

Equilibrating the Status Relationship Between Client and Consultant

EREK OSTROWSKI

Verve Coaching, Boston, Massachusetts

The stereotypical and widely held image of the consultant as the quintessential “expert with all the answers” undermines the true power and possibilities of the consulting relationship. The real potential of consultation to produce significant, lasting results lies in the ability of the consultant to create and maintain a status equilibrium in his/her relationship with the client. This is the only way to access the heart of the situation, to make a valuable contribution, and ultimately, to be of service to the client.

In order to understand why status plays such an important role in the consulting relationship, it may help to consider that the dynamics of the consulting relationship are essentially very similar to any helping relationship. We can gain insight into the consultant’s world by examining the role of the helper, and the helper’s relationship with the person seeking help.

First, the very act of asking for and receiving help disturbs the status equilibrium between any two people. Edgar Schein (1998) says “At the beginning of a helping relationship, the two parties are in a tilted or imbalanced relationship with the helper being “one-up” and the person seeking help being “one-down” (p.31). Asking for help immediately skews the status relationship by assigning power and authority to the helper. The helper’s status becomes elevated while the status of the person seeking help is lowered.

In consulting, as with any other helping role, there is a tremendous pull to accept the power that the client offers. “Just being asked for help,” says Schein (1998), “is a tremendously empowering situation, implying that the client endows the helper with the capacity to help, with expert knowledge, with a sense of responsibility not to take advantage of the situation...” (p.34). I have personally experienced this pull in my own consulting practice. I have often had the experience that clients will actually push me to accept a degree of power that elevates my status in our relationship. Often, this happens when the client starts to develop a degree of dependency on my expertise, which leads them to substitute my “expert” answer for their own investigation and creative thinking. From the outset, it may not be obvious why a client would want to skew the balance of power toward the consultant, but I have found that the reasoning is not always present in the client’s conscious awareness.

For example, in a new client relationship, the client sometimes assumes that the consultant has all the answers. The consultant is perceived as the expert and the client is willing to accept what the consultant says at face value. A slightly more insidious version of this dynamic comes into play when the client defers to the consultant's point of view in order to avoid the responsibility of thinking through the problem and creating his/her own solution. This can be a sign that the client is looking for a quick fix, and may not be willing or able to invest the necessary time and energy into creating an effective, long-term solution.

Still another example of the reasoning that can drive the client to give away his/her power is in order to avoid revealing areas of vulnerability. The client may wish to keep feelings of helplessness, resignation, resentment, failure, or dependency concealed. Peter Block (2000) explains "If you have been brought in to solve a problem, it means the client organization has not been able to solve it themselves. It is not that they aren't smart enough to solve it. The reason they have not been able to solve it is they have not been able to see it clearly. They are so close to the problem and have such an emotional investment in any possible solutions, that they have needed an outsider to come in and define the problem and possible solutions for them. In the problem or solution, there is some *difficult reality* that the client has had a hard time seeing and confronting" (p.149). Sometimes, it is this difficulty that the client tries to protect or conceal in an effort to appear invulnerable. In any of these examples, accepting the power offered by the client contributes to a disequilibrium in the status relationship, and prevents the consultation from reaching deeper levels of insight into the client's challenge.

At other times, it is the consultant who asks for power or takes power from the client, either consciously or unconsciously, in order to satisfy his/her own needs. Looking back, I can identify times when I have done this myself (hindsight is always 20/20). If I examine my own motivation for skewing the status relationship in my favor, I can see that it was most often the result of insecurity or fear. Ironically, it was a way of making myself feel more useful - a reaction to my own concern that I wasn't contributing enough value to the client. It was a way of making myself feel more comfortable by assuming the role of the "expert", providing concrete and solid advice, when the situation might have been better served through inquiry, dialogue, and collaborative problem solving.

Says Block (2000), "The downside of our need to be useful is the desire to prove that our work led to good results. Needing to claim credit for the risks and efforts made by clients is a measure of our own inflation and the anxiety that underpins it" (p.48). That sense of anxiety, and the need to feel useful, can influence a consultant's decisions and behavior, resulting in the consultant actually taking power away from the client by elevating his/her own status.

From the consultant's point of view, what does it take to resist the power offered by the client? What does it take to actively seek an equilibrium of the status relationship, when there are so many factors in the client/consultant relationship that seem to spawn disequilibrium? According to Schein, it requires discipline and awareness. Schein (1998) writes, "The temptation to accept the power that the other person grants you when he asks for advice is overwhelming. It takes extraordinary discipline in those situations to reflect for a moment on what is actually going on (deal with reality) and to ask a question that might reveal more or encourage the other to tell you more..." (p.17).

