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Transformational Consulting – Application of Idiomatic Phrases to Technical and Adaptive Challenges

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Abstract

There seem to be a dominance of prescriptive models aimed at addressing organizational challenges in a dynamic environment. To what extend do prescriptive, n-step models facilitate transformational growth and development during unsettled time. Due to the realization that most emerging consultants tend to exclusively and excessively rely on certain tools and frameworks, idiomatic phrases, and quotation-based knowledge, the author elaborates the distinction between technical and adaptive challenges (Heifetz, 1998). Unfortunately, most practitioners are guided by idiomatic phrases of the past and as such treat adaptive challenges as technical challenges. The submission is informed by the view that consultants should not adopt approaches or mindsets that try to fit an organization into already prescribed models or patterns of thought. Given organizations as complex adaptive systems, the analysis proffered in this article indicates the need for the customization of idiomatic submissions to context or to the client system. Consulting work should spark curiosity, imagination, and enlightenment in client systems. Blind reliance on idiomatic phrases depletes enduring capabilities in client systems. In dealing with technical and adaptive challenges, consultants need to ensure shifting rather than static mental frameworks when supporting client systems.

Introduction

The urgency to complete consulting activities leads to the increased possibilities of failure. There seems to be a dominance of prescriptive models aimed at addressing organizational challenges in a dynamic environment. Furthermore, consultants tend to overly rely on certain tools and frameworks, idiomatic phrases, and quotation-based knowledge. Unfortunately, idiomatic phrases and quotation knowledge destroys our capacity to find out the truth ourselves (Chinoperekweyi, 2017). This article explores some idioms that are useful in consultants' efforts to lead positive social change. The article identifies situations where these idiomatic phrases could be helpful when facilitating change initiatives or building sustainable organizational interventions. Each idiomatic phrase analysis is supported by reflection questions to keep consultants grounded on the dynamics of change. Consultants should identify transformational techniques to facilitate positive change when dealing with technical and adaptive challenges. As defined by City Year Columbus, these are techniques for "mobilization, communication, inspiration and critical thinking, as well as for reflection, teambuilding and just simply "breaking the ice" for small, medium, and large groups."

Transformational consultants need to appreciate the different approaches to dealing with technical and adaptive challenges. Technical problems can be fixed by applying analytical models and expertise. Adaptive challenges are complex issues without a single answer (Bushe & Nagaishi, 2018). In exploring the idiomatic phrases, this article embraces the Organization Development (OD) field's dual identity and the premises of informed inquiry and effective engagement. Most traditional idioms seem to contradict the fundamental values of OD while favoring n-step methodologies. Applying an OD lens to the idioms helps senior leaders engage all stakeholders in inquiries (Bushe and Nagaishi, 2018) and create readiness and sense of ownership (Trottier, 2012).

Following is a discursive analysis of ten idiomatic phrases as they relate to technical and adaptive challenges. Given the dynamic environment, the analysis supports consultants in the process of reframing approaches from static mental frameworks to shifting mental frameworks. It is accurate to state that most of the idiomatic phrases are informed by deficit-based, static, and n-step frameworks. Though logical in their submissions, blind adoption and application of these idioms lead to abstract conceptualizations that are detached from reality.

1. Don't boil the ocean

This idiomatic phrase is essential when defining the scope of work or deciding to undertake certain tasks. The perspective implied in this phrase is that the ocean (entire system) is too big to attend to. Does this phrase contradict whole system interventions? As consultants is it possible to 'boil the ocean'? What situations can consultants boil or not boil the ocean? A lot is written about systems thinking. Change can be approached as incremental and transformational change & development; and planned and emergent change. In transformational change & development, it makes good business sense for consultants to start thinking about boiling the ocean. This is supported by whole system thinking and the multi-disciplinary nature of field and practice of Organization

Development (OD). In a dynamic business environment, businesses need to be daring and to see things from multiple perspectives.

Organizations face technical and adaptive challenges. It is accurate to state that when dealing with technical challenges consultants should not try to 'boil the ocean' because there are a lot of unknowns. In such situations incremental and planned change can be achieved through linear and piecemeal approaches. As such consultants can adopt n-step approaches with a view of the change initiative as an event. When dealing with adaptive challenges, with many unknowns, possibility-seeking mindset is fundamental – meaning consultants need to 'boil the ocean'.

