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Advisers' Roles

Both external advisers and internal change agents can choose very different roles in capacity-development processes. Over the duration of an assignment or project, a competent adviser takes on a variety of positions in relation to different people or parts of the client system. This demands a critical awareness of types of roles and judgements about what is needed when.

In their article originally published in ***Training and Development*** journal February 1990, Champion, Kiel and McLendon identify nine possible roles and suggest key factors to consider in making judgements about which consulting role to take on. Their model helps advisers, change agents or consultants to improve the clarity of expectations between themselves and their clients. The article also explores factors that consultants may consider when adjusting their role towards a particular situation or phase of a project. Though it was written 20 years ago and not specifically targeted at the development community, this text is still highly relevant and addresses questions that will be very familiar to practitioners.

Choosing a Consulting Role: Principles and Dynamics of Matching Role to Situation

Douglas P. Champion, David H. Kiel and Jean A. McLendon[1]

Introduction

You have been asked to help an organization to manage a task force charged with designing some new procedures as part of an overall organizational development plan. The organization has never had a task force, but you've been told that your role is simply to 'sit in from time to time and make comments' as needed. You don't think that provides enough support to ensure success in this important aspect of the change process.

You have been asked to provide some 'listening training' to a work group with a history of conflict and dissension. You suspect that training at this point may not be well received by the group and that the causes of the problem are deeper than skill deficits.

Both of the above situations illustrate a common dilemma. In both, the consultant's initial view of the relationship and the intervention that will be effective differs from what the client thinks is needed or wanted. Such situations are likely to end up with disappointing results.

Consultants – internal and external – often talk about getting 'burned'. Usually it happens when the way the consultant's role has been structured leads to no-win situations.

Much good advice is available to new and practising consultants on how to be effective organizational development (OD) practitioners, but not much of it is focused on the special problem of role definition. There isn't much clear guidance for the consultant and client as to whether the role being played is the right one.

In order to do this kind of practical assessment and to facilitate collaborative agreements between clients and consultants, we need three things:

- a clear understanding of the purposes of a consulting relationship;
- a language for talking about consulting roles;
- criteria for determining which role is appropriate in a given situation.

Goals and roles

In any consultation, the clients will have two types of needs.

First, the need for results refers to concrete outcomes associated with a project. These might include changes in the bottom line, organizational structure, information transmitted, skills learned or behaviour and attitudes.

Second, the need for growth means increased capacity to perform new functions or behaviours on a continuing basis. In other words, if a high level of growth is achieved in the consultation, then the client will be able to do the job next time with less or no outside help.

The need for results and the need for growth will vary depending on the nature of the consulting project. For example, in performing a one-time service with which the client is unfamiliar, the consultant's major focus is likely to be 'getting the job done' for the client.

However, in helping the client perform an important and recurring – but new – task, the appropriate emphasis is on helping the client learn how to perform that task over the long haul, instead of merely producing an immediate result.

When project outcomes are specified in that way, it is easier to determine what services are needed from the consultant and what contributions are needed from the client system to bring about the desired changes.

Nine roles to consider

By constructing a grid model of consulting, using as the two axes consultant responsibility for growth and consultant responsibility for results, we can identify the specific consulting roles appropriate for the mix of services that the consultant is expected to provide.

The nine roles of the consulting role grid (Figures 4.1 and 4.2) reflect the options the consultant has in a given situation. Presumably, if a consultant correctly assesses the situation, he or she is likely to choose the role that will be most effective.

The consultant who takes on the hands-on expert role (9,1) actually undertakes the task on behalf of the client. In this role the consultant has most, if not all, of the responsibility for producing good results. The client is not expected to grow in capacity very much. He or she will need the consultant again next time in order to perform the task equally well.

The modeller role (9,5) implies that the consultant is highly responsible for results in the current project, but also that there is some value in the client system building its own capacity. The modeller carries out the task for the client system, but does so in a way that makes his or her approaches and techniques apparent. The consultant is available for answering questions about what he or she is doing, and why. The implication is that some time in the future the client may carry out the task.

