

"Integrating Research and Practice"

KA1C

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One of the primary objectives of this paper is to understand what it means to be engaged in a "scholar-practitioner" model of learning at Fielding Graduate Institute. At the heart of this model is the groundbreaking seminal work of the late Dr. Donald Schon, whose scholarly work has left an indelible impression on "learning systems" as we have come to know them today. Dr. Schon's unique philosophy and generative thinking inspire us to this day, and his ideas and concepts on reflective practice further catalyze new breakthroughs in the way we think about and approach "communities of practice."

It is the author's contention that many students come to the Fielding HOD doctoral program wearing the "practitioner's hat" and some never take off that hat, even after they graduate. Not only is it a stark reality, but also a solemn reminder that many of us go through life doing what we have always done as practitioners; which is to speak to our clients in a language that is not only easily understood, but also helps them take the "path of least resistance." It is this

oversimplification that sometimes becomes a practitioner's worst nightmare, for what we consider to be the best approach for the client, may not always be grounded in research and inquiry, even though it may "feel" right to us. In our eagerness as practitioners, to make sense of what feels right and "relevant" to us based on our "knowledge-in-action," we sometimes fail to examine this very approach as a way of thinking. In his first book, Displacement of Concepts (1963) (republished in 1967 as Invention and Evolution of Ideas), Schon refers to this as "the ways in which categories are used to examine things, but are not themselves examined as ways of thinking" (Parlett 1991, quoted in Pakman 2000).

The "Rigor" vs. "Relevance" debate continues to this day, and there are no easy answers. Both scholars and practitioners undoubtedly agree that integration needs to happen between inquiry and practice, but what makes the task daunting is their inability to hold the tension of opposites as a paradox that needs to be embraced, rather than a point of disagreement/conflict that needs resolution. The consulting arena is fraught with uncertainty, ambiguity, and chaos, where the organizational theatre can change very quickly from a "sea of tranquility" to a "swamp of alligators." There is not one right approach, one methodology, or a singular stance that will effectively address a client's presenting problem. The consultant has to frequently draw from her repertoire of competencies and present solutions that are not only relevant to the client's situation, but also grounded in solid research. While this may add some

credibility to organizational interventions, and give the consultant and client a sense that the approach in use is robust and well grounded, it is also important to understand that what happens in the real world does not always take a rational and positivist path. As a matter of fact, executive decision making in organizations is sometimes intuitive and highly irrational. Schon makes a germane analogy as he writes, "There is a high, hard ground where practitioners can make effective use of research-based theory and technique. And there is a swampy lowland where situations are confusing messes incapable of technical solution" (Schon, 2000).

So, how does one decide what's best for the client? A high status, "rigorous" approach, or a low status, "relevant" approach? How does a consultant move back and forth between scholarship and practice, between idealism and pragmatism, between a well deliberated scientific approach and one that intuitively feels like the right fit? And, even if a consultant were to draw from a theoretical model in a given client situation, how comfortable would she feel that the theory in use was once written with the practitioner in mind?

Keith Melville writes:

"A comprehensive understanding of obstacles to applied social research needs to take into account considerations relating to knowledge producers, knowledge brokers (i.e. those who synthesize and disseminate), and knowledge users. But no matter what researchers do to make their work relevant—no matter how timely, robust and well

synthesized it is—ultimately its use or neglect depends on the attitudes and reality-testing of clients, rather than on the good intentions and analytical skills of the scholars who produce it.” (Melville, 2003)

Herein lays the essence of what we do every day as organizational consultants. We match products/services with client needs. We determine what models and theories would be most effective in addressing a client’s presenting problem. We are often conditioned to look at “malleable variables” at the behest of the client. We work under serious time constraints, and we are called upon to provide the most ethical, efficient, and well grounded, evidence-based interventions. Our failure or success is measured by our clients, not by the number of brilliant theories and models we used, but often by the efficacy and outcome of our interventions, that are sometimes evaluated through a grueling and highly subjective reality-testing process.

In his groundbreaking book entitled “The Tipping Point” Malcolm Gladwell proposes:

“The second of the principle of epidemics—that little changes can somehow have big effects—is also a fairly radical notion. We are, as humans, heavily socialized to make a kind of rough approximation between cause and effect” (Gladwell, 2000).

So, how do our clients arrive at a “rough approximation” that what the consultant proposed is just the thing that either produced, or failed to produce the desired outcome? How do they determine the correlation between cause

and effect, between the intervention and the outcome, and between the investment and return? Do they arrive at these conclusions, using a “rational” decision making process, or are they so consumed by institutional pressures of time, deadlines, and budgets, that they sometimes unconsciously succumb to these very pressures and end up making irrational decisions? Do they really have faith in the models and theories of academics, and the patience to carry through on consultants’ recommendations?

