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Transformational Consulting: Shifting from Consultant-centered Solutions to Client-centered Solutions

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Abstract

Consulting has evolved significantly over the years. This is in response to the changing operating environment and the emerging needs of organizations. To enrich client-consultant relationships, this article explores the changing philosophical positions around consulting and some of the applied techniques to make consulting an instrument of help in organizations. To enhance understanding of the varying consulting approaches, the article covers consulting approaches from Sigmund Freud, Karl Marx, Erich Fromm, and Patrick Trottier. The philosophical positions and insights from their work will support the emerging consultant in deepening transformational consulting. Through a review of the literature and reflecting on the author's consulting practice, the article summarizes approaches to enhance transformational consulting. These approaches advance the humanistic paradigm and as such promotes the co-creation of solutions with the client system. The article positions the Use of Self and Action Research as fundamental to enriching consultants' productive impact. In addition, the article highlights four strength-based models that enrich the design of client-centered solutions.

Introduction

Transformational consulting is a systematic, holistic, and humanistic approach to the provision of support services to a client. This is achieved through widespread informed inquiries and engagement of stakeholders; the co-design of interventions that awaken and empowers the system to actualize its potential; continual self-renewal; taking advantage of emerging potential; and leading from the emerging future, while achieving productivity, profitability, and sustainability. In transformational consulting, the consultant makes use of provocatively poignant questions, generative dialogue, storytelling, contemplative and reflective practices, and creating psychologically safe spaces to uncover covert and grand structural and cultural issues affecting a client system. It is an eclectic approach that is deeply embedded in contextual intelligence and emergent learning with the client system, not the consultant, being the primary change agent. It usually entails the consultant, as a gadfly facilitator of meaningful and generative conversations, working in partnership with the client system to co-create and co-evolve sustainable and profitable interventions.

Enriching consultation practices with transformational consulting attributes facilitates sustainable growth and development of client systems. Therefore, it is important to raise our awareness of the need to embrace client-centered consulting approaches. Consulting work should shift from consultant-centered solutions to client-centered solutions. In addition, the consultant should encourage possibility-seeking engagements rather than excessive problem-orientation.

The Evolution of Consulting Methodologies

Given the impending humanistic paradigm – in business and society, consultants need to engage in practices that are embedded in some fundamental humanistic principles. Therefore, both seasoned and emerging consultants need to appreciate the evolution of consulting methodologies. Most importantly, consultants must reflect on the value of these methodologies in their practice. Adapted by Chinoperekweyi (2022) from organization development (OD) literature, Figure 1 depicts the evolution of consulting methodologies from an organization development perspective.

