

Results by Persuasion—Influencing the Customer to Get What You Want

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Introduction

Many people learning consulting skills look for techniques and procedural ways to become more effective as consultants. As EH&S professionals we are in a continuous cycle of trying to influence others to change. As consultants we are able to offer technical capabilities to the client because we have something the customer does not. Beyond the technical skills, we offer our clients a beguiling approach to consulting, in that we are more intimately involved in the process than if you were applying your expertise in some other way. The consultants' special challenges will be discussed in this paper to provide some clarity on our role in trying to persuade and influence our customers to get what we want.

In all the years I have been an EH&S consultant, I've always found that the customer has had certain defined expectations of me. The challenge for you as a consultant is to find out what those expectations are early on in the customer-client relationship. The sooner we can persuade the customer to reveal their needs the more efficient and effective we will be at enabling change.

Consultants are often seen as "change agents," or sometimes as "change masters." Rarely are a consultant's services requested to recommend that things stay the same. If that does happen the consultant must stay very tuned into the political climate because he or she might be used as a pawn between the change initiators and change resisters (1997 1).

In this article we will examine the five phases of consulting and their influence on the client-consultant relationship and the ability to solve the issues at hand. My ASSE conference seminar will discuss additional attributes for successful persuasion to influence the customer that will not be covered in this article.

The term "customer" and "client" will be used interchangeably throughout this paper. The client/customer is the person or persons that we want to influence or change to believe in our way of thinking. Once we are successful in revealing our needs and wants, we will be faced with the harsh reality that we do not have the power to make change happen. The power to create change lies with the client. The consultant does not have the power to make changes, but does hold the keys to persuade and influence.

Who We Are as EH&S Professionals

Since our role as EH&S professionals is to influence change to foster safety effectiveness through communications with our customer, one would think that we ought to be very proficient communicators. This is only partly true. Yes, strong communication skills are absolutely critical to being an effective consultant, but equally important is a clear understanding of what the customers want us to do, or function as, so they can reap the benefits of what we deliver. One of our purposes is to deliver our knowledge and technical expertise in loss prevention.

There are three skills you need to be a successful consultant—technical, interpersonal, and consulting skills. Above all, we need technical skills. Technical skills are what we have to sell to the customer. Having expertise and technical skills that the client does not have is the foundation of consulting—and the reason our services are sought!

Using the definition coined by Peter Block in *Flawless Consulting*, a consultant is defined as “a person in a position to have some influence over an individual, a group, or an organization, but who has no direct power to make change or implement programs” (2000 1). We are all consultants in life. That is, in our communications with others we are usually trying to convey a message of change and of knowledge in order to influence or change the beliefs of someone else. Let’s examine how we can influence change.

Influencing Change

As safety professionals we are in a continuous make-things-happen mode. Sometimes the client identifies areas of weakness or the nature of hazards present, but sometimes they do not know what the problem is (never mind what is at the root of the problem).

Let’s explore how we use *persuasion* and *influence* to successfully breed change. By definition, “to persuade” is to get somebody to do something; to succeed in convincing somebody to do something, especially by reasoning, pleading or coaxing. And by definition, “influence” is having the power to sway—the power that somebody has to affect other people’s thinking or actions by means of argument, example, or force of personality.

To function effectively with people, we need to have some level of interpersonal skills. Interpersonal skills are the behaviors and feelings that exist within all of us that influence our interactions with others. Interpersonal skills translate into having the ability to put ideas into words, to listen, to give support, to disagree reasonably, to maintain a basic relationship.

Effective consulting skills breed influence upon the customer to act upon and make organizational change. Without effective interpersonal skills and a thorough understanding of the needs of the customer, our ability to influence is diminished.

Task versus Relationship

The “task” verses the “relationship.” Which is more important? The answer is both. The difficulty comes in balancing task vs. relationship. Without having both components in harmony or balance, the success of creating changes is hindered. Too much attention on the task hinders the relationship side of influence. Similarly, too much emphasis on relationship hinders the effectiveness of completing the task.