The jury is still out on these perplexing questions. In addition to the questions raised above, there are several other areas of inquiry and practice that need further exploration through this paper. An attempt will be made to explore these areas in this assessment. This will be done in the context of two real life “case scenarios” that were presented in an online seminar conceptualized and designed by the author of this paper. The seminar was entitled “From Resistance to Organization: A Psychodynamic View of Organizational Consulting” and hosted on the ORGDYNE list serve for a six-week duration. The seminar was publicly available and permissions were obtained from the consultants who own and presented the case studies. An effort will be made through this paper to better understand:

-The nature of the author’s professional practice and what area of human and organizational development does it impact the most?

-What academic theories, models, and research inform the practice and how often are these models drawn on to make decisions and client interventions?

- What are some key questions that, if clearly answered, would enhance one's effectiveness as an OD practitioner?
- How can scholarship and research be better integrated in the author's own practice, and what contributions can the practice make to the world of traditional OD theory and research?

The following case scenarios are being submitted as separate attachments in the folder for this KA Assessment and will be referred to in this paper from time to time:

"Toward Increased Collaboration" by Keith Mutch

"Strategy as Story: An Appreciative Approach" by Richard Seel

Through an analysis and critique of these two case studies, an attempt will be made to further illuminate the following:

- What it means to conceptualize, promote, and lead "communities of practice" in a highly dispersed "virtual" environment.
- How two "unrelated" organizational situations that use very different modes of practice and inquiry, can actually end up with surprisingly similar challenges and outcomes.
- The interplay of the unconscious dynamics of the consultant and client, and how these might impact the consulting scenario.
- The efficacy of the two approaches and their contribution to organizational growth.

- How "basic assumptions" can play a critical role in teamwork, and if unaddressed, may seriously undermine the primary task of the work group.
- The manner in which additional research can be used to improve the effectiveness of the modes of practice.

In order to better understand the presenting problems in each of the case scenarios, let us individually examine the highlights of the two situations, hereinafter referred to with the following acronyms:

- Toward Increased Collaboration (TIC)
- Strategy as Story: An Appreciative Approach (SAS)

(TIC) uses a "hard skills", traditional OD approach focusing on a systems thinking methodology. The consultant, Keith Mutch is a systems analyst who has previously worked for several technocratic organizations. After coming into contact with the author in 2001, Keith decides to join the ORGDYNE Global Forum that is dedicated to the research, exploration, and understanding of group and organizational dynamics. The forum offers Keith an opportunity to explore other, nontraditional methodologies used in organizational consulting and he seems particularly fascinated by the "psychodynamic" approach to consulting. He also feels very comfortable with the online group where the seminar is being hosted, and assures every one of his fullest support and cooperation with presenting his case. Incidentally, Keith does carry out his task with dexterity and complete diligence in an online group of 570 consultants from around the world.

Keith's client sponsor Jane, is very astute and task oriented. Although their relationship is cordial, it does however seem from the case narrative that not a lot of time was invested by either Keith or Jane in getting to know one another better. Perhaps Jane's task orientation and mechanistic managerial style contribute to her desire to remain business like and aloof. On the other hand, Keith himself is feeling ambivalent around accepting this assignment, but does so nonetheless, for his own selfish reasons. It also seems quite evident from the narrative that Jane is probably looking to Keith for solid, research-based advice, while failing to recognize that many of the problems she is having with her team, probably have their roots in interpersonal conflict. Keith, on the other hand, is more inclined to help the client address her presenting problem with a more nontraditional and relevant approach, using a combination of hard and soft skills.

We see our first major predicament in this situation, and a possible mismatch between what the client wants (robust inquiry), and what the consultant is willing to deliver (a pragmatic, socio-emotional approach, typically used by practitioners). The client appears to have her mind set on the way she wants the consulting project to progress, while Keith does not seem willing to attend to her needs before introducing his own unique methodology. This is a common failure in client-consultant relationships and makes one wonder what the consultant could have done to alleviate the tension in such a situation.