The partner role (9,9) implies high responsibility for results and growth. It assumes that both the client and the consultant have the capacity to successfully perform aspects of the task and that both will share responsibility for the results. It

Counsellor 'You do it. I will be your sounding board.'	**Coach** 'You did well; you can add this next time.'	**Partner** 'We will do it together and learn from each other.'
Facilitator 'You do it; I will attend to the process.'	**Teacher** 'Here are some principles you can see to solve problems of this type.'	**Modeller** 'I will do it; you watch so you can learn from me.'
Reflective observer 'You do it; I will watch and tell you what I see and hear.'	**Technical advisor** 'I will answer your questions as you go along.'	**Hands-on expert** 'I will do it for you; I will tell you what to do.'

Source: Champion, Kiel and McLendon, 1985

Figure 4.1 *Typical role statements for the consulting role grid* also assumes that a big jump in the client's capacity to do the task is an important goal. The partner role means that the client is ready to learn in a hands-on way and that the consultant can teach effectively in this mode, as well as guide the task to successful completion.

In the coach role (5,9), the consultant does not have direct responsibility for performing the task. Instead, he or she may observe the performance of the task and provide feedback. The coach uses highly directed instructional techniques to improve the client's performance; providing feedback, prescribing and observing practice sequences, and giving advice and support during actual job performance. The coach is indirectly involved in carrying out the task, but highly involved with the client and his or her growth.

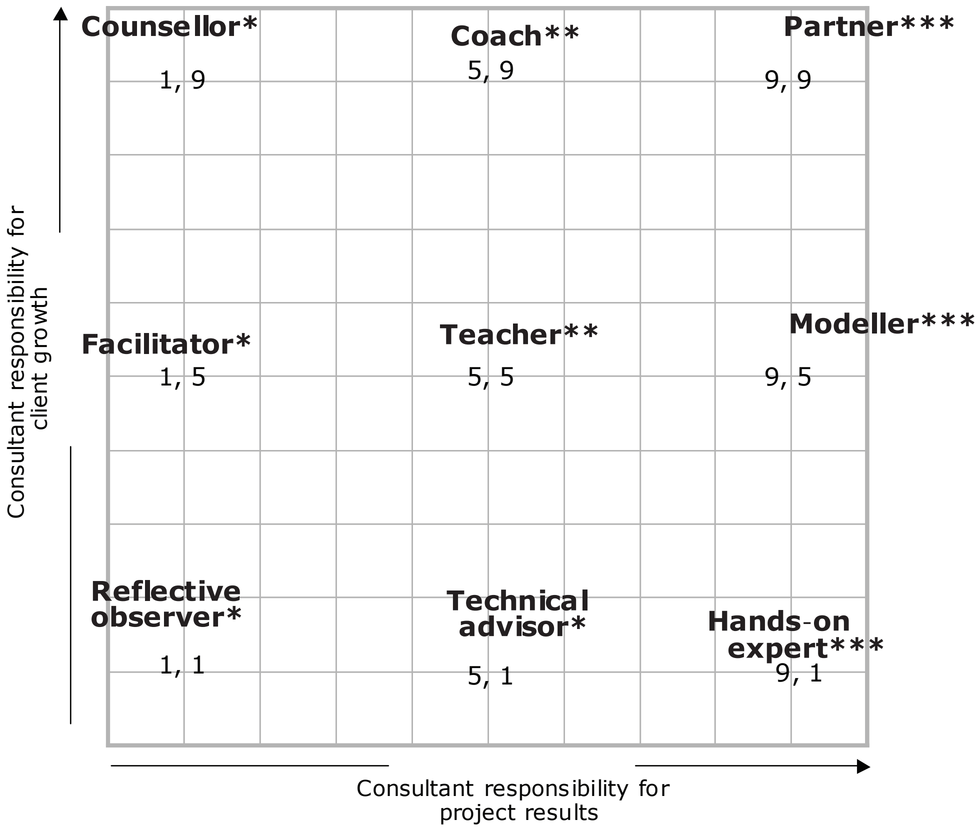
The teacher or trainer role (5,5) is even more removed from the scene of the action. The trainer or teacher, unlike the coach, is concerned with general performance rather than performance in a specific situation. For example, the teacher is concerned that the client knows the basic principles and has mastered the skills of managing a meeting, while the coach may actually observe the client leading meetings and discuss the results afterward.