Schein's point about dealing with reality is very enlightening. Essentially his message is that in any moment when a consultant experiences an offer of power or elevated status, there is more to the picture than what can be seen from the surface. There is a deeper, more significant current running beneath the surface, that the consultant can tap into if he/she can resist the offering of power and status. It is this deeper current that carries the possibility of the consulting relationship - the potential of the consulting relationship to make a substantial and lasting difference, by accessing deeper feelings, thoughts, assumptions, and patterns held by the client. Hence, the consultant who merely skims the surface never sees what is actually going on and never gathers more than a superficial understanding of the client's situation, which significantly limits that consultant's capacity to be of value to the client. On the other hand, the consultant who engages the client on a deeper level learns more about the true nature of the problem at hand, as deeper and more useful communication occurs between client and consultant.

This being understood, we can see that creating and maintaining an equilibrium in the status relationship between client and consultant serves to reveal deeper and deeper levels of the condition that the client is facing, as it also reveals the client's true relationship to the condition itself. For the consultant, this is the way to the heart of the matter. Because the client feels listened to and understood on a deeper level, he/she is more likely to say the things that really matter. This builds trust, which leads to even

more meaningful communication, and an even deeper understanding of the situation. “Even if you are being paid to give advice, listening is the most critical communication skill, both for completing the project and for building the relationship” says Elaine Biech (2007, p.162).

For many clients, the experience of being listened to, *really* listened to, is new and profound. Listening in this way (the way that becomes possible when a status equilibrium is present) does more than just give clients an opportunity to express themselves. In fact, it helps shift the way they see themselves in relation to the issue or the problem at hand. When a client can voice his/her deepest thoughts, feelings, and intuitions about a problem, and the consultant does nothing but receive and acknowledge his/her communication, the client may experience a profound sense of validation and empowerment. When the client sees that his/her own thinking is contributing to the solution, he/she becomes invested in the process, and invested in the outcome of the consultation. Instead of seeing it as something that is being “done to” the client organization, the client begins to see the process as an organic and collaborative effort in which he/she is a key player. Because the client experiences empowerment, he/she begins to trust himself/herself more readily, and to believe in his/her own ability to solve the problem. The value of this type of contribution goes way beyond the value of merely giving advice because it transcends the dependency inherent in the role of consultant-as-expert. Instead of being dependent on the consultant for the solutions to complex problems, the client comes away with an increased capacity for diagnosing and solving problems on his/her own.

This is an extremely important concept, because as an outsider, the consultant has very little hope of achieving as complete an understanding of the problem as the client, meaning that the true potential to solve the problem and implement the solution lies solely within the client. The best we can do as consultants (and this is really something) is help people learn to help themselves. Says Edgar Schein (1998), “...the consultant can seldom learn enough about any given organization to really know what a better course of action would be or even what information would really help because members of the organization perceive, think about, and react to information in terms of their traditions, values, and shared tacit assumptions - that is, their organizational culture and the particular styles and personalities of their key leaders and members” (p.9). Any contribution of real and lasting value made by the consultant must be made with this premise as a backdrop.

Insofar as I have attempted to explain why the true potential and possibility of the consulting relationship depends on an equilibrium of status between client and consultant, I believe it is also important to consider that maintaining the status equilibrium at all times is an ideal that cannot realistically be attained. In reality, consultants fulfill many different roles with their clients, depending on the circumstances, and often times the expectations of the client. In fact, in my experience, most consultation involves near continuous shifts in the status relationship throughout the duration of a project. Rather than attempt to achieve perfection, I believe a worthwhile goal for the consultant is to cultivate an acute awareness of the status relationship at all times, and to make a practice of consciously choosing the role that best aligns with the needs of the client at any given time. There may be times when expert advice is exactly what is needed, and there may be times when the consultant-as-doctor is needed to diagnose a problem and suggest a course of treatment. In these situations, the status relationship will surely change. The question is whether the consultant has the wherewithal and the skill to bring about a status equilibrium when that is what the situation calls for, and the discipline to maintain that equilibrium when there is great pressure, both internal and external, to attain a position of elevated status.

The status relationship plays an integral role in determining the potential of any consultation to achieve significant, lasting results. While the stereotypical notion of the consulting relationship portrays the esteemed expert doling out advice to the unenlightened masses, the reality is that the consultant's ability to create and maintain an equilibrium in the status relationship is fundamentally important.

References

Biech, Elaine. (2007). *The business of consulting: the basics and beyond*. Second Edition. San Francisco, CA: Pfeiffer.

Block, Peter. (2000). *Flawless consulting: a guide to getting your expertise used*. Second Edition. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass/Pfeiffer.

Schein, Edgar. (1998). *Process consultation revisited: building the helping relationship*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing.