynamics. The first focuses on the problem, constructs it as an objective reality, and privileges the consultant's expertise. In contrast, the second focuses on people's lived experience of their subjective reality (instead of 'the problem'), assumes that there will be different perceptions, and privileges a form of social interaction as a means of exploring a multitude of subjective realities and ways forward. This latter gesture is 'relational' in its intention and nature, and is informed by the notion of organisation as a dynamic social process, while the first gesture is instrumental in intention, and is informed by a linear, diagnostic perspective. Living inquiry adopts the former stance.

In essence, *living inquiry* consists of four core processes - *engaging*, *inquiring*, *experimenting, and learning* – that are *all* going on all of the time; like four separate, but interrelated strands in a plaited loaf of bread. This is illustrated in the diagram below:
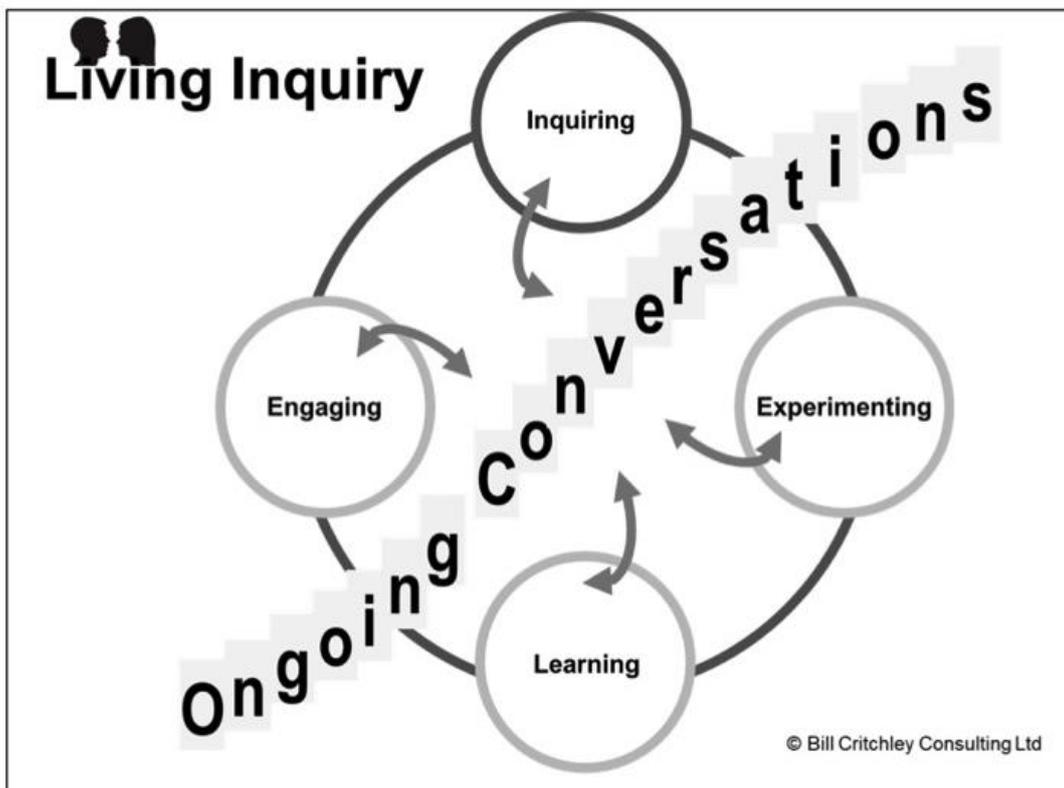

Figure 1. Four core processes of living inquiry

Four core processes of living inquiry

Engaging

Taking a relational approach requires us to always think first of the *process* of engagement, and then pay attention to the emerging patterns of gesture and response in this engagement process, because it is in this process that meaning is made and action emerges. It also requires us to be continuously aware of the nature of our *presence*. As Rodenberg ((2007) suggests, the way in which we impact on people through the quality of our attention, our capacity to listen, the congruence between what we espouse and how we actually interact has a primary influence on the quality of any human encounter. We therefore *engage* with the clients in a participative process of exploration.

We use the term 'engaging' to mean that, whatever else we are doing, we are entering into a *relationship* with other human beings. This puts the quality of relationship at the forefront of our consciousness. It is through relationship, rather than through particular techniques or rigid methodologies, that change occurs. As psychologist Carl Rogers observed as long ago as 1957:

> *"For constructive personality change to occur it is necessary that (…) two persons are in psychological contact. (…) All that is intended by this first condition is (…) that two people are to some degree in contact, that each makes a perceivable difference in the experiential field of the other."* (Kirschenbaum and Land Henderson 2001, p. 221)*.*

The importance of the quality of relationship is now endorsed by research carried out in the fields of both psychotherapy, and coaching. In the words of Gregory Bateson, it is the "difference that makes a difference" (1972, p. 381).