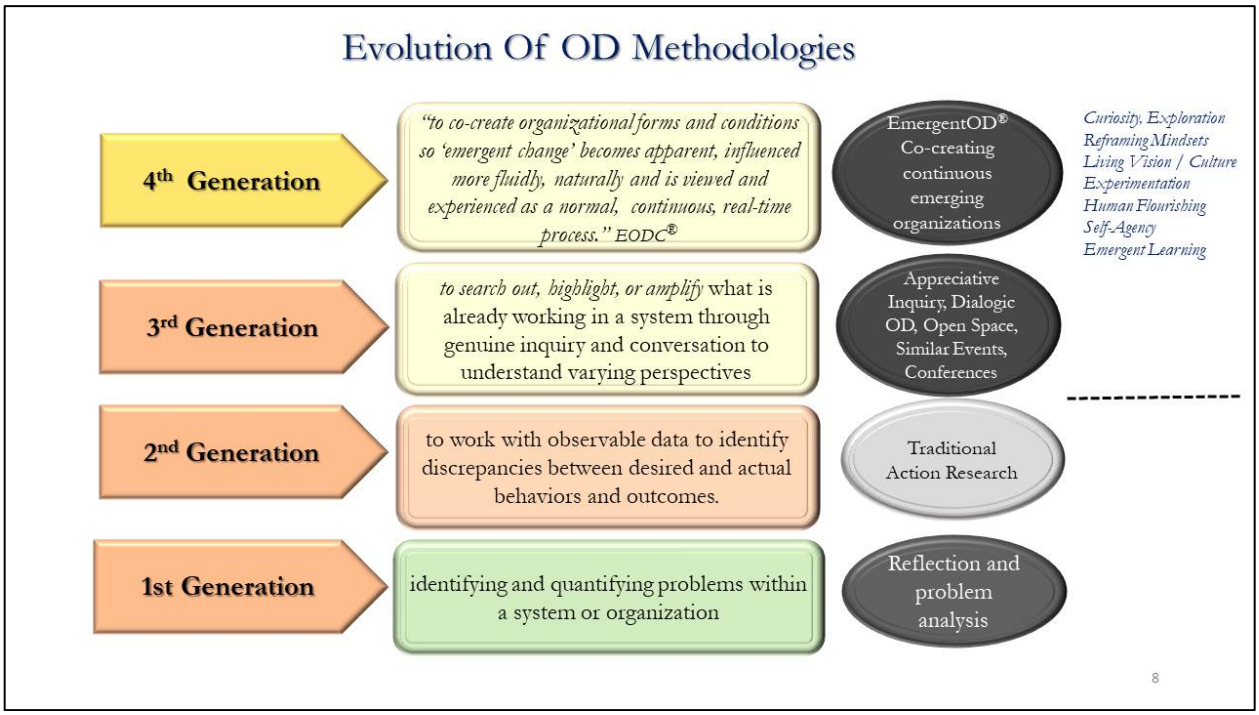


Figure 1

As depicted in Figure 1, consultants who are informed by the first-generation methodologies get preoccupied with problem analysis. The consultant in this case is viewed as a solution-provider. The second-generation consultants work with observable data to identify gaps between desired and actual behaviours and outcomes. The adoption of third-generation methodologies focuses on strengths and opportunities rather than problems. The consultants search and amplify what's working in a client system. Those using fourth-generation methodologies co-create continually emerging forms of organizing. Reflecting on these four generations of OD methodologies shows some significant shifts in the way that consultants engage with client systems.

Price (2022) identified the roles of a consultant as encompassing "educators, diagnosticians, researchers, facilitators, interventionists, trainers, and coaches" (p.50). Noting misunderstandings on the roles of a consultant, Lynn (2017) made a distinction between a consultant, moderator, and facilitator. While providing clarity on these roles, he stated that "it has become 'desirable' – unfortunately – for 'consultants' to describe oneself as a 'facilitator'". Concerning organization development consultants, Chinoperekweyi (2019a) posits that consultants "enhance an organization's ability to simultaneously explore the market and exploit the organization's capabilities to improve performance and drive sustainability" (p.23). To execute this role, consultants should be guided by the 5As Transformative Framework. The framework indicates that consultants should be *Authors* of novelty, *Advocates* for transformational growth and development, *Agents* for change and development, *Arbiters* in the event of a conflict, and *Ambassadors* of relational practice (Chinoperekweyi, 2019b). Organization Development literature identifies four main consultative approaches as follows: Expert Consulting, Medical (Doctor-Patient) Consulting, Process Consultation, and Emergent Approach (Emergent OD®). These approaches are being widely used by consultants today and inform the consulting process.

First, **Expert consulting** places the consultant as the primary change agent. This implies that the consultant is a solution provider and can identify what is right and wrong. As stated by Zaldivar (2010), it is worth noting that expert consultants "rarely acknowledge the values and realities of the client system" (p.13). Sadly, some organizations have a cultural expectation of consultants delivering expertise to their systems. Zaldivar (2010) posits that expert consulting assumes too much and is often unaware of its biases. This makes it unreliable in complex, cross-cultural human system dynamics.

Karl Marx's consultative approach helps us understand expert consulting. Chinoperekweyi (2022) refers to Marx's four-step approach while supporting the working class of his time.

