
Management Consulting's Black Holes: A Question of Time and Space

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Abstract

Performance improvement interventions undertaken by management consultants, like many others, can experience difficulty in ensuring that the bulk of the effort put into the intervention translates into the desired change. While consultants themselves are limited in what they can control once their work is completed, there are nevertheless activities they can carry out or at least initiate to improve the chances of change being brought about. Goal setting, self-management and action planning have demonstrated positive effects, particularly where behavioural change is required. Similarly, based on a tested model of learning transfer, other activities relating to peer support, manager support and external coaching can be encouraged and set in train.

Introduction

Regular debates within the world of theoretical physics have maintained awareness of the phenomenon of 'black holes', those spaces into which much energy disappears and from which little or none emerges. The 'parallel universe' of management consulting provides similar challenges. Not enough, it would appear, of the vast amount of resources spent on consulting interventions results in tangible and meaningful benefits for organisations. Yet there are ways of improving this situation. A major factor is the ability of the participants (clients) to generate the time and the mental space to make intentions a reality. This article discusses what can help do that.

The Issue

In today's rapidly changing business environment, gaining and sustaining competitive advantage is critical for organisations' success. To that end, billions are spent in developing the necessary capabilities through a variety of individual, team and organisational consulting interventions. There is a widely held view, influenced by popular articles in the practitioner literature in particular such as Beer et al. (1990) and Kotter (1995) that the rate of failure is of the order of 70%. Although this view is challenged (e.g. Hughes, 2011) there is nevertheless a strong sense that it is difficult for interventions to achieve all they set out to do in the face of a range of challenges. This is particularly true of the type of interventions that are the focus of this article – ones that require behavioural change – such as leadership development, team development or organisation development. In that regard, some rigorous studies from the world of Learning & Development (L&D), for example those of Brinkerhoff (2006) or Saks & Belcourt (2006) are not particularly encouraging either. In terms of the value organisations derive from these interventions, their studies estimated that only between 10% and 30% of skills and knowledge were being fully applied by people in the organisations they studied after the consultants had left. Therefore, there is clearly a need to close that gap. An opportunity exists for management consultants working on change projects to do more to facilitate the application of new learning back on the job. The process involved is known as learning transfer and deserves further attention.

What is Learning Transfer?

Learning transfer (or transfer of learning) is discussed in the literature as the generalisation of what is learned (e.g. skills acquired, knowledge gained) from interventions to the job context, as well as maintenance of that learning over time (Baldwin and Ford, 1988; Broad and Newstrom, 1992). For example, consultants may work with an organisation to incorporate a new way of formulating strategy. They may facilitate a team in clarifying its goals or improving its processes. Or a particular leader may now have a professional development agenda to implement. Ideally, each should involve the consultants 'leaving knowledge behind' to continue the process started and integrate that knowledge into the organisation's way of doing business, so understanding how that process works is important.

What Does It Look Like?

It's not unreasonable for an organisation to want to know if investment in a change initiative has been 'worth it', hence the preponderance of outcomes-based evaluation. Yet a strong body of evaluation research, particularly in the Learning & Development (L&D) field points to the need to consider the impact of a range of factors on the final outcome (Aguinis and Kraiger, 2009; Baldwin, Ford and Blume, 2017; Bell et al. 2017; Bhatti and Kaur, 2010; Holton, 1996; Kirwan, 2005; Perez-Soltero et al. 2019). In summary, these factors primarily relate to individual participants (e.g. motivation, ability); L&D/change programmes (design, delivery); and the work environment (manager and peer support, organisational climate). One model of influencing factors drawn from the L&D world is shown in Figure 1.

