
A Consulting Assignment as a Conversation

Brian Ing

Introduction

My intention in this short article is to draw similarities of both processes (that is having a conversation and undertaking a management consulting assignment) in order to inform how we consult and evaluate our efforts. Initially I start with trying to define a conversation between two individuals who initially are strangers to each other as a process: a simple process that proceeds from one step to another to a successful outcome.

The two-person conversation process:

- *Initiation*: involves greeting, exchange names,
- *Validation*: discovering initial details in order to check that we should be talking
- *Finding a common topic*: exploratory (often false or “blind alley”) starts
- *Discussing the topic*: a to and fro interaction of both participants which may involve differences of view or information.
- *Reaching a conclusion*: both agree to finish topic
- *Ending*: agree any future actions and participant

And at the end the conversation could be seen as successful if the originator of the topic has gained more insight or validation, the other feels they have contributed and aided, and both feel that the person they have just met would be worth talking to again. Simplistic and idealised I agree, but this is the bones of the process. My proposal is that we should consider, at a base level, a management consulting assignment as a “conversation” between consultant and client.

For evidence that this is so, I refer to the recent issued standard ISO 20700, Guidelines for Management Consultancy Services. This standard is a groundbreaking standard addressing as it does for the first time in an ISO standard the interaction in service provision between the service supplier, in this case a management consultant, and a service user, the client. The standard refers to the service provision requirements on the supplier and the user is assumed to reciprocate, following the “it takes two hands to clap” principle. The standard emphasises explanation, communication and responding

to queries. These can only be achieved if the client is reciprocating. In my terms, if both are having a conversation.

There is a clear analogy between the social rules, mores, and practices in conversations and the clear exposition of the “best practice” rules of interaction in a consultancy assignment implicit throughout in ISO 20700. The standard reinforces a belief of mine for a long time.

I started my consulting career in the 1970s when some aspects of the consulting business were still in their infancy. Often, I would hear consultants make extensive addresses or speeches to clients packed with as many polysyllabic words as it was possible. In private, I would ask them to tell what they meant, and they would repeat the long diatribe that I had just heard. A follow up question of, “but what does that really mean?” too often left them speechless. They may have considered they had fulfilled their role in the consulting process, but I am sure the client was only a little wiser. In my terms they had not had a meaningful conversation together. I leave it to the reader to note whether such behaviours still exist today.

My belief is that with our increasing use of sophisticated models, tools, and approaches, it is easy to get so wrapped up in the technicalities of the approach as to forget the underlying process. In essence, normally a single person (as representative of an organisation perhaps) has an issue or problem which they wish to work through with another person (who in turn may be the lead representative of a consulting organisation) so that they have a way that they are confident of to be able to deal effectively with the issue or problem. To achieve this, they seek confidence in the interaction and outcome. This confidence is generated through the interactions of the conversation/management consultancy process.

I hold that we as individual consultants or as a profession should be judged by the results we achieve: the changes, the improvements and even the rescues. This is in contrast to being judged by the language and communication we produce. The impenetrability of some utterances and the apparent, but false, sophistication of complex language do not enhance our usefulness, and hence damage the perception of our value.

But not all advisers work this way. I am aware that in some cultures it is more common than in others for the advisor to attend, be told the problem, to collect data/information, undergo a complete analysis of the information and present back the conclusions of the analysis. Whilst undertaking the analysis this is not interaction with the client: the client wants a solution only. There will be times when a proper professional management consultant has to work this way at the client’s request. We should be aware that this way of working without interaction is missing the “conversation” and is in my terminology not “consultancy” and the role is that of “the analyst”. A valuable role in the right circumstances but not offering the possibilities of exploration and elucidation available in the interactive consultancy process. The consultancy process enables use of alternative considerations and options that had not been surfaced at the beginning of the assignment and enables the client to be part of the derivation of the final outcome, to be involved and convinced step by step to “own” the outcome and to be better placed to drive through their own organisation the resultant actions from the assignment.

At the end of an assignment, we should review our performance. I hold that a review point for every assignment should be “How did the conversation between us and the client progress?” We have all had consulting assignments that were difficult through misunderstandings, changing circumstances and needs, surprising findings detouring the assignment and, we must admit, us taking the wrong path initially. Despite all of these challenges, the client and consultant may still agree that the assignment was successful. I maintain that this would have in part due the conversation being maintained and effective through the challenges.

For those who still are not willing to accept the view presented above of the consulting process, I would like to quote an eminent physicist. I was privileged to be taught by Sir Nevill Mott as a student theoretical physicist. He was awarded the Nobel Prize for work he did, aged 68, after he retired as the Cavendish Professor. He set us to write an essay (incidentally the only one I was asked to write as a student in the mathematical sciences) on what had been his life work without using symbols, equations, or diagrams. After a three-hour detailed examination of my essay, he went to the blackboard and wrote “if you cannot explain the physics simply, you have not fully understood it”. Naturally, this does not apply only to physics, and I have applied the mantra to management consulting. Hence, on this basis I maintain that the appropriate response, given this advice, to the question, “What does a management consultant do?” should be, “They have a conversation with a person who has a problem or issue to help them reach a solution”.