

Safety and Health Consultant Roles: Being the Best at Your Game

**Katherine A. Hart, Ed.D., CSP
K.A. Hart & Associates
Alameda, California**

Introduction

Trying to be all things to all people can become an environmental, safety and health (ES&H) professional's nightmare. And can eventually lead to or be one of the most significant stumbling blocks in moving an organization towards ES&H excellence. For any one person to be successful there needs to be clarity of focus on what their actual roles and responsibilities are. On the flip side, just focusing on one specific role or area of focus without understanding the broader picture of who needs to be influenced or what needs to be accomplished can also create misunderstanding, role confusion, and stall or impede ES&H progress. The purpose of this paper is to provide, from the author's perspective, a framework for examining the four over-arching roles of the ES&H professional. Along with describing each of the four roles, discussion will be provided as to how to apply the roles in a work setting, and how application and selection of different roles will achieve different end-results. These different end-results will directly affect one's ability to influence and bring about organizational change from an ES&H perspective. Development of these roles is based on an underlying foundational concept that all ES&H professionals, to some degree, along a continuum of experience, knowledge and education are serving as consultants, whether internal or external, to the organizational improvement and integration of environmental, safety, and health. For this reason, time is spent at the front-end describing what a consultant is and why this applies to ES&H professionals.

The ES&H Professional as Consultant

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 changes or implement programs" (1981 1). Block takes this definition further to imply that anyone who works in a staff role to the organization, "even if they don't officially call themselves 'consultants'" (1981 2), are in fact consultants. His stance is that while individuals in these positions may plan, recommend, assist, advise, or whatever support

term can be identified, these people do not actually approve, implement or have direct control over employees, unless reporting to them directly, resources, dollars, and time.

And isn't this the dilemma of most (if not all) ES&H professionals? They have information, knowledge, tools, and ideas of how to move environmental, safety and health efforts forward in a company, but unless those within the organization who have direct control over people, resources, time and money agree to what is being recommended, they will be unsuccessful. It is always somewhat of a wake-up call to newly assigned ES&H staff to understand that their job is in fact to sell ES&H to others, and to realize they have little to no direct control over whether their ideas get accepted or not. This in no way implies that they don't have control over how the message of ES&H is delivered, when to deliver (timing), or other aspects of their job. It does mean however, that they are at the mercy of others to make progress forward.

Those that do have direct control within the organization, whether they are a supervisor, line manager, or whatever title defines them, are, according to Block, called "clients" (1981 2). Clients consist of an individual person, a group of people, team, department, or even the company as a whole. The client is the person or persons that the consultant wants to influence and "sell" their idea of safety to, without being able to directly control or exercise authority over them. Though clients are not the enemy of safety and health, though there are certainly some difficult personalities out there, they are certainly the most significant challenge to achieving safety and health excellence. The bottom line is that until ES&H professionals realize their primary job is to be a consultant and win over clients to their way of thinking, change within the client organization will not occur.

There are certainly those ES&H professionals who will counter that since there are rules and laws governing an organization's ES&H activities, this provides them with a way to exercise authority over their clients. The reality is that company's make decisions all the time as to whether they going to follow or not follow ES&H regulations, or any other regulations. While there are certainly consequences for inaction or inappropriate action, it is ultimately the company's choice and decision and not one that can be directly changed by an ES&H professional. Of course, and perhaps this is where the fun really begins, there are a multitude of influential actions that can be put forth by the ES&H professional to guide, engage, and sway their client organization towards making informed decisions and taking appropriate action to support those decisions.

ES&H Consultant Model

Once one grasps the fact and understands that ES&H professionals are acting in the guise of a consultant then the discussion unfolds as to what are the roles of a consultant? For ES&H professionals to be the most effective and efficient at influencing their client, what should they be doing? Where should they in fact be spending their time, energy and efforts? To answer these and similar questions, the author has developed a relatively simple four-step model that outlines the various roles of ES&H consultants. All the roles combined together make-up the overall work of the ES&H professional.

While the model itself is easy to understand, the implications for advancing ES&H and the far-reaching effects it can have on enabling change within an organization to occur is deeply powerful. The reason for this is because individuals have the ability, when they clearly

understand the breadth and scope of their influencing capacity, to bring about significant and sustainable change for the organization they either work within (internal) or from without (external). This is the calling of ES&H professionals, to be the best at their game at influencing and getting others to bring about significant change in organizations and thereby affecting and promoting the safety, health and well-being of all who are connected with the organization. The model is intended to enable ES&H professionals to re-think the work they do, how they accomplish it, and their inter-relationships with their clients in light of new meaning and understanding. The belief is that if one can recognize the different roles available, understand the consequences of what happens in each of the roles, then one can be more conscious and self-aware as to where to focus time, energy, and efforts.