> *"First, he started by showing the people that they suffered. In doing so, Marx tried to destroy the illusion that tended to cover the workers' awareness of their misery. Second, he took people through the causes of this suffering. Third, Marx demonstrated that suffering could be removed if the conditions for suffering were removed. Finally, he shared the new practice of life, the new social system that will be free of suffering. I could safely say, Marx was, kind of, holding the mirror for these people to see themselves and change. However, he seems to be an expert in the whole process." (p.2)*

Second, the **Medical Approach** relies predominantly on assessment, and diagnosis to offer a prescription. In this case, the consultant is still the primary change agent. Trottier (2012) identified eight assumptions from the medical model. Some of these assumptions are 1) the consultant can get accurate diagnostic information on his/her own, 2) the standard, prescribed, off-the-shelf assessment tool of the consultant's 'fits' the situation and the culture of the organization, and 3) the consultant will create the necessary degree of trust and relationship needed in a short amount of time when dealing with a whole organization.

As published by Chinoperekweyi (2022), Sigmund Freud's method of healing aligns with the Medical Approach. Freud's healing method can be summarized as follows:

> *"Patients consulted Freud because they suffered and they were aware that they suffered. But they were usually not aware of what they suffered from. The first task of the consultant (psychoanalyst) is to help the patient give up their illusions about their suffering and learn what their ill-being consists of. This is done through a diagnosis process. Interestingly, diagnosis is a matter of interpretation, and various interpreters can differ in their submissions. It is worth noting that during this entire process, the patient's picture of what they suffer from is usually the least reliable datum for diagnosis." (p.2)*

Third, **Process consultation** was developed by Edgar Schein, who stated that "Process consultation is a series of steps facilitated by the consultant that help the client to perceive, understand, and act upon the issues that occur in the client's environment(s) in order to improve the situation as defined by the client." (Schein, 1987). This approach empowers organizational members, as process owners, to solve

their problems and co-create organizational solutions. With process consultation, the consultant focuses on human processes such as face-to-face interactions, communication, intergroup processes, and building self-improvement capabilities. Erich Fromm's consultative approach helps in understanding the process consultation approach. As a radical humanist, Fromm's seven fundamentals recognized people in a social system.

First, practitioners are obligated to reformulate, not just the definition of a client's problem, but also the tools that are used to address it. This minimizes the dominant tendency among practitioners of trying to fit the client's problem or system into some already prescribed tools or frameworks. If this is done, according to Ashby's Law of Requisite Variety, the intervention's complexity will not match the system's complexity. Second, the practitioner's goal is to facilitate the client's self-discovery or promote continuous development and self-agency. This is against the practitioner being viewed as a solution provider. Third, practitioners should strengthen the client's sense of responsibility. In 2018, Gervase Bushe and Makoto Nagaishi proposed three criteria that are useful in determining whether a system is fully developed. Their three criteria support this point. The three criteria for successful OD are: "a) the more developed an organization, the more aware it is of itself and can talk to itself about itself, b) The more developed an organization, the less it is driven by reactive, unconscious emotions, motivations, and cognitive frameworks and the more decisions and actions are based on reason, rationality, and cognitive complexity, and c) the more developed an organization, the more it can realize its potential." Fourth, Fromm indicated that, when treating a patient, it doesn't make sense to focus exclusively on their pathological qualities, the symptoms of their illness, or the negative aspects of their condition. Acknowledging their positive qualities will enhance the therapeutic technique. Here we see strength-based approaches such as Appreciative Inquiry.

The fifth fundamental is that practitioners should not simply add their two cents so that the client will change. They also must help the client develop strategies so that they can reintegrate themselves into society/industry and feel stronger. With this, the system can actualize its potential and be a contributor to the common good. Sixth, practitioners should be receptive to advancements in science and changes in society. It is important to understand the cultural, economic, and political conditions that surround the client. It is a mistake to work from a reductionist perspective. Contextual intelligence and emergent learning become key here. Lastly, practitioners should use clear, transparent, understandable vocabulary. In addition, practitioners should not try to project an image of power and superiority. Indeed, organizations are operating under complexity and chaos already, as practitioners we should not add to that complexity through terminologies and templates that confuse clients. Immerse yourself in the client system and use their language.

Lastly, the **Emergent Approach**, as developed by Patrick Trottier, is focused on "an open, evolving process of unfolding discovery and shaping that discovery on an ongoing basis in present real-time" (Trottier, 2012). This is an evolution from the traditional problem-solving approaches.

