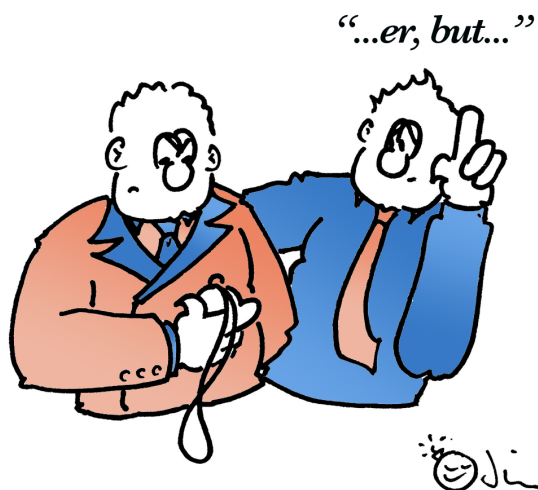


87 { Consulting work that adds value to clients and the wider community

*“Call yourself a consultant?
It’s been 15 seconds and you
still haven’t come up with a
solution!”*



Much of our consulting work helps clients with problems at the edge of established knowledge. Mainstream ‘best practices’ offer limited guidance on how to address challenges and concerns arising from unique client situations. In conducting our work, we thus have the opportunity to advance knowledge that can be shared for the benefit of all. This, though, requires a conscious decision and a willingness to expend the time and effort to go beyond the immediate assignment, to reflect, to discuss and to capture the insights gained. In this Lucid Thought we discuss the opportunity and the merits of seeking to draw more widely applicable lessons from individual consulting engagements.

Solutions to important client issues are rarely ‘off-the peg’. Like other consultants, we are hired to apply our generalised knowledge to address specific questions or problems. In many instances, conventional approaches, techniques and

methods need to be adapted or flexed. Our observation is that going from the general to the specific is deceptively difficult. Poor, sometimes ill-conceived, advice abounds, and expedient remedies are frequently presented as enduring solutions.

At the heart of this failure, we believe, is a superficial understanding of approaches to planned change. Most consultants know how to apply methods, techniques and procedures, but many do not truly understand the concepts, theories and assumptions on which they are built. Models of practice are built from theory, but over time the caveats and limitations, inherent in the theoretical base, are lost to sight. Practices that have worked in the past in various contexts appear as universal prescriptions. The client’s inability to implement or follow best practice is seen as a client shortcoming, not a shortcoming in ‘best’ practice.

Our reflection is that starting a consulting assignment with a view to addressing the clients’ requirements and adding to generalised knowledge fosters a hugely beneficial shift in mindset. It prompts a need to explore and understand more fully the generalised knowledge that to be drawn upon – especially the assumptions on which any proposed action is predicated. It forces us to be more conscious of where we are pushing the boundaries of knowledge and the need to articulate and justify, to ourselves and our client, the rationale for our advice. It reminds us that our insights and conclusions will be subjected to the exacting scrutiny of both seasoned practitioners and academic review. Our recommendations are built on foundations that are understood, using logic and evidence; and practically applicable in the specific client context. We shape our advice to be as rounded and reliable as we can, and this means being willing to admit that we don’t have perfect answers. Our experience is that popular mantras and supposed panaceas have limited value in most client situations – they were, after all, developed in another era, and are now managerial fossils!

Seeking to add to generalised knowledge does not entail being 'academic' in the pejorative sense of the word – abstract and disconnected from every-day reality. Like managers, consultants have to 'get their hands dirty'. But, seeking to add to generalised knowledge does mean **using scientific principles and approaches, honed over generations, of inquiry, analysis and synthesis**. Scholar-consultants combine sound theoretical knowledge with an understanding of the actualities of practice and organisational life. The contribution to the client is high-quality, relevant advice. The contribution to knowledge is grounded in addressing pragmatic challenges so it is hugely relevant and directly informs future practice. Given the challenges of the dual hurdle of providing first class advice, and researching the situation rigorously, when such work is published in academic journals it is a testament to the quality of the work and its conclusions.

It seems to us, though, that some clients can tend not to recognise the quality and value attributable to consultants' theoretical knowledge and scholarly capabilities. Perhaps the pragmatic nature of project and programme management leads to a view that only practical knowledge is relevant? Perhaps interest in progressing theoretical knowledge is interpreted as being detached from practice, rather than being dedicated to the discipline and providing better advice? Perhaps the absence of 'off the cuff' advice is seen as a lack of knowledge, rather than a deep understanding of the nuances of a complex, multi-faceted situation.

Our view is that a predisposition to learn and share insights from specific consulting interventions adds tangible value to clients and supports the development of the wider community. If only we could convince everyone that 'silver bullets' and 'simple recipes' are best left in the realms of novelists and chefs, we would all be better off.

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