Crucially, too, we usually refer to the people with whom we engage as our 'clients', while many of our colleagues still talk about engaging with 'the system'. The danger with using the latter term is that it tends to de-personalise our clients by abstracting from them as individuals and by reifying 'the organisation'. Once we lose sight of the essential truth that organising (instead of *the* organisation) and consulting are social processes, and that we are relating to interdependent individuals in their specific context, we are likely to become instrumental in our practice. This is indeed how most conventional consulting is conceptualized.

Inquiring

As the initial conversation with our clients broadens into a wider engagement, increasing the number of people involved in the inquiry, the conversation develops into a mutual exploration of the issue as 'framed' in the initial contracting phase. As such, this enhances participants' sense of involvement, and influence.

> ### The nature of inquiry
>
> *We distinguish clearly between the kind of 'inquiry' we are proposing here and the kind of 'enquiry' a police force might conduct into a crime, or an audit office into malpractice.*
>
> *The latter usage (more usually spelt with an 'e') implies a truth to be uncovered, usually located in the efficacy of structural arrangements and the logic of cause and effect.*
>
> *In contrast, we use the term 'inquiry' very differently; meaning a participative process of exploring multiple perspectives with the expectation that some consensus about critical issues will emerge.*

Experimenting

A robust joint inquiry *changes the conversation,* and 'themes' which seem to be organising people's conversations, start to emerge. These give rise to the possibility of new forms of 'joint action'. The inquiry, characterised by almost simultaneous processes of exploration and consolidation, *is* the change process. However, it is useful for the consultant to draw attention to these emerging themes by designing a more structured meaning-making and action-taking process. We do this by drawing attention to those emerging themes and 'progressing' various 'initiatives' configured around particular aspects of those themes.

In some instances, a more formal coordinating event might be needed, where relevant 'stakeholders' are brought together to make meaning of what is emerging. For some clients, it might also be necessary to symbolise a specific activity 'phase', by forming working groups to address particular aspects of the change in a co-ordinated fashion. If so, the most important thing is that these groups maintain the fluid and emergent nature of the process and do not collapse the spirit of the ongoing inquiry/ experimenting into an over-elaborate and linear planning process.

Learning

The fourth aspect of our living inquiry is learning and review – both as a continuing practice and at particular junctures. Although this is happening all the time, it is helpful to signal some formal way of reviewing the experiences and effects of the inquiry as a punctuation in the conversational life of the organisation, and attempt some collective reflection on themes which have emerged throughout the inquiry, as a basis for ongoing improvement.

Conclusion

The key argument that I have made in this article is simple:

> *In order to make a noticeable and sustainable difference for the 'better' in an 'organisation' we - clients and consultants - must work as fully-embodied human beings with what is actually happening in the moment in our local situation.*

Conventional, linear cause-effect based consulting methods that focus on working with *abstractions* and *generalisations* (e.g. the organisation, the manufacturing function, the strategy, the process, the customers) lend themselves well to mechanical, engineering issues (e.g. assembling a car). But these do not lead to lasting improvements, if mistakenly applied to long-term organisational functioning - a social rather than mechanical process.

In contrast, consulting from a process perspective requires a *relational* approach, in which we *engage as knowledgeable people with other people* in an ongoing process of live encounters, rather than consult to clients as objective experts through pre-scripted rituals (e.g. agenda-driven meetings, presentations, or written reports). This, I suggest, requires personal presence, courage, and the ability to handle the paradoxical nature of organisational life. It is also quite likely, and quite understandably so, to be anxiety-inducing.

This way of working can also provide considerable personal challenges to our clients. Hiring OD consultants to help 'make things better', only to be told that, despite clear intentions for the consulting work, we can neither predict nor guarantee precise outcomes, requires them to demonstrate trust, courage and a similar ability to handle anxiety. Helping them to contain their anxiety, as well as containing our own, is integral to the living inquiry process.

Finally, we need some way of ensuring that we are serving, as well as we can know, our clients' best interest. As we join the on-going processes of communicative interaction, in which we are both shaping our clients and being shaped by them, ethical decisions are being made all the time. We therefore continuously need to keep our own motivations and intentions under review, often through employing our own supervisors, to ensure that we are behaving 'ethically'. There is no generalised 'code' capable of anticipating all eventualities; ethics and values emerge in the activities in which we engage in any given moment, and, as Shakespeare observed, "'Tis rigour, not law." (Rodenberg 2007, p. 253).

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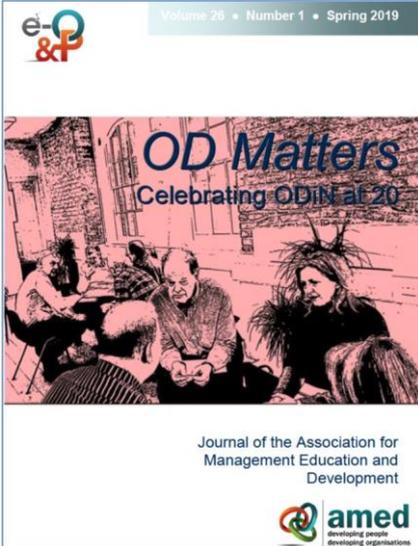
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