The reality of most communication that takes place between the customer and the client, both verbal and non-verbal, is that it must occur with a delicate balance of the task and relationship. The “task” is what we want to accomplish: the need-to-do items. The customer and the consultant both have to-do items; both have wants and needs which typically are not the same. We must actively listen and thoroughly understand the problems of the client in order to enable influence. The needs of the customer are therefore the tasks at hand. Additionally, we have the needs of you the consultant, which are also the tasks at hand. The other side of the equation is relationship. In conversation with one another you (the consultant) and the client pose various questions to yourselves, non-verbal questions like “Does this person like me?” “Does he hear me?” “Does he have the power to take action and create change?” “Is this person credible?” “Will they make me look good?” “Do I like this person?” and so on. The relationship piece of successful consulting is about gaining trust.

Let’s take a look at an example of the relationship process in which the client presents an organizational problem (i.e. the need for training). The action level is problem solving the training issue. You gain more knowledge by asking the customer questions, such as what the expected results from this training are. While this exchange of information (or “wants” of the clients) is being presented, you are both sizing each other up---whether you feel accepted, resisted, comfortable and supported, threatened, etc. More often than not, the client’s redundant internalized questions are “Is this consultant someone I can trust? Is this someone who will make me look good and help bring me ideas and expertise to solve the problem of the organization?”

Phases of the Consulting Process

The “task and relationship” aspects of consulting are constantly struggling to obtain equilibrium. Both the relationship and the task progress through five phases of processing. The model shown in Exhibit 1, titled The Phases of Consulting, depicts how the relationship/interpersonal skills along the left column and the task/technical skills along the lower row are in constant uniform succession and result in the progression of the consulting process. The phases of consulting are adopted from Block (2000).

Exhibit 1 is a complete depiction of the phases of the consulting process. In order for the power of persuasion to be unleashed, the consultant needs to thoroughly understand the correlation of interpersonal skill, technical skills, and their affects on the phases of the consulting process.

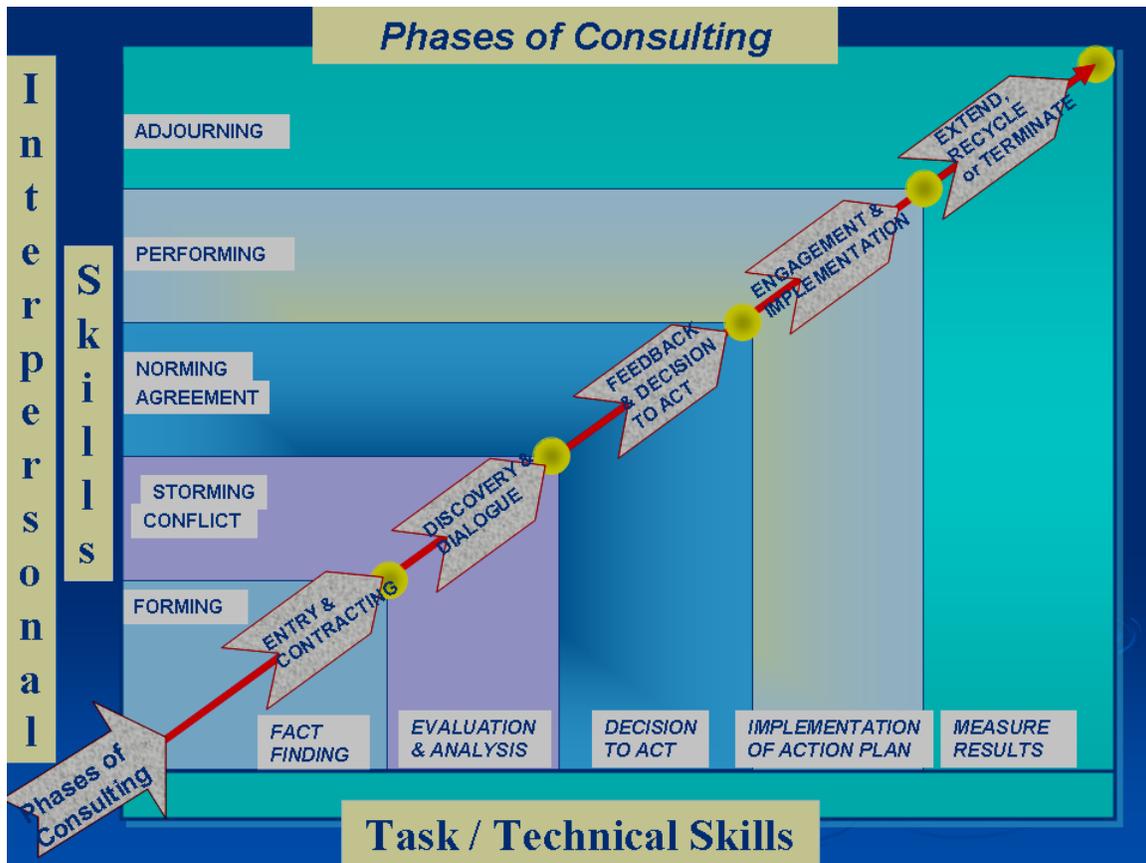


Exhibit 1. Phases of Consulting.