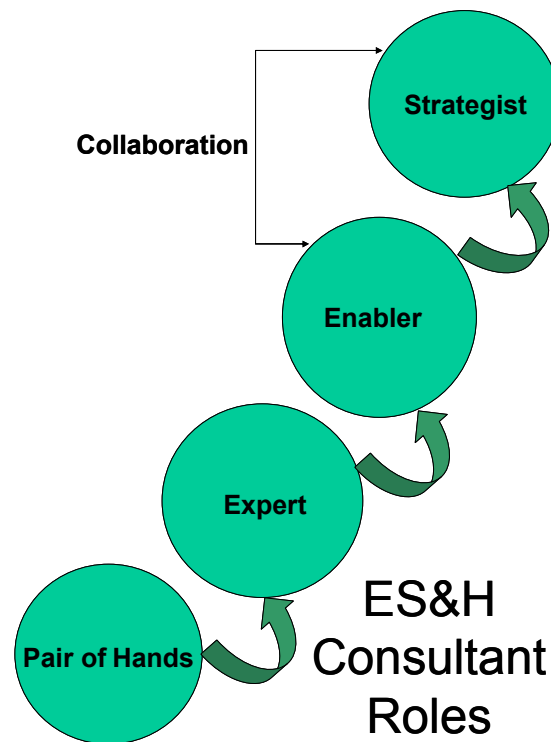


Exhibit 1. ES&H Consultant Roles

The model shown above, entitled Exhibit 1. ES&H Consultant Roles, depicts 4 circles, each of these circles represents ways of interacting with clients. These three roles were adopted from Block's (1981) three roles of how a consultant works with clients. He describes them as an expert, pair-of-hands, and collaborative. The author has maintained the first two in alignment with Block's model, but has divided the collaborative role into enabler and strategist. While it is true that both the enabler and strategist must be collaborative, which will be described further, there is also much that can be learned when recognizing and applying the differences between an enabler versus a strategist.

Pair-of-Hands Role

In the pair-of-hands role the client views the consultant as another “doer” within their sphere of control. In most instances the client will tell the consultant what to do, when to have it accomplished, and in some instances what forms or documents to use. To give an example, let’s say the department manager has the responsibility to conduct a safety inspection for their floor. They request that someone from the safety department conduct the inspection, using the already developed forms and information. Once the inspection is completed and any deficiencies noted, the manager then has the safety representative follow-up and ensure the corrections are taken care of. In this instance, it is recognized that the manager is the one who made the decision of when, what form to use, and who would be conducting the safety inspection. The person conducting the inspection is in reality only serving as the additional pair-of-hands for the manager to get the job completed.

The ES&H consultant interacts in a more passive and responsive type of relationship with the client when functioning in the pair-of-hands role. The focus here is doing exactly what the client asks for, recognizing that the client is in charge of making the requests and decisions. While there is certainly some specialized knowledge required to complete the assigned task, and the consultant may, based on their experience and knowledge of the client, go above and beyond what the client requests, there is minimal interaction or two-way interactive communication taking place. The communication is rather one of clarification, guidance, and assistance on the part of the consultant. For instance, when serving as a pair-of-hands, one may need to clarify when the inspection is due or who will review the form prior to submittal, but these are directly related to carrying out the task at hand. When acting in the pair-of-hands role collaboration with the client is not necessary, nor is trying to influence or persuade them to see a different perspective or way of operating. The client is very much aware they are ultimately responsible for the inspection or whatever the task is that needs to be carried out and completed. Moreover they are meeting goals and procedural requirements that are under their span of control.

Most ES&H professionals begin their careers spending a large percentage of their time being a pair-of-hands, especially when there is an already established environmental, safety and health program or they are very new to the tasks of ES&H. Regardless of whether one is a novice or seasoned professional, there is certainly time that is going to be spent in this role. So what then are the downsides of acting in a pair-of-hands role? The first one is that as professionals, when one falls into the trap of always doing the work there emerges in the clients mind that whenever some task related to safety needs to occur then ES&H does this task. The client is never in a learner role to understand how to do the work or involved in doing them work themselves. When this occurs, ES&H is not viewed as integral to the work of the department but rather tasks to be done by others.

