

Consulting Framework Executive Summary – John Cramer

Peter Block and Edgar Schein provide two distinctly different frameworks to organizational consulting and how to deal effectively with clients, peers, and others. When utilized together, these complementary philosophies and methodologies can become powerful tools to the skilled consultant who desires to be a capable instrument of change.

Block states that “the ultimate goal or end product of any consulting activity is some kind of change” (Block, 2011, p. 4). He posits consultants must operate at two levels: the content level (i.e., the analytical, rational, business situation); and, the relationship to the client, which includes responsibility, feelings, trust, and needs. Both levels require attention and ongoing assessment throughout each phase of the consulting engagement.

Block’s consulting model emphasizes skills and techniques designed to build competencies and confidence in the consultant, the ultimate aim being to learn to trust oneself. The skills are broken down into three categories: *technical*, specific to one’s discipline (e.g., engineering, project management, planning, marketing, etc.); *interpersonal*, which apply to all situations (assertiveness, supportiveness, confrontation, listening, management style, and group process); and, *consulting*, which Block has organized into four categories (contracting, discovery, feedback, and decision).

Block also identifies three types of roles the consultant can choose to adopt with a client based on the client’s style, the nature of the task, and one’s personal preference—*expert*, *pair of hands*, and *collaborative*. Each assumes different responsibilities and approaches to move toward collaboration, with goals and expectations set with the best interests in mind of the client and the consultant.

The model consists of five phases. The first phase, *Entry and Contracting*, focuses on the initial contact with a client about the project. The thrust of the second phase, *Discovery and Dialogue*, is a gained, shared understanding between the client and the consultant of the target problem and the strengths of the client. In the third phase, *Analysis and the Decision to Act*, the consultant must organize, synthesize, and reduce the vast amount of data collected and identify a manageable set of high priority issues which will be addressed in the engagement. It is in this phase where the scope is clearly defined and the goals for the project are set. The fourth phase, *Engagement and Implementation*, involves carrying out the planning of the third phase. In the fifth phase, *Extension, Recycle, or Termination*, the lessons learned from the results of the consulting engagement are reviewed and assessed to determine the appropriate next step—i.e., whether to extend the change to other parts of the organization, to “recycle” or start a new engagement focusing on a different problem, or to terminate the consulting relationship.

While Block focuses on skills and techniques to affect change in an organization, Edgar Schein’s *Process Consultation* philosophy dissects the psychological and sociological aspects of the helping relationship with the goal of building meaningful and authentic relationships. Schein enumerates ten principles, or guidelines, as the essence of process consultation, which are to be kept in mind in establishing and furthering the relationship. He identifies three engagement role models. The *expertise* model, or “selling and telling”, assumes the client purchases from the consultant information or expertise they are unable to provide for themselves. The *doctor-patient* model assumes the client is aware there is a problem, but needs help from the consultant to analyze, diagnose, and recommend the appropriate intervention. In the *process consultation* model, the consultant does not assume that the client knows what is wrong, or what is needed, or what the consultant should do. Process consultation means working in the present reality, in an

ongoing interaction, and “in the perpetual process of jointly deciphering what is going on” (Schein, 2008).

In my experience as an internal consultant in large organizations, the emphasis has been almost entirely on practical, instrumental change methodologies, e.g., Lean Six Sigma, Design for Six Sigma, and Creative Problem Solving. Having that background makes Block’s consulting model, with its phased approach, skills, and techniques, very relatable to me. Comparing these frameworks side-by-side, one can detect similarities across Block’s five phases, Six Sigma’s Define-Measure-Analyze-Improve-Control, Design for Six Sigma’s Define-Measure-Analyze-Design-Verify, and Creative Problem Solving’s Mess Finding-Problem Finding-Idea Finding-Solution Finding-Action Finding. As well as the differences. Lean is about the flow and efficiency of creating and delivering value to customers. Six Sigma is about reducing variability of processes, products and services to customers. Design for Six Sigma and Creative Problem Solving are structured approaches for designing and implementing innovative products and services.

In contrast, Schein’s process consultation framework is more difficult for me to grasp. In my twenty years in quality, process improvement, and organization effectiveness, I have not experienced or witnessed anything that comes close to what Schein advocates. Schein, himself, in the preface to his book, states he originally wrote Process Consultation “out of a sense of frustration that my colleagues did not really understand what I did when I worked with clients and organizations. I now have a new sense of frustration that my colleagues in consulting and the managers whom I am trying to reach still do not understand the essence of process consultation” (Schein, 2008, p. xi). At this moment in time I would have to count myself as one of those colleagues.

References

Block, P. (2011). *Flawless consulting: a guide to getting your expertise used*. San Francisco: Pfeiffer.

Schein, E. H. (2008). *Process consultation revisited: building the helping relationship*. Reading, Mass.: Addison Wesley.