Adaptive challenges require that consultants become daring and enhance exploratory and exploitation competencies. This is because in adaptive challenges:

- there are many possibilities;
- whole system thinking is critical; and
- context is in a constant state of flux

As transformational change & development consultants, the following are some of the applied techniques to addressing the system (ocean) as a whole:

- Explore deeply the dynamics of the system prior to designing interventions
- Participatory Action Research - Involve all stakeholders in the ocean
- Empower all the stakeholders with the right resources
- Leverage the wisdom in the ocean
- Build a collaborative network
- Learn macro-mindedness and constellation of strengths

2. Don't put all your eggs in one basket

This is a phrase around diversification. In context of technical challenges, as consultants, we can easily put all our eggs in one basket. The idea of putting all eggs in one basket aligns with an expert or medical doctor consulting approach. In line with these consulting approaches and the emphasis on specialization, practitioners suffer from expertise in the methods, models, and analytical frameworks related to a specific field (Chinoperekweyi, 2021). In putting all eggs in one basket, consultants suffer from methodological monism and methodological overkill during Organization Capacity Assessments or diagnosis. Though it can facilitate short-term incremental change, as a consultant, putting all your eggs in one basket leads to overconfidence trap, illusion of control, and field rigidities. However, when dealing with adaptive challenges, eclecticism and/or methodological pluralism is essential. The idiomatic phrase aligns with transformational change & development because it recognizes that OD is a multi-disciplinary field premised on the science of change and the practice of changing. Context is always changing; hence consultants need a broad toolkit that can be used lightly (Chinoperekweyi & Young, 2021). Change is changing, as consultants we need many open baskets to explore and exploit.

How do consultants adopt an eclectic approach to consultation?

- Appreciate that OD is not a program but a dynamic approach to strategic change, continuous improvement, and elevation of human systems
- Avoid the rigidities that come with specialized knowledge
- Collaborative capital
- Promote divergent thinking
- Methodological pluralism rather than relying on the consultant's favorite diagnosis
- Communicate that OD is cross-functional and can apply systems thinking and continuous and learning
- Address emotional attachment to certain tools, models, or frameworks
- Foster iterative transformations

3. Haste makes waste

This idiomatic phrase is against taking action too quickly for fear of making mistakes. How do we support clients in a disruptive vortex of change? Do organizations have time to following logical sequence towards decision making? The phrase works well in efficiency management and when dealing with closed systems. This could have worked well in traditional, hierarchical organizations but would need refinement when dealing with 21st Century collaborative networked organizations. The phrase therefore advocates for thoughtful, prudent, logical, n-step approaches based on best practices. Methodical approaches work well when dealing with technical challenges. In such instances, it is important to conduct due diligence prior to action. However, change has become so rapid and unpredictable that n-step approaches might lag behind the change curve. When dealing with adaptive challenges in a dynamic environment, experimentation and agility drives transformational growth and development. Agility is a defining feature of organizations that can thrive during unsettled times. Approaches that sustain consulting interventions during unsettled times should be premised on continuous reframing of people's cognitive and emotional frameworks in real time.

How do consultants capitalize on agility in a dynamic environment?

- Nurture curiosity among all organizational members
- Involve all stakeholders and ensure they are emotionally invested in the initiatives
- Foster pattern thinking and active real time feedback streams even under chaos
- Enhance exploration and exploitation competencies in real time
- Contextual Intelligence & Emergent learning among all stakeholders

Trottier (2020) states that "Curiosity, exploration, imagination, openness, inquiry, dialogue/ conversations, trust, shifts in mental and emotional frameworks, etc., naturally form / develop, and the emergence of newness and novel 'frameworks' (thoughts, beliefs, concepts, perceptions) occur naturally and in real time." The antidote to 'haste makes waste' narrative is to fully develop systems, such that they can self-organize and self-renew. Such a system continually evolves its strategies, norms, challenges, and

ways of working. Self-organizing system nurture enduring human capabilities and decisions naturally flow as a result of active real time feedback streams.