As one reviews the case further, it does seem that the barriers to communication between Jane and Keith begin to dissolve, however

organizational pressures intervene, the project gets delayed, and Keith is unable to contain the anxiety and frustration which he is probably unconsciously attributing to the client. From a theoretical psychodynamic perspective, there is an "emotional storm" that both the client and consultant are now a part of (Hinshelwood, 2000). The client does seem oblivious to this storm which is influencing the relationship. In such situations, a consultant is called upon to show the utmost empathy, containment, and composure, while encouraging the client to look at the situation through multiple lenses. In this case, it seems clear that it is Keith who is seeking understanding and empathy from the client.

Practitioners often get prematurely caught up in seeking approval from the client because they are eager to see the project move. Clients, on the other hand, look at the situation from their own vantage points, and are more focused on outcomes and return on investment. It does seem that Keith was inexperienced in the interventions he was so frantically trying to use with the client group. He was using what he thought was an intuitively correct and relevant approach, but it is the author's opinion that Keith's inability to invoke creative tension within the group, and/or his failure to engage them productively, was in large part because of Keith's inadequate knowledge and theoretical foundation in team facilitation and group dynamics. This technical failure could have perhaps been avoided if the consultant had spent more time upfront during the process of introduction, discovery, and relatedness, while setting the stage for what the client could expect, moving forward. As is fairly evident from the

case, not enough time was spent on building trust and rapport with the client. These are extremely crucial elements that often determine part of the success or failure of a consulting project.

An analysis of this project by Keith himself, and an informal consultation with the author, possibly helped him see with some clarity the issues that perhaps became significantly important and even responsible for the partial failure of the intervention. He was able to recognize his own naiveté and lack of competency in psychodynamic consulting, something he is beginning to now work on seriously. It was encouraging to see Keith make a postmortem “self analysis” that he has courageously recorded in the summary of his case scenario, under the title “Remaining Issues” on page 7 of the narrative. As practitioners, we are always held to a higher standard and publicly scrutinized for our actions. This makes it all the more important that we use robust, theoretically-based models and interventions when working with clients, while also recognizing that not all theoretically grounded material is relevant or even effective. The wisdom and artistry of consulting are both vitally important and must be integrated, not polarized.

In contrast with (TIC), the second case scenario (SIS) uses a different approach to consulting. Richard Seel and Rachel Bodle are seasoned OD consultants who have both worked successfully in the organizational arena. However, it is clear from the case narrative that the strategy they are about to use with the client, i.e. “storytelling” as a means of helping the organization

connect with its own essence, purpose and mission, is something that has not been tested by them before. What they are attempting to do is incorporate storytelling into an “appreciative inquiry” approach. There is no question that appreciative inquiry is a popular, respected, and well grounded research-based methodology, but it does not fit every mold in consulting. And, it certainly does not address every organizational problem.

It is a consultant’s job to determine, first of all, if AI is right for the organization, given its present culture and openness to new ideas. Is there a serious buy-in at the top for new strategies? Are the organizational members willing to retell/relive the past stories, without having their defenses raised in the process? We are so conditioned in organizations to stay with the gestalt (the here and now), that anything that stirs up emotions and feelings, especially as it relates to past events, is actually frowned upon.

Upon reading the background of the case material presented, it is clear that the client is seeking the consultants’ help with “strategic planning” designed to address the organizational responses to significant changes in the business environment. Traditionally, this would need a “SWOT” analysis, as any management theorist would suggest. Such an analysis is supported by the “direct client” Eric, who is Deputy Chief Executive of the firm, but undermined by the Chief Executive, John as a “waste of time.” He is ambivalent about the approach, but reluctantly goes along with Eric’s recommendations. The

consultants are aware of this situation, but choose to disregard this tension as probably unimportant. We have our first dilemma right there.

From further reading the narrative, it does seem that the consultants try to engage the executive team in some strategic planning exercises in a series of workshops. What is not so clear is whether a well defined theoretical model was used as part of the strategic thinking process. The team members and the Chief Executive do seem resistant to anything untested or “off the wall” (see under Workshop Design, Pg. 3) yet it is puzzling why the consultant unilaterally decides to promote what he thinks might be the relevant approach, i.e. storytelling.

It is not unusual in consulting for a practitioner to take the lead on the use of a particular methodology, but the more astute consultants take measured and informed risks, especially when the client is highly resistant to a new approach that is either esoteric or lacks a theoretical foundation. Here is a typical scenario in which the consultant is probably setting himself up for trouble, even before the assignment can progress. He is so consumed, even obsessed with what he believes is an innovative strategy, that he fails to “listen” to the client’s concerns. He sets out, in consultation with his partner, to roll out “appreciative inquiry” as a strategy, on the assumption that because it had Eric’s backing it would be supported by the Chief Executive as well. There are tell-tale signs that things are not quite in order, as it evident from the following excerpt from the narrative (The Workshop, page 4):

During a break in this process I found myself in the toilet with the chief executive. "I can't cope with this sort of thing, Richard," he said. I replied with something like, "Just hang in there, John, it's going to be fine."