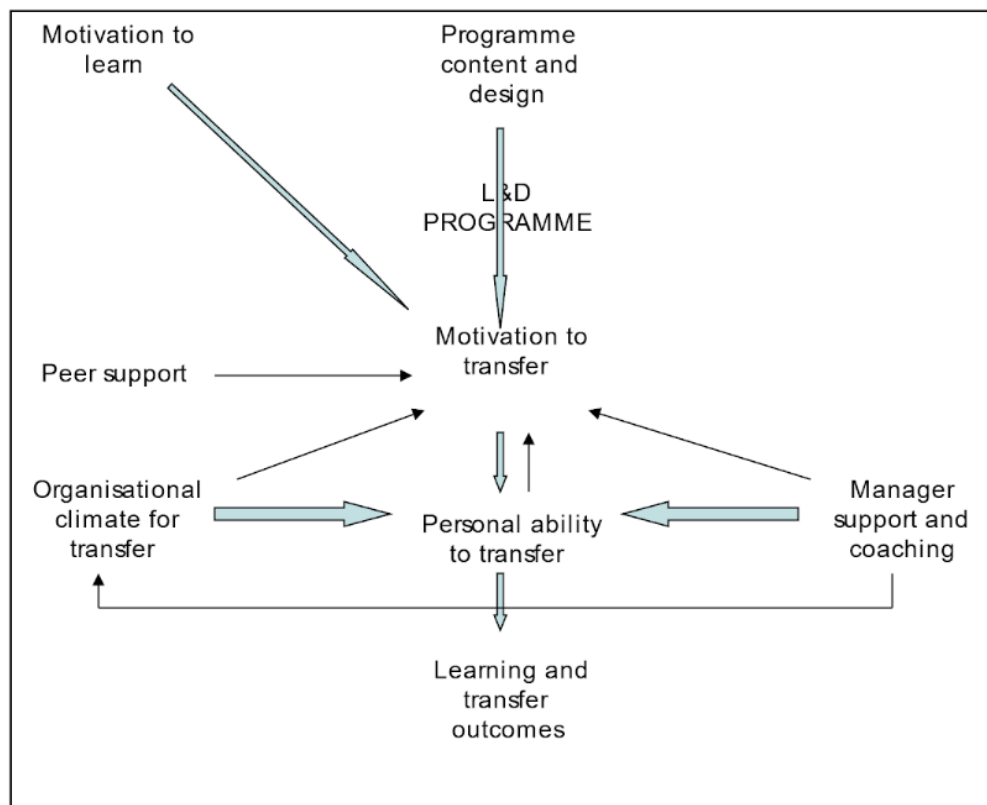


Figure 1: Model of learning transfer (Kirwan, 2009)

In this model, a participant's motivation to learn (the degree to which they are prepared to fully participate in the programme and learn from it) is important to begin with, as is their motivation to transfer (how keen they are to use that learning back at work). The extent to which they see the content as appropriate to their practical needs, and the way in which the design and delivery of the intervention facilitates them in transferring new learning back to the job also makes a big difference (programme content and design). However, there are other influential factors over which an external consultant will have little or no control. These are the work environment factors, such as the extent to which peers (peer support) and particularly supervisors/managers (manager support & coaching) reinforce and support the use of learning on the job. In addition to these is the extent to which the work environment itself (organisational climate for transfer) helps or hinders the application of new learning. The various factors work together to facilitate the conditions for learning to flourish, by creating important time and mental space

(personal ability to transfer) for learners. Maintaining these conditions over time has been shown to improve transfer and thus the return on L&D investment. The influence of and relationships between the above factors is well documented in a number of useful literature reviews and meta-analyses (Baldwin, Ford and Blume, 2017; Bell et al. 2017; Blume et al. 2010; Burke and Hutchins, 2007).

Two Key Factors

Of the factors studied, perhaps the one whose importance has been most clearly and consistently demonstrated has been individuals' motivation to transfer that learning. It makes sense. No matter how successful the intervention is (in the eyes of the consultant) unless people want to put that learning into practice it will be very difficult for this to happen. Nevertheless, research by Kirwan (2005) has identified what may be the key to translating that motivation into reality. His research highlighted the necessity for two factors in particular to be present for effective transfer – the participants' motivation to transfer (not surprisingly) but also their personal ability to transfer. The former is about how much effort one is prepared to put into using learned knowledge and skills back at work, while the latter concerns the extent to which individuals can make the time and 'mental space' in their work to apply that learning. The two factors work together, with the latter as the means by which the former can be translated into action. In the research, personal ability to transfer was the factor that correlated most strongly and significantly with actual learning transfer. Motivation to transfer is easier to generate but harder to maintain, so personal ability to transfer is critical. While it can be influenced by the support people receive from a number of sources such as managers, peers and the broader organisation (as per the model) there are a number of things consultants can do before they depart to help with this very important transition.

What Can Consultants Do?