The technical adviser role (5,1) is a back-up role. In this role, the consultant has moderate responsibility for results; the client uses the adviser's expertise for specific purposes. The technical adviser may have close or distant personal relations with the client, but his or her concern is not the growth of client capacity, except in an incidental sense. The focus is on helping the client get over a specified problem that the technical adviser's knowledge and experience can solve.

In the counsellor role (9,1) the consultant's concern is almost entirely for the capacity of the client to perform the task. The counsellor tries constantly to help the client clarify and set goals, maintain positive motivation and develop and implement effective plans. The counsellor often is removed from the performance of the situation. He or she may have to rely on the client's data about what is happening in the project. Hence, much of the counsellor's skill is in helping the client to gather, analyse and develop conclusions from his or her own experience.

The facilitator role (5,1) consists largely of helpful but process-oriented activities such as convening, agenda building, recording, collating and displaying data, providing techniques such as problem analysis or brainstorming, and planning and leading meetings. Through the facilitator's intervention, clients may absorb the helpful techniques and processes the facilitator uses. That leads to moderate growth of the client's capacity in these areas. One main reason the consultant is an effective facilitator is that he or she has a low stake in the task at hand and is neutral within the client group. This is a low task-responsibility role.

With the reflective observer role (1, 1) the client is most responsible for the results and capacity building; the consultant is least responsible. The consultant's task is limited to feeding back observations and impressions. In spite of the low activity level of the consultant, this role can have a dynamic effect on a client system that is skilled in using such assistance. The reflective consultant can help clients monitor themselves on such ambiguous but critical indicators as trust, teamwork and openness.



Source: Adapted from Champion, Kiel and McLendon, 1985

Notes:
* low-intervention roles
** moderate-intervention roles
*** high-intervention roles.

Figure 4.2 *The consulting role grid*

Roles versus jobs

We shouldn't proceed much further before distinguishing the nine consulting roles outlined above from job titles. A person may have the job title 'technical adviser' or 'trainer' but he or she may still take on any or all of the above roles on a temporary, situational basis. For example, a trainer may leave the classroom and 'coach' the student, or be the expert in designing a curriculum or course.

Similarly, a consultant may play multiple roles simultaneously within a client system, but with different clients. He or she might be counsellor to one manager, a trainer for the team the manager leads, and coach for a task force of other managers. In this framework, the consulting role is always defined situationally within a specific client or client group.

Ideally, roles will be well defined and clearly understood by both the client and consultant. Many consulting errors arise from the consultant's attempt to play more than one role simultaneously with the same client without a clear contract to do so.

How to choose

The process of role choice and transition is obviously a critical area of judgement and skill for the consultant. What guidelines can we go by to make informed choices?

We can identify four key areas building on Robert Tannenbaum and Warren Schmidt's classic formulation of criteria in determining behavioural choice for leadership roles ('How to choose a leadership pattern', *Harvard Business Review*, March–April 1958). These are the areas to consider.

The organizational situation The roles in column 9 on the grid (partner, modeller and hands-on expert), are likely to be appropriate in cases where there is immediate need for results and for client capacity development. If client capacity is already moderate to high, then the low-intervention roles (counsellor, facilitator, reflective observer and technical adviser) may make more sense.

Characteristics of the client In determining an acceptable role relationship, the client ought to ask the following questions. Will the proposed consulting relationship be likely to achieve the results that the organization needs? Will I be helped to grow in the process in a direction that is in my long-term interests? Will the skills that I already possess be used to their fullest extent? Are the skills that the consultant possesses being used in the best way?

Characteristics of the consultant The capacity of the consultant is the most obvious limiting factor in determining a consultant role. Consultants cannot take on the more results- or growth-oriented roles if they lack the experience, knowledge or confidence to do so. But if the consultant is competent to take on various roles, how should he or she choose among them? Willingness, interest and time are factors. The consultant needs to ask him- or herself, not only 'Can I do this?' but 'Do I want to serve in this role?' A role that is unwanted will probably not be well performed.

The client–consultant relationship A relationship of trust and openness permits collaborative determination of the appropriate client–consultant role. Too often, the client's unwillingness to ask for help leads to an insufficient consulting role, or the consultant's need for business results leads to an unhealthy dependency. But most relationships don't begin with the necessary trust to permit open discussion and negotiation of roles. The grid model, by providing a common language for clients and consultants, may help overcome some initial barriers.