The five phases of consulting: (Block 2000).

1. Entry and Contracting.
2. Discovery and Dialog.
3. Feedback and Decision to Act.
4. Engagement and Implementation
5. Extension, Recycle or Terminate

According to Bruce Tuckman, interpersonal/relationship skills can be defined as follows:

1. Forming—forming an opinion of another
2. Storming and Conflict—give me more info...In disagreement. Both are trying to be heard.
3. Norming / Agreement—roles are being understood. Decide to work together.
4. Performing—starting to work to accomplish the goal or fix the problem(s)
5. Adjourning--Goal accomplished

Task and technical skills are:

1. Fact Finding
2. Evaluation and Analysis
3. Decision to Act
4. Implementation of the Action Plan
5. Measure Results

Let's examine Exhibit 1 in detail.

Phase I:

In phase one we are planning and or making initial contact with the client.

Entry and Contracting—setting the stage, initiating the relationship. This is the most important step in the process of consulting. This step must prove to be positive. It is critical that the consultant is prepared for the first contact with the client. In this first step we are building the foundation to cultivate what we hope will be a collaborative relationship. This is the initial contact with the client, exploring the problem, determining if the consultant is the right person for the job, sizing each other up, and expressing what I (the consultant) want and what client wants.

Relationship/Interpersonal Skills—Forming. Forming is shaping the need for dependency and inclusion. Here we begin to gather thoughts or form an opinion of the other person. The forming of an opinion can begin even before you meet your client face to face.

In this phase, issues of trust and personal power begin to emanate. We continue to internalize thoughts, form opinions and ask questions such as “how does the client feel about me”, “how do you feel about the consultant” and “what will be my role and what will be yours?” The opinion-forming process is underway and gives reason to believe that this is the most critical phase of the entire relationship building segment. Making that positive first impression is imperative to successful persuasion.

Task & Technical Skills—Fact finding. Gather information and knowledge of the problem to connect with the utilization of your technical skills. The issues are specified and the nature of work is explored. Active listening is critical here to identify the client's needs and wants. A common understanding of the task at hand leads us back to exploring the relationship (i.e. *how* people work together determines *if* they will work together).

Phase II:

Phase Two begins to cultivate energy and conflict signals begin to emerge. Both sides are beginning to accept and recognize the problems and begin to take responsibility to formulate change. Resistance issues can develop quickly in this phase and the issue of control becomes apparent. Both parties become uncertain of who should be doing what. Data is being evaluated with a critical eye. There are times when this phase circulates round and round without progressing forward. We need to stay acutely aware of the need to perpetuate this process and not become idle in this phase.

Discovery & Dialogue—Analysis and executions of the issues are cultivated. Problems and challenges are being revealed. The consultant needs to understand and be able to articulate what the real issues are behind the problem. Using the example of the need for training, the consultant needs to determine if this is an organizational cultural issue or a deficiency in knowledge or some other underlying issue in which training will or will not solve the problem. The consultant needs to internally ask what the underlying issues are that need to be addressed and whether he or she has enough information to thoroughly understand the task or problem.

Relationship/Interpersonal Skills—Conflict. Storming an opinion, interpersonal conflict begins to surface. Communication is reserved and not necessarily open. Here we are holding out and waiting to see who is willing to disclose information. Data is being evaluated and analyzed but not shared equally. The customer is very vulnerable in this phase. The more information the client reveals the more power or control is being given-up. Collaboration is often not thought about or attempted at this phase.

Task & Technical Skills—Evaluation and Analysis. In this phase we are expressing the areas of differences rather than agreement. The customer is being fed objective data that needs to be analyzed and processed before they can accept it. We need to communicate what the benefits are to the clients with our initial ideas of problem solving. For example, if we identify hearing protection as an issue, we need to convey to the client that the employees should be wearing hearing protection. Persuasion and influence can be utilized if we communicate the benefits derived from wearing hearing protection and how they will impact a problem's solutions. If the customer sees value and benefit in your ideas, you begin to gain influence and power. The persuasion process is jump started and begins to gain momentum in the next two phases.