For many consultancy assignments, the consultants' responsibility ends when the intervention is formally finished. However, their departure is often only the beginning of the process to embed new learning into the client organisation's way of doing things. Consultants can enhance their reputation (and their fees!) by improving the chances that what they leave behind will last. Firstly, they can reinforce the idea that there is a need for time and mental space to allow changes to happen (there's plenty of evidence for this). Secondly, before they depart, they can facilitate a number of transfer-enhancing activities, perhaps in the form of short workshops, to help generate that time and mental space. These 'bridging activities' don't add new content but rather focus on ways of sustaining new knowledge and skills acquired during the intervention. They include goal setting, self-management, action planning, enlisting the support of their manager and coaching. Above all, what they have in common is that they allow time for reflection.

Promote goal setting

Over the years, a significant amount of evidence has accumulated to suggest that setting clear goals to achieve specific ends makes achievement of those ends more likely. Not surprisingly, the situation is the same with regard to the application of learning. For a long time now, setting goals around the application of learning back at work has been demonstrated to have positive effects on the outcome (Wexley and

Nemeroff 1975; Feldman 1981; Magjuka, Baldwin and Loher 1994). It is a process whereby the consultant, the programme participant and perhaps also their manager agree the achievement of certain application objectives by the participant following the intervention. For instance, following a leadership programme, a participant might have a goal to give feedback in a particular way to a specific employee, or to chair a meeting, and would monitor and record their use of these new skills. The consultant can build in time at the end of the intervention to provide help in how to do this. It's more common for participants to set their own goals (the 'participative' strategy) but depending on the circumstances, goals may be set for them (the 'assigned' strategy). Wexley and Baldwin (1986) discovered that if they included a 45-minute session at the end of the programme on the setting of specific goals, it was seen to be more effective in promoting transfer than not having such a session, and instead leaving it to participants to 'do their best'. This is worth knowing as goal setting at the end of interventions can often be quite a rushed affair, with little time for reflecting on how the goals will be achieved.

The way in which goal setting makes application of new learning more successful is the same as for any other endeavour. By making transfer objectives clear (sometimes publicly so) and by considering the ways in which they'll be achieved, usually through considerations around specificity, measurability and achievability, participants can construct a very clear view of what success in application looks like. Once again, the process of reflection that is part of goal setting is also important, so activities undertaken at the time of goal setting that encourage reflection should also improve the probability of them being achieved. For this reason, putting goals in writing and/or testing them with colleagues can also be helpful. The amount of time given to goal setting will no doubt vary with the length of the intervention. A short workshop on a specific topic may complete the process in a matter of minutes. Deeper interventions, where more complex skills and knowledge are involved or where feedback needs to be reflected upon, should allow significantly longer. In these situations, one-to-one assistance from the consultant with goal setting can also be of benefit.

Have participants construct an action plan

An action plan, sometimes called a 'performance improvement plan' is, according to Cowan et al. (2010, p.18), 'a particular approach that helps participants apply what they have learned during training of their jobs.' Evidence for their effectiveness in transferring learning is provided by Foxon (1987) and Hollenbeck and Ingols (1990), among others. It is essentially a statement of what the participant intends to do to enhance the chances of their learning translating into real changes in behaviour at work. While action plans can be constructed at any time, and don't even need to be part of a particular intervention, it is usually such an intervention (and the reflective time that accompanies it) that starts the learning transfer process in earnest. Writing down what one intends to achieve is the first step in meeting the commitment.

Drewitt (2008), for example, suggests that it can be part of a broader strategy involving the participant's manager from before the actual intervention. This doesn't always happen, but that reality need not preclude the consultant from giving time to it as part of the intervention. Wherever the process starts, experience has shown that the most effective action plans typically follow a thought process something like the following:

- Taking some time to think about what has been learned from the intervention. Consideration of inputs such as new models, frameworks or processes, personal experiences and observations, or discussions with others at various stages.
- Identifying areas in which success is already being achieved (it is important to remind oneself of this) as well as areas in which improvements might be made. This usually involves some prioritisation, focusing on areas that are felt to be important individually and to the performance of the unit/team, and where it is felt that efforts can have a beneficial impact. It makes more sense not to consider improvements in too many areas, perhaps limiting them to two or three. More often than not, setting too many goals will result in no goals being achieved. For each improvement action, a participant can be encouraged to ask the questions below to serve as a support for the thinking process.
 - What is the benefit for me/the team of taking action?
 - What are the consequences if I don't take action?
 - What is my objective for this 'area for action'?
 - What are the obstacles to achieving my objective?
 - What help will I need to achieve my objective?
 - How will I know if I'm succeeding?