Role negotiation

Here are five steps for effective role negotiation for the client and consultant.

1 Collaborative clarification of the organization's need for results and growth for each client or client group
2 Open discussion of the current capacities of the clients and consultants
3 Identification of an appropriate match between client needs and consultant capacities relative to the various tasks and client groups, using the consulting role grid
4 Assurance that all parties have the support they need in the situation to deliver on their accountabilities for results and growth
5 Commitment of both parties to their respective role responsibilities in the consultation

With those steps in mind, we can now go back to the two consulting dilemmas posed at the outset of this article. Let's examine how our framework can provide conceptual support for clients and consultants when negotiating the right consulting role which is crucial to success of the project.

In the task force situation, the needs of the system are relatively apparent to both the client and consultant, yet the role suggested for the consultant seems inadequate to bring about the results. In such a case, the consultant should discuss with the client the apparent discrepancy between the need for immediate results in the situation and low-results orientation of the observer role the consultant is being asked to take (step 1). That discussion would probably result in agreement on more active consultant roles, such as coach to the manager in question, and facilitator to the task force (steps 2 to 5). That would leave the organization and the client more protected against the consequences of project failure.

In the second case – in which the consultant is charged with training a divisive work group in listening skills – the consultant and the client are not in a position to collaboratively diagnose the needs of the organization. The consultant might point out that the training role assumes willingness to learn on the part of the group: a willingness that may not exist. It also assumes that listening skills would solve the problem: a claim that may not be true. The consultant cannot safely accept responsibility for results unless the group shows interest in learning. If the group does not, the client's relationship with the group – and the consultant's relationship with the client – could be seriously damaged.

The consultant could suggest an initial phone call or interview with group members. In it, the consultant would help the group clarify its need for results and for capacity-building by assessing the nature and causes of past conflicts and the group's willingness to engage in problem solving (step 1). With those data in hand, the consultant and client can more confidentially negotiate an intervention role (steps 2 to 5).

Successful outcomes

Consultants and clients can do a better job of negotiating roles and increase their chances for successful project outcomes. But that can only happen if both parties are clear about the outcomes the organization needs and the capacities they both have. The consulting role grid can help match needed outcomes with appropriate levels of consultant involvement. The five-step model of role negotiation can help ensure that the agreements reached can be successfully carried out.

By using this simple framework, consultants and clients may be able to avoid some of the game playing and misperceptions that can handicap consulting relationships from the early stages. The result is openness about what is needed and about how the client and the consultant can meet those needs. That openness can set the stage for a collaborative relationship for the duration of the project.

Note

1 The editors of this volume are grateful to the American Society for Training and Development (ASTD) for permission to republish the original article from *Training and Development* journal (February 1990). While the content remains unchanged, minor stylistic changes have been made to the text for consistency with other chapters in the volume.

Recommended readings

The reader is directed to a number of chapters in this volume that touch on the question of roles and capabilities that advisers combine in supporting capacity development processes. Chapter 5 explores the balance that advisers or consultants must strike between technical or 'hard' skills and 'softer' process capabilities, while Chapter 6 looks at the role of a practitioner in dealing with the inevitable conflict of interests that occurs when working with multiple actors. Chapter 24 takes a broader look at the field of capacity development as a whole and examines what a move towards professionalization of the field would mean for both practitioners and their organizations. In addition, the following publications offer further perspectives on advisory roles and how a practitioner may position him- or herself effectively in working with clients depending on the context, needs and client capabilities.

Schein, E. H. (1998) *Process Consultation Revisited: Building the Helping Relationship,* Prentice Hall Organizational Development Series, Addison-Wesley, Wokingham

Against the background of systems thinking, Schein offers very practical ways in which practitioners can position and clarify the different roles they play in various client situations. The main messages are complementary to those discussed in this chapter.

Divine Thaw and Warren Banks (2007) *Facilitating Development Processes: Working in the Unknown*, Olive-PPT, Durban

This is an eight-part series dedicated to a practitioner's work. Adopting a process approach it covers a number of angles which help to reflect on the roles to be played at different stages of engagement.

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