



designedLearning

**Flawless
Consulting
Skills
For Human
Resource
Staff**

Consulting Skills For Human Resource Staff

In some organizations staff positions, i.e. engineers, personnel, systems analysts, purchasing agents and human resources, make up as much as 40% of the workforce. Among the things all staff positions have in common are, professional expertise, limited direct authority over the use of their expertise, and the desire to have some impact.

Staff organizations however are reevaluating their role, especially in the face of dramatic changes causing shrinking numbers and levels in organizations. Human resource groups no longer wish to view themselves as policemen, implementers of ineffective policies, experts with solutions in hand or pawns available for manipulation by powerful line managers.

These staff professionals concerned with the utilization of the organization's people want to be partners with managers, - equals who collaborate to discover solutions to the organization's problems

and dilemmas. They want to contribute to solving problems and make a difference to the bottom line.

PLAYING A CONSULTING ROLE

Organizations too, are asking human resource professionals to become more consulting in their approach. Some companies are setting up individuals as consultants. As such, they are liaisons with various departments or divisions. In this way they retain their status as HR experts and also act as a channel or broker for the HR function.

A consultant, writes Peter Block in his book, *Flawless Consulting*, is a person in a position to have some influence over an individual, a group, or an organization, but has no direct power to make changes or implement programs. Often they are called in as a "pair of hands" to implement a predetermined solution to an existing problem. At other times, they are asked to "fix something" with their expertise.

Consultants often appear as solutions in search of a problem. If the solution works, the line person who chose the solution is a hero. If the implementation fails, the

staff person is the scapegoat.

FRAME OF REFERENCE CHANGES

The idea of partnership requires a frame of reference change for both managers and HR staff. For the manager it means working **with** the HR consultant to solve problems. It's continuing to **own** their problems and staying involved through to the implementation of solutions.

For HR staff, the required change in frame of reference is more complex. The task is to

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maintain the position of technical expert while working to keep line manager clients involved and responsible for solutions to the line managers' own problems. One change is the way work on assignments is begun. HR professionals are characteristically people who want to serve. They commonly delve into assignments with good will expecting management support for their recommendations. Such support sometimes does not come. The failure to

manage issues of commitment and responsibility early, often proves troublesome.

Another change has to do with the self-perception of HR professionals that must move from an *I'm only staff* to *I'm a partner* who cares about the business as well as the "soft issues".

One HR staff from a large manufacturing organization says, "*I was never only staff – I wanted to make a contribution and work in a partnership role with my clients. In fact some of my clients in production and marketing used to say, 'Are you sure you are staff – you certainly don't act like staff.'*"

Common to HR practitioners is an "*I only want to be helpful*" orientation. This often translates into a reluctance of HR staff to articulate their own wants and needs.

While the client managers are usually clear about what they want and need, staff people often find this difficult. Yet, what the HR person wants is rarely selfish or idiosyncratic. They just want to do work to impact the effectiveness of the organization.

With this motivation they ask for things to make their work more effective and productive, nothing more, nothing less.

Says Jeff Delanoy of Michigan Consolidated Gas,

"My needs are as important as the needs of the client. It's okay, when my needs are not being met, to back off the task, or renegotiate" he says. "It gives me confidence to know that my superiors support this view. When the clients make the decision that they cannot meet my requirements, they take the responsibility for the decision. Expressing my needs is a new tool I never used in the past. Before, I thought I had to do whatever they want. Now I know they have as much responsibility for meeting my needs as I have to meet theirs. Instead of causing problems, this attitude wins respect."

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Althea Duggins, department trainer for Hewlett Packard has learned to say, "*Here is what I want so I can make the project successful. I want it! It's not just what the project needs to be successful."*

CONSULTING SKILLS
Designed Learning calls the skills to keep clients working on their problems "*Consulting Skills*". The firm teaches consulting

skills to hundreds of men and women in various staff functions including Human Resources each year. In Designed Learning's workshops participants learn to manage the business of each phase of the consulting process described in ***Flawless Consulting***.

The development of consulting skills involves making explicit the process the HR professional will use to manage the relationship with the client. This means:

- Contracting for the work.
- Making your own diagnosis of the problems.
- Giving feedback about personal and organizational data for facilitating decision making.
- Carrying out the plan.
- Evaluating the main events.