An additional benefit can be gained by discussing the draft action plan with a colleague, perhaps a fellow participant in the intervention. The role of that individual can be to 'reality test' the plan for its specificity, measurability or achievability (the SMART framework is often recommended). Changes to be made to the plan can be noted there and then.

Conduct a self-management/relapse prevention session at the end of the intervention

In essence, self-management is concerned with encouraging participants to consider as many issues as possible that might prevent their new skills or knowledge from surviving the transition from the intervention to the job, and to consider how they will deal with them. A self-management session can be facilitated by the consultant at the end of an intervention, and is likely to include some goal setting, as described above. It can be a valuable addition to an action plan. Once participants have outlined a plan and discussed it with a course colleague, the consultant may wish to introduce a session in which participants consider what faces them in terms of implementing their action plan when they get back to work, what difficulties they may encounter, and how they might be able to deal with them. Typically, this session builds on action planning and discusses (in plenary) issues such as how specifically changes in behaviour will be made, where resistance might come from, what they'll need from their manager, and so on.

If considered appropriate, this session can also use a concept that some researchers have looked at as a way of improving learning transfer. Relapse prevention, as it's called, was originally used with addictive behaviours and is based on the model of Marlatt and Gordon (1980). In theory, the model proposes that anticipating and monitoring past and present failures will enhance long-term behaviour change. The individual then develops a response to cope with high-risk situations following the original intervention. Increased confidence following the successful overcoming of

the high-risk situation decreases the probability of relapse. One can imagine its use with negotiation skills training, for example. The session might focus on instances where application of the skills (declaring an interest, for example) doesn't produce the desired result (the other party declaring their own interest, thus setting the scene for progress). According to e.g. Burke and Baldwin (1999), relapse prevention sessions seem to have greater impact where the climate for transfer is less supportive. Other research around these concepts (Gist, Bavetta and Stephens, 1990; Richman-Hirsch, 2001) although conducted some time ago, has produced variable results, although the importance of goal setting and consideration of barriers and facilitators to application (self-management) is upheld. Both may need to work together for successful transfer.

Encourage participants to discuss change with their manager or a mentor

As can be seen from the model earlier, the support of a participant's manager has an important influence on their personal ability to transfer, and the maintenance of new knowledge and learned skills in the workplace. In an ideal world, and for some types of intervention, that manager would already be involved in the process, discussing desired outcomes and such. However, even if that hasn't happened, there is still a lot to be gained by involving them at this point. The consultant should strongly encourage this contact as soon as possible following the intervention. The action plan can provide the starting point for this meeting. How it will be implemented, what support is available, and what barriers need to be surmounted should all be discussed. Obviously, managers who are skilled in coaching are likely to be of the most help. In reality, of course, some managers can be reluctant to get involved in the process, so in those circumstances the participant should be encouraged to take the initiative.

If a manager is neither willing nor suited to the task, an alternative can be to find a mentor, usually an experienced individual who is not a direct supervisor/manager. Mentoring is described (Giacumo et al. 2020) as a method to develop skills and knowledge for professional and career growth. In effect it promotes the transfer of knowledge, skills, and 'organisational acumen' from a more experienced employee to one less experienced. Mentors can be a rich source of information, experience and guidance. The consultant can provide input (which can be easily acquired) at the end of the intervention as to how to gain the most from it. Of course, in some cases mentoring may already be happening informally, and this should be considered, rather than 'forcing' another process on participants.

Encourage participants to support each other

A major benefit that participants very often report from shared learning experiences is the opportunity to form networks with people who have to deal with similar issues. Keeping in touch with those who have had the same experience has a number of advantages. Firstly, in the context of the action plan, pairs of participants may exchange plans and undertake to monitor each other's progress, providing timely reminders of promises made. They can also act as sounding boards or sources of advice for each other with regard to difficulties that arise. These can develop into 'communities of practice' (Lave and Wenger, 1991) which are groups of people who come together (with varying degrees of formality) to share their expertise to solve problems and provide mutual support. However, rather than leave the possibility of networking to chance (participants' actions don't always match their good intentions!) it is usually possible to set up these networks before the consultants have departed. Perhaps even check-in points can be agreed at this stage. The community's work

may also involve the use of 'action learning sets' (Smith and O'Neil, 2003a; 2003b) to advance their problem-solving efforts. While the setting up of communities of practice and action learning sets is not normally part of the toolkit of even L&D consultants, there is an opportunity to add value by providing specialist support (e.g. a team of external coaches) to an intervention here.