Another difficulty is when clients are asking for specific tasks to be accomplished and their reasoning for doing the work or how to do the work is inaccurate. As an example, you are asked to conduct a safety inspection in a mechanic shop and the client asks you to use the inspection form they have used from the past. You agree to the task, yet once you are handed the form realize the form was originally designed for an office setting. While modifications have been made to the form, you recognize that many of the hazards relevant to the environment you are in will be overlooked. When you bring up this information, you are informed that another safety consultant working with this group used this same form and didn’t have a problem. In this case

you might surmise, without knowing any further information, that either the consultant was not astute as to the differences in the environment or maybe they were simply acting in a pair-of-hands role and not questioning the client request. Another situation could be that the supervisor in charge of the group modified the form and he thinks it will work just fine. As a consultant you are now dealing with the problem that you already agreed to do the inspection using their form, and are seen as questioning the supervisors experience, authority or both with regards to how they want you to accomplish the work. Either way, as a consultant you are now faced with a difficult situation to resolve.

Expert Role

The expert role is, in most cases, the more likely and often used role that ES&H consultants operate from, particularly as they become more knowledgeable and versed in regulatory requirements. The expert is someone who brings knowledge and experience to an assigned task, and is recognized by the client for having this expertise. An example of this is when an employee incident occurs and it needs to be investigated. The manager requests that the ES&H staff person come into their department and conduct the investigation, using their knowledge and experience to determine what went wrong and what corrective actions need to be taken. The ES&H expert comes in, interviews the people involved, and follows all the steps they have been trained to do for conducting a thorough investigation. The client supports the work they are doing, treating them like an ex-officio member of their staff. At the end, the investigator reports to the manager what caused the incident and the actions that need to be taken to ensure the incident isn't repeated. In this example, the client plays an inactive role. Though they are responsive to the requests to interview people involved and to provide assistance where needed, they take no responsibility for the outcomes of the investigation or how it was conducted. They rely solely on the expert knowledge of the ES&H consultant.

When acting in the expert role, decisions on how to proceed with the doing the work or how the work is to be accomplished are solely determined by the consultant. The client is not involved and takes no responsibility because they are not the expert when this type of scenario plays out. All information or data gathering to address the problem at hand is understood to be taken care of by the expert consultant. Collaboration as to how to resolve the problem or, in this example, conducting the investigation, are not discussed or even considered. Communication between the consultant and client are directive in a nature, as opposed to two-way interactive discussions. The focus is on the consultant letting the client know what they did to do their job, and the client arranges or provides the resources to do the work. Once the job or task is completed, it is typical for the client to judge and evaluate the work of the ES&H expert. While frustrating for the ES&H professional, it is human nature to find fault and/or praise for the work of an expert, since they are as such coming in as someone with more knowledge and experience of how to handle a particular task. And above all, it is the ES&H responsibility when playing the expert role to solve the immediate problem for the client.

So what's the difficulty in operating from an expert role? One of the most significant is that there is minimal to no commitment to support or put into place the recommended actions for improvement. Let's go back to the example above of the incident investigation. The ES&H completes the investigation and lets the client know there are several actions they implement to ensure this type of incident doesn't occur for the future. However, once the investigation is

completed, the expert walks away, and the corrective actions never get implemented. The reality, according to Block (1981 19), is that “studies done by ‘outside experts’ seldom carry the kind of personal ownership and commitment needed to deal with difficult management issues.” Meaning that unless the client is directly involved some way in accomplishing the work, they do not see the value in doing the hard work of implementing the corrective actions.

Another difficulty is that by coming in as an expert, there is no learning that takes place for the client. There is no development opportunity for others to handle future investigation cases, since the expert simply came in and did the work for them. The other difficulty with coming in as an expert is that resistance builds up in the part of employees to get actively involved. Comments such as “Don’t ask me, I’m not the expert and would not know how to proceed,” begin to surface. When one operates from an expert mode, as opposed to a learner role which will be described later, then learning for others is diminished, as well as for the ES&H professional. Too often, in the author’s perspective, ES&H professionals restrict and limit the affect they can have on individuals, teams, and organizations because they approach the work they do in an expert mode. This is not meant in any way to imply that knowledge and experience are not important. They are imperative for any professional. However, it is the approach or the role that one plays that makes the difference of whether they affect and influence multiple levels of change within the organization or are simply recognized as the expert one goes to get the work accomplished.

Collaborative Roles of Enabler and Strategist

In opening the discussion of the next two roles related to enabler and strategist, they both fall into Block’s definition of being collaborative. According to Block (1981 21), one assumes a collaborative role in the relationship “with the notion that management issues can be dealt with effectively only by joining his or her specialized knowledge with the manager’s knowledge of the organization.” The key assumption in a collaborative role is that the client is actively involved in all steps of the work and shares in the responsibility for success or failure of the intervention.