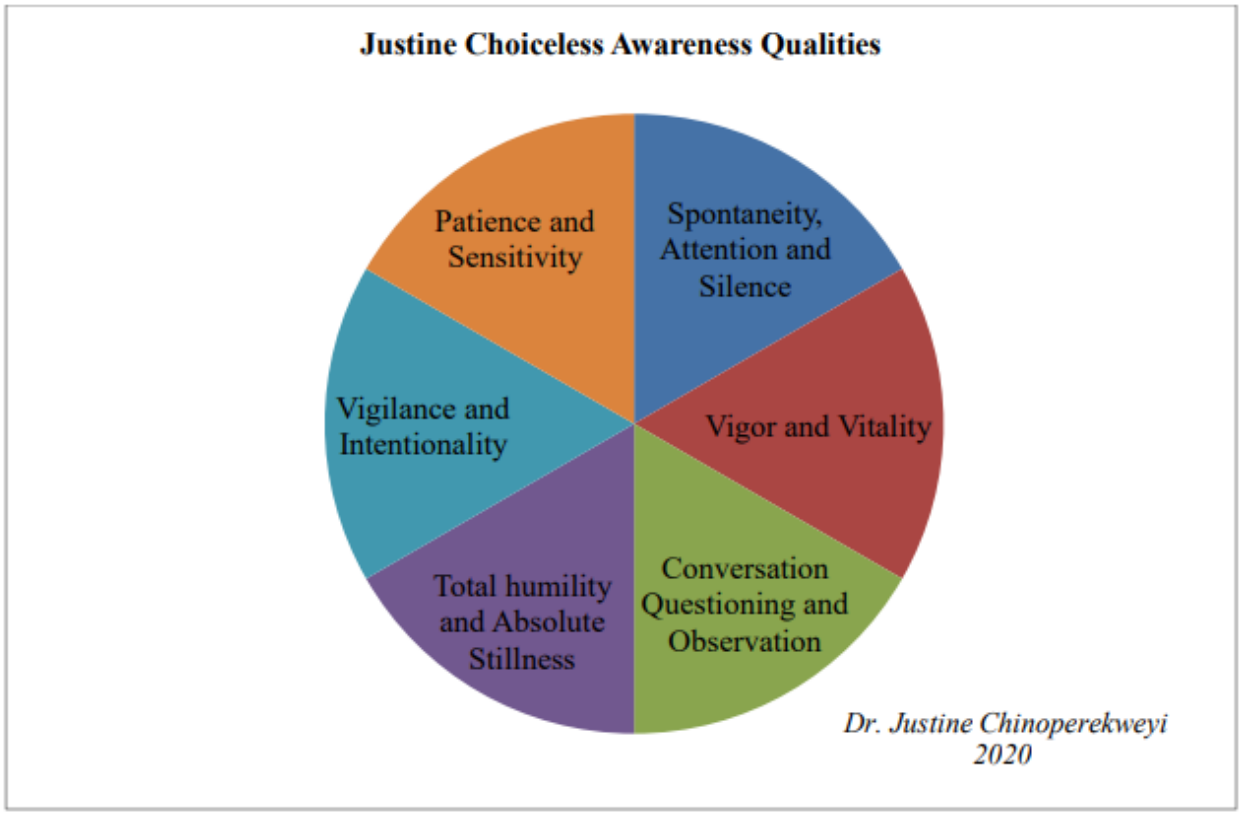
4. Keep your ear on the ground

Listening is fundamental in transformational consulting. When dealing with both technical and adaptive challenges, consultants need to keep their ears on the ground. Consultants need to watch out for new information and new trends. There are numerous influencing patterns and factors leading to new and emerging forms of everything. Transformational change & development require constantly updating organizational routines with new information in real time.

Positive social change is compromised if consultants allow personal and cultural biases to influence their engagements. Chinoperekweyi et al., (2021) indicated that the listening dilemma encompasses:

- failure to pay attention to the many voices of awareness;
- attentional loss and vigilance decrement;
- conditioned, conforming, and compulsive listening;
- lack of listening optimism; and
- lack of self-mastery, poor understanding of conversations, and a failure to scan the environment.

This idiomatic phrase is corroborated by Marshak (2010) who pointed out deep listening and transforming talks as fundamental to transformational change and development. To ‘keep your ear on the ground’ and facilitate choiceless awareness, Chinoperekweyi et al., (2021) identified six qualities grouped as ‘Justine Choiceless Awareness Qualities’.



When dealing with both technical and adaptive challenges, it is important to have enhance choiceless awareness. Listening and learning in real time are fundamental elements to transformational change and development.

5. Look before you leap

Organization Development is premised on inquiry and engagement. It is important to always take calculated risks; hence the process of inquiry and effective engagement helps the consultant to be well-informed. As practitioners we need to leverage on inquiry and effective engagement before taking action. It is important to foster action that is informed by imaginary thoughts and imaginary beliefs.