One wonders what the consultants could have done to address the Chief Executive's resistance at that early stage, or if something was even possible.

There was however, a strong indication that the strategic planning process was being unconsciously undermined by John, but probably allowed to continue in order to appease his direct report, Eric. An "unresolved" intrapsychic conflict such as the one experienced by the Chief Executive John has been known in organizations, to bring a crushing blow to internal and external interventions. Even though the direct client Eric and the consultants Richard and Rachel feel that significant progress was being made as a group, the outcome is surprisingly different. As Richard Seel recounts in the narrative (Workshop, Pg. 5):

"The workshop ended on a high note and I waited to hear from Eric, fully expecting to have some significant input into their next steps. I heard nothing for two weeks. Finally, a phone call from Eric: 'I am really sorry Richard, but John has decided that all the work we've done is a complete waste of time. Everyone here is devastated because we all thought it was really positive. But we have to accept his decision in this matter.'"

A postmortem analysis and reflection by Richard Seel reveal some feelings of despondency and inadequacy (Questions and Reflections, Pg. 5), coupled with a sense that some progress had indeed been made with the client, even though

the Chief Executive thought the intervention was a failure. These are legitimate concerns we all have as consultants. What we do not hear in the case narrative are attempts on the part of the consultants to better understand issues as they surface, especially those that relate to a conflict of ideology. What is also not sufficiently clear is whether the stage was set at the point of introduction and discovery, to lay out for the client, the “theoretical and scholarly” foundation of the work. It does appear that the Chief Executive was not sold on the “storytelling” approach as a way of addressing “strategic” dilemmas within the organization. This resistance may have less to do with the approach itself, and more with the perception that it was probably not well grounded, researched, or even relevant in the given situation.

Clients do not want to become the first “guinea pigs” at the hands of consultants, and will go to great lengths to resist such attempts. It is not uncommon for organizational leaders to frown upon “touchy feely” interventions, or those that are designed to bring out unconscious issues. The task of a psychodynamic organizational consultant is therefore fraught with a great deal of anxiety. Standing on the hard ground with a client, using a rational and positivist approach is relatively easy. What is not so simple is to stand with a client in the swampy marshland, where a rational approach just will not work. So, how does one move back and forth between the hard ground and the soft ground, between inquiry and practice, and between the rational and the

irrational realms? There are no easy answers; just more questions and challenges.

At this time, it might be helpful to revisit and recapture some of the learning that has emerged from an analysis of the two case studies, and see how it ties into the author's own practice:

-Both consulting scenarios (TIC) and (SAS) reveal a heavy "practitioner" orientation, with greater emphasis on relevance, rather than rigor. This could have been one of the reasons why both interventions ended up failing, or only marginally succeeding at best.

-It is strongly apparent from both case scenarios that the ability to "listen" to a client's concerns is of paramount importance. In addition, what might be construed by the consultant to be a highly relevant and effective intervention may not be viewed as such by the client. Clients will usually feel more comfortable with approaches that are both credible and pragmatic.

-Before embarking on a brand new strategy with a client, it is important to study it seriously, experience it in a safe setting, and understand the research that has gone into it. In both case scenarios, we observe the consultants "trying" something new; "drumming" in (TIC) and "storytelling" in (SAS). Both attempts are rejected by the clients.

-Unless there is "buy-in" at the top, the intervention will likely fail to produce the desired outcome. "Buy-in" is better facilitated with more upfront work, a deeper process of discovery, and through setting the stage with what can be expected

down the road by the client. No one likes surprises, even though we all know that the rapidly changing nature of the organizational environment (both internal and external) have many surprises and challenges in store for us.

-For this author, designing and facilitating an online "community of practice" has been extremely interesting and educational. With global communities coming closer through virtual networking, this is a wonderful opportunity to bring together some insightful minds into a pedagogical system of inquiry and practice.

In summary, this paper has been a wonderful mental exercise in at least establishing that the integration of scholarship and practice is, and will always be a journey, not a destination. In the author's opinion, the tension will continue to exist between the two camps, and each will try to undermine the importance of the other. By contrast, those of us who are able to honor and respect the interdependency of inquiry and practice, hold the paradox of opposites, and be able to incorporate both dimensions in our work, are likely to achieve a greater level of success with clients, by producing both, "rigorous and relevant" interventions.

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