Approaches to Enhance Transformational Consulting

Consulting work must be meaningful and generative. There are multiple approaches to enhancing transformational consulting. The Use of Self and Action Research is key to enriching consultants' productive impact. Zaldivar (2010) defined the Use of Self as "a practice of consciously raising awareness of one's own filters, one's point of view and one's assumptions, then using such awareness to further the process of mutual learning in a client system" (p.19). Through effective use of self, the consultant becomes aware of his/her biases and general worldview. Nevis (1987) asserts that "The practitioner is not only to stand for and express certain values, attitudes, and skills, but to use these in a way to stimulate, and perhaps evoke from the client, action necessary for movement on its problems. This means that the practitioner is generally more open and revealing about the thoughts and feelings that might be true in other forms of process consultation. The aim is to take advantage of the issues of difference, marginality, and attraction by the client to use oneself in the most powerful way possible (p. 54). Action research encompasses repeated cycles of contracting, data collection, diagnosis, feedback, and action. The action research process is aligned with the process consultation approach.

To become transformational consultants, a new spirit of creative thinking and opportunity awareness must be borne. The following approaches are fundamental in shifting the client's cognitive and emotional frameworks, enhancing readiness for desired change, and creating a sense of ownership. These approaches indicate a shift from a problem orientation to possibility-seeking.

- Storytelling – Serrat (2008) defined storytelling as "the vivid description of ideas, beliefs, personal experiences, and life lessons through stories or narratives that evoke powerful emotions and insights". (p.1)
- Generative scribing – a visual practice of representing ideas while people talk – is a distinct social art form that facilitates group learning and cultural memory.
- Adaptive Action – According to Holladay (2022), it is a three-step iterative cycle of inquiry, reflection, and action. This is designed and popularized by the Human Systems Dynamic (HSD) Institute.
- Asking powerful, poignant questions – Consultants must endeavour to consistently ask powerful questions, which open up new possibilities and new ways of thinking. This requires a meaningful connection between the one asking and the one receiving the question.
- Reflective practice – is the ability to reflect on one's actions to engage in a process of continuous learning.
- Principles of procedural fairness – this includes engagement, explanation, and expectation clarity. In transformational consulting, consultants ensure that a fair process is always followed. This enriches the client-consultant relationship.
- Mindfulness & contemplative practice – The Center for Contemplative Mind in Society states that contemplative practices are practical, radical, and transformative, developing capacities for deep concentration and quieting the mind amid the action and distraction that fills everyday life. This state of calm-centeredness is an aid to the exploration of meaning, purpose, and values. Contemplative practices can help develop greater empathy and communication

skills, improve focus and attention, reduce stress, enhance creativity, and support a loving and compassionate approach to life.

Strength-based Models – Leading the co-creation of client-centered solutions

- Appreciative Inquiry – a strengths-based, positive approach to leadership development and organizational change. This model can be used by individuals, teams, organizations, or at the societal level; in each case, it helps people move toward a shared vision for the future by engaging others in strategic innovation.
- Theory U - Theory U suggests shifting from a personal, individual-centered approach to a collective, group-centered one to move towards a more sustainable, healthy life. It suggests that society should get to “eco-system awareness”-driven forms of cooperation.
- Conferencing Model – is a process that uses search conference methodology and sociotechnical systems principles to redesign an organization. Axelrod and Associates, Inc. developed and piloted this approach at a division of R. R. Donnelley and Sons Company, the world`s largest commercial printer. The Conference Model involves a series of four conferences; in this case, each conference involved up to 80 participants.
- SOAR Model – This strategic model is an acronym for Strengths, Opportunities, Aspirations, and Results. Both existing and new organizations can make good use of this type of analysis. It works for everyone within an organization, irrespective of position or hierarchical level.

Conclusion

Wainwright (2022) pointed out the need to actively manage the client-consultant relationship as an impression management approach. Consultants should learn and embrace concepts around the Use of Self and Action Research as fundamentals of transformational consulting. Furthermore, eclecticism is essential when facilitating consulting engagements. To be meaningful and generative in client systems, consultants need to reaffirm their passion and commitment to supporting clients in building great teams and great organizations. The tools and models shared in this article, are essential in the co-creation of client-centered solutions.

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