Applied techniques to look before you leap:

- Exploratory interview through asking powerful questions
- Informed Inquiry and Effective Engagement
- Facilitating meaningful generative dialogue through brainstorming sessions, workshops, charrettes
- Set up a strong and diverse guiding coalition

6. No One Speaks Twice Until Everyone Speaks Once (NOSTUESO)

This rule is quite useful in facilitation. The idea is to facilitate inclusion of ideas, perspectives, and people. This signifies a shift from leader-centered, expert approaches where the leader lays down their agenda and gets everyone else to adopt and execute

without questioning. No one person or group of people should dominate a discussion. The ideas, questions and concerns of all people are heard.

How do we encourage active participation of all members in a group without stifling the conversation?

- Create space for good conversations
- Listen to the stories of many
- Instill courage to share thoughts on all members

7. Don't stoop to their level

This idiom positions the consultant as superior to people in the client system. As such a consultant is viewed as a messiah, an expert, and solution provider. Though this can work pretty well when dealing with technical challenges, this will not work when approaching adaptive challenges. Answers or solutions can come from anyone. When dealing with adaptive challenges, practitioners need to appreciate that ideas need to be further developed in dialogue with others.

- Manifest the wisdom in the client system through creating safe space for people discover the new, rediscover their potential, and deepen their sense of ownership in the client system (Chinoperekweyi & Young, 2021).
- Appreciative Inquiry
- Humble Inquiry
- Elevate and celebrate human spirit

8. A new broom sweeps clean

Just as a new broom sweeps clean because its bristles are strong and rigid, so a new boss or administrator may make a strong impression by demanding that, as of now, everything be done in his way. As consultants we need to appreciate, harness, and manifest the wisdom existing in the client system. People in the organization are a reservoir of knowledge that might have learned helplessness and as such a viewed in negatively. The starting point therefore is that of helping senior leaders appreciate the wisdom in their systems. Rather than rely on external consultants, as new brooms, senior leaders must awaken and manifest the wisdom in their systems. When dealing with technical challenges, people working in the system can easily resolve even complex issues. Chinoperekweyi & Young (2021) explored the consulting maxim that emphasize the need to "create space to manifest the 'wisdom in the room'" p.3.

What are the transformational techniques available to OD practitioners?

- Assemble a circle of willing and able people (Chinoperekweyi & Young, 2021)
- Create an environment that empowers people to make decisions and solve problems
- Recognize and amplify people's capabilities
- Convey possibilities

9. Familiarity breeds contempt

When you get up close to someone and get to know his weaknesses, you lose your former sense of respect and admiration and tend to look down on him as not being as perfect as you thought he was before. “One of the problems with the close intimacy of marriage is that familiarity breeds contempt.” “Never let yourself get too close to the servants, because, invariably, familiarity breeds contempt.” “Never try to be pals with the enlisted men under your command because familiarity breeds contempt.”

To deal with this phrase and nurture client systems imagination, proffer sustainable solutions, and facilitate continuous development, renewed thinking is pivotal. Consultants need to think in strategic and operational multiples. According to Chinoperekweyi (2020), this enhances the capacity to effectively respond to “trends, opportunities, shocks and pressures, streamline business functions, increase efficiency, and to resolve the complex and disruptive challenges in organizational life” p.28.

- Encourage widespread learning and constant informed inquiry
- Foster discovery and prediction techniques & competencies
- Learn macro-mindedness and constellation of strengths

10. Know your place

Remain aware of your (low) social station and do not speak or act as if you were more important than that; perform your function on the social level in which you find yourself and keep in the background. This happens when consultants are working for management.

- Have courage to peddle difficult conversations
- Create space for good conversations
- Pay attention to exploratory conversations

11. Live in an ivory tower

Consultants should get into the trenches in order to avoid abstract conceptualizations. It is worth appreciating that knowledge for use exists on a continuum of inquiry.

Applied techniques towards managing living in an ivory tower:

- Management-by-Walking Around
- Relentless inquiry and acute observation
- Context immersion
- Facilitate good conversations

Conclusion

This article emphasizes the difference between technical and adaptive challenges in an organization. Consultations should be clear on the type of change and challenge they

are addressing when working with a client system. Idiomatic phrases are useful in facilitating change initiatives. However, the analysis proffered in this article indicates the need for the customization of idiomatic submissions to the client system. Consultants need to have shifting mental frameworks when dealing with both technical and adaptive challenges. This implies that an eclectic approach to consulting produces transformational results in client systems. Transformational consulting encourages senior leaders and consultants to always think in strategic and operational multiples.

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