Phase III:

In Phase Three the dialog begins to move forward toward generating ideas to solve issues and problems. This brings us back to the purpose of joining consultant and client together. Both parties accept that the data is truthful and that all pertinent information has been shared and utilized professionally. They are also secure in the fact that their contributions will be acknowledged, their thoughts will be appreciated and understood, and that a mutual decision to act will blossom.

Feedback & Decision to Act—Here we gather data and reduce it into a manageable size to achieve results. We begin to strategize a plan to ensure that each item/task selected is acted upon on behalf of the client. For example, in the training problem case we needed to determine who within the client's organization was able to deliver the training and what the desired outcomes of the training were. Providing feedback to the client at this stage is critical. In return, this is the opportunity for the client to express what they will do. If the client recognizes the value of your suggestions and you've identified ways that they can address fixing the problem, than successful implementation is underway. Decisions need to be made on the "what to do" front, and the better the consultant conveys this information, the better the chance for implementation.

Relationship/Interpersonal Skills—Norming and agreement. Conflict may begin brewing in Phase Two, and this is the phase in which it must be managed. Progress begins here as to how or if collaboration can exist on this project. For successful persuasion to begin, we must communicate to the client how their needs will be met as they relate to your consulting strategy for the problem's solution and implementation. The negotiation dialogs must be open and free of hidden agendas.

Task & Technical Skills—Integrate the solution set-up here. The consultant begins to provide feedback to the client to address their needs and wants. The consultant uses their technical skills to offer advice and make recommendations to persuade the client to accept your ideas.

Phase IV:

Cohesion between the task and relationship come together in this phase with the implementation of the plan. Mutual confirmation of assigned activities is exchanged and agreed-upon target dates are set.

Engagement & Implementation—Planning out the previous steps. In this phase we ask ourselves several questions: “Who will do what?” and “Will implementation fall entirely on the line organization or will the consultant be thoroughly involved and then slowly disengage him or herself?”

The consultant needs to clearly communicate the process for successful implementation of problem mitigation. It is particularly important that problem root causes and improvement solutions are clearly identified.

Relationship/Interpersonal Skills—Performing is letting each party be a “doer”. In this phase, acceptance of each others needs turns into action. The actions can be both interdependent and shared.

Task & Technical Skills—Progression has occurred and actively doing is underway. Work is done either collectively or individually and is meant to be shared with the participants. The tasks to be done are prioritized, target dates established and contingency plans developed.

Phase V:

The energy of coming together and getting something done is exalted and diminishing in this phase. Decisions have been made, understandings reached, the problem is being addressed, and actions are being performed accordingly. The agreed upon plan is nearing completion and conclusions as to whether the project is complete are determined.

Extension, Recycle or Terminate—Evaluating what transpired in the engagement and implementation phase has a direct impact on the extension or termination of the project.

As problems have been resolved, have others been identified? Has the original problem identified other areas that need fixing in order to solve root causes? If the implementation was successful or if there was failure, termination of the offering is in order to bring closure.

Relationship/Interpersonal Skills—Adjourning and closure. In this phase we evaluate our successes and faults in meeting each other’s needs, and our ability to work well with one another. If our relationship is positive and has produced desired results, it is likely that the relationship can produce future contractual work together.

Task & Technical Skills—Progress metrics and follow through. We audit our plan of implementation and measure the return on our efforts. If we have not fully implemented change then the process can begin to recycle. It must be understood that recycling through the original task means starting over at Phase One and progressing back through each of the phases.

Conclusion

In summary, the balance of the task and relationship will permit the phases of the consulting life cycle to emanate. As consultants, we must not cling to the fantasy that if our thinking is clear and logical, our wording is eloquent, and our conversations are solid, the strength of our arguments will carry the day. Clear arguments do help, but they are not enough. The client and his or her colleagues will experience doubts and dilemmas that block commitment (Block 4).

A thorough understanding of each other's wants and needs and authentic communications are the key to successful consulting. After all, consulting cannot be done well without genuine care for the client. In the end it is our authenticity, the way we manage ourselves, and our connections to our clients that produce results. If done well, satisfaction will consummate for both.

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