Each consulting project, whether it lasts ten minutes or ten months, goes through these five phases. The steps in each phase are sequential, skipping any or assuming it's taken care of, invites trouble. Skillful consulting is being competent in the execution of each step. Successfully completing the business of each phase is the consultant's challenge.

CONTRACTING IS ESSENTIAL

A contract, written or not, is simply an explicit agreement of what the HR consultant and the client expect from each other and how they will work together.

“Every project I’ve had that has gone South, when I analyze it now, has failed because the contracting work was not done well,” says Arnie Winkler, Senior Human Resources Development Consultant for Pacificorp Electric Operations. *“Now, every time, I get agreement on the boundaries and objectives of the project. We agree on the kind of information we are going to get. We define my role and the client’s. We agree on the product I will deliver and what support and involvement the client will give me. And, we set a time frame.”*

In Designed Learning workshops, consultants learn how to contract. They practice asking for what they want and need to enable them to serve the project. They discover ways to hold back from offering solutions and concentrate on making sure their clients retain ownership of the problem. They work on ways to surface their clients’ concerns about exposure and the loss of control. There are usually several clients or client groups involved in a project. Commonly, the primary

client manager, his or her boss, the HR consultant’s boss, people in other departments who provide assistance or information, and the people affected by the change must all be included in the contracting phase.

“I volunteered for an experimental assignment to coach first line foremen to be better leaders,” recalls Michael Cristiani, a consultant staff manager in organization development with McDonnell Douglas Electronic Systems. *“I had an agreement with the manager who made the assignment, but I soon*

“Specifying what they and I needed at every level yielded the cooperation that made the project successful.”

realized I did not have the cooperation of the foremen themselves. When I began to discuss a contract with them, I realized I also needed to contract with the general foreman and even the superintendent. I finally decided to start at the top with the program manager of an entire aircraft operation and work back down to the foremen. Specifying what they and I needed at every level yielded the cooperation that made the project successful.”

GIVING FEEDBACK

A consultant must always reduce a large amount of data into a manageable number of issues. There are some important consulting skills that make the feedback phase more effective. These include an ability to confront the client with all relevant data even if it was not a part of the assignment.

It’s also important to give descriptive rather than evaluative feedback including data about the client’s personal behavior in handling the problem with the targets of the change.

One personnel specialist, in the systems division of a high-tech conglomerate, recalls a manager who complained of excessive turnover because of inadequate pay. The manager proposed a plan giving pay increases to about forty people. *“He thinks pay solves everything,”* says the personnel specialist, who played a major part in developing the current compensation structure.

She asked to collect some data by interviewing some employees who left the company. The company, which supports staff people who want to play a consulting rather than a purely technical role, allowed her to conduct the interviews. She concluded that pay was not the problem. Instead, she found another major dissatisfaction to address.

To manage the business of the feedback phase, the consultant has to structure and control feedback meetings to elicit client reactions and choice of next steps. The consultant must also work to make sure she is present at meetings where action steps are determined.

DEALING WITH RESISTANCE

All consultants soon discover that no matter how reasonably they present data and recommendations, clients resist.

Resistance, when it happens is puzzling and frustrating. It's almost an automatic reaction to view the resisting client as stubborn and irrational. If viewed this way, the consultant may react by presenting the data and justifying the recommendations more loudly and more forcibly.

Skilled consultants understand that clients need to express resistance directly in order to learn something important about how to handle a difficult problem.

Unless resistance is expressed, there is little chance the client will genuinely accept and use what the consultant has to offer.

The skills to deal with resistance include being able to identify when resistance is taking place and supporting

the client to directly express the resistance.

Above all, the consultant cannot take the expression of resistance personally or as an attack on his or her competence.

WORKING ON PARTNERSHIP

Effective organizations are those where line and staff work together to solve problems and take advantage of opportunities. To work together effectively requires both line and staff to consider themselves in a partnership equally responsible for successful change. While the line manager remains the client in the partnership, the HR staff partner takes on a consulting role.

As a consultant, the responsibility is to manage the relationships as well as the human resource issues associated with the project. The process of consulting when properly managed increases the chances of the staff person having a strong and positive impact on the effectiveness of the business. In this way the HR will be viewed as a partner in the business not just a "keeper of people problems."



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