Encourage the involvement of an executive coach

The relatively recent surge in demand for coaching programmes in organisations is one indication of a recognition of the value coaching can provide. An effective coach can be of great assistance to an individual in identifying and meeting a variety of development needs. Coaching is essentially a practical, goal-focused form of personal one-to-one learning (Hall, Otazo and Hollenbeck 1999). It typically takes the form of a short- to medium-term relationship between a manager or executive and a coach, in order to improve the effectiveness of the former. Working with a coach is increasingly being seen as an effective way of creating the necessary time and mental space discussed earlier. Ideas can be tested, doubts surfaced, and advice sought regarding the best ways of navigating a changed landscape. Indeed, a coaching situation is the very definition of the creation of space for thinking and exerts its influence mainly on personal ability to transfer (Kirwan and Birchall, 2006). The option of external coaching as part of change programmes is increasing, and many consultants in other fields are seeing the value of collaborating with specialist coaches to help in the transition of new knowledge into practical application. On the surface, coaching may seem an expensive option, but the significant investment of time and money involved should be balanced against what the evidence suggests are equally significant learning and performance outcomes. Coaching interventions have the benefit of dealing with specific issues relating to specific situations, as well as being very flexible in terms of how they're conducted. In this way, both learning and learning transfer are taking place at the same time.

The amount of evidence in support of the value of coaching is increasing each year. For example, the International Coach Federation (ICF, 2020) reports yearly growth in the number of coach practitioners (some 71,000 by 2019) as well as a further 15,900 managers and leaders using coaching skills. This is heartening, as it suggests benefits are being reaped. A wealth of research on coaching outcomes is provided in a meta-analysis by Athanasopoulou & Dopson (2018) as well as further work by de Haan et al. (2013) and Jones et al. (2016). Studies cited, many of which incorporated multisource feedback, indicated positive outcomes including enhanced leadership skills, reduced stress, higher ratings and improved self-efficacy, among others. Organisation-level findings such as heightened productivity and leadership effectiveness have also been observed. These recent studies back up early work by Olivero, Bane and Kopelman (1997), Hall, Otazo and Hollenbeck (1999) and Smither et al. (2003).

The role for coaching here is in helping to create the time and mental space for individuals to reflect upon and change their thinking and behaviour. In creating that time and space, they acknowledge the need to 'step back' mentally from the work, and establish trust, empathy and confidence in the coach's credentials. The coach encourages the client (the participant) to think through the issues under consideration, by asking appropriate questions to elicit facts, opinions and feelings, and reflecting and summarising to help the client clarify for themselves what's on their mind. They help the client to identify options, perhaps broadening their

perspective and getting them to see things in a different way. They can also challenge the client's thinking if they see that as a barrier to behaviour change.

Conclusion

In summary, there are a number of things that can be done to enhance the likelihood of new skills and knowledge being applied back at work following change interventions. Consultants can play an important role in facilitating this transition, particular while they're still directly involved and can have influence. Evidence clearly suggests that goal setting is an effective transfer strategy. While support for relapse prevention is mixed, self-management activities have been shown to be effective. It would seem that the key to learning transfer is around making conscious decisions about how the learning will be used and anticipating difficulties and generating strategies to cope with them in order to transfer learning. Help from 'fellow travellers' can smooth the path. Finally, manager support, mentoring and particularly coaching have all received significant attention, both in applied settings and empirical studies.

Given the evidence presented earlier concerning the return on consultancy investment, organisations can derive much greater benefits from that investment by improving individuals' personal ability to transfer – translating their learning into practical and meaningful behavioural change. While many of the factors to be considered are not under the control of consultants undertaking change interventions, they may be able to enhance the effectiveness of those interventions by helping to create time and mental space for clients to absorb and make practical use of what they learn. In this way will investment in the capabilities necessary to deliver competitive advantage be realised.

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