Some of the key attributes of a collaborative relationship involve negotiation, communication, interdependence, and mutual respect. When working from a collaborative stance, both the consultant and the client rely on each other for action planning, implementation, and eventual outcomes. Collaboration does not mean that disagreements will not occur, in fact they are almost certain to arise. Rather these disagreements are seen as opportunities to connect with greater understanding and generate new ideas and ways of thinking between the consultant and client. Information exchange and discussion of how to approach the work are done in a two-way communicative fashion, both the consultant and client bringing their body of knowledge to the table to determine how to address the problem or move the ES&H program forward. Implementation and assignments for future action are based on maximum use of resources, learning opportunities, and capacity-building for all involved. By establishing a partnership with the client, the consultant and client become co-advocates for moving the ES&H work forward and gaining greater buy-in and support from the whole organization.

Let us now examine the two roles identified under the collaboration umbrella – enabler and strategist. The term enabler is being used in this context as someone who through his or actions allows someone else to achieve something, namely related to environmental, safety and health. Other words that have entered the business world and could apply to the enabler role would be

both a mentor and a coach. Though in and of themselves they do not fully embrace what is meant by enabler. The reason for this has to do with the on-going role of an enabler to continuously be looking for opportunities when others can achieve something, and not simply when problems arise or they are called in to coach an individual. The enabler recognizes in most situations that they have the wherewithal to do the work, but they also know that only when they get others directly involved and allow them to achieve something can change truly happen. When an ES&H professional takes on the role of an enabler they are in a sense relinquishing some ego and control in what the outcomes will be. They are engaging and involving others, from senior management on down to front-line workers, in ways that will allow their clients to shine and be center-stage.

Choosing to take on the role of enabler is a much more difficult and frustrating than being an expert or pair-of-hands. There are also certainly rewards that come from operating in this realm, but they too are more intrinsic and fleeting. Let's face it, when the expert arrives there is much fanfare and accolades of what this person can accomplish. When the enabler begins their work, there is minimal fanfare and it is only rarely that direct recognition for the work being accomplished is acknowledged. Not because people are not appreciative, but because it is not as readily apparent to them. What helps to sustain the enabler is the progress they see others making in achieving and implementing environmental, safety and health practices.

Moving to the next circle, a strategist is one who is continually looking to create a longer-term sustainable change for the organization, most typically by applying innovative and frame-shifting perspectives of how to envision the future. The strategist is not just thinking about the work task at hand, but continually looking longer-term as to how the work task fits into the bigger ES&H integration work of the organization, and how by doing the task it can leverage the organization forward. A strategist is one who can shift their thinking from the tactical work at hand, to envisioning the broader implications of the work and aligning it as part of the organizational improvement work.

Strategic thinking is more than just responding to the problems at hand, it is determining what new reality and new tomorrow can look like for individuals, teams, and the organization. This type of thinking cannot be reactive, but proactive in nature. That being said, it can emerge when one is called in for a reactive response, the choice here is whether the ES&H professional seizes the opportunity to jettison from the reactive to enable the client to step-back and examine proactively the implications and outcomes. The wake-up call to the ES&H professional is that being a strategist and invoking strategic thinking can be applied any day and at any time.

Playing the role of the strategist, so essential to the ES&H consultant, always involves changes, and often, deep profound personal change. It requires a flexibility to step-back from the cacophony of client expectations and demands to partner and guide the client in a journey of discovery. In embarking upon a strategy role, the ES&H consultant has to be willing to challenge their own personal paradigms and ways of thinking, relating, and acting. For it is in imagining the results that are possible for the future that new ways of thing can be applied into the current organizational thinking, enabling tangible results to emerge.

Linking It All Together

To link these roles together and illustrate the opportunities that emerge when looking at all four in relation each to the other, an example of implementing a corporate inspection program for a high-rise building will be illustrated.

Both scenarios were implemented at one company, the first scenario was implemented first. The second scenario was implemented one year later, when the first failed to produce the required results. The first scenario is an inspection program that was implemented with the focus being on a pair-of-hands, expert, and minimal involvement as an enabler role. The second scenario, of the same inspection program, shifted the emphasis to being an enabler and strategist, though still tapping into the pair-of-hands and expert role. The requirement for both inspection programs was to establish a twice annual office inspection program for two, side-by-side high-rise buildings. One building consisted of 30 floors and the second consisted of 15 floors. Both buildings were operated by the same management company. There was a corporate safety and health department that resided in one of the buildings, and because of their existence there as well as several fire department write-ups for non-compliance, it was agreed that the safety department would coordinate the inspection effort.

Both inspection scenarios involve an ES&H consultant asked to coordinate the effort (though different consultants for each scenario), a secretarial support staff person from the safety department assigned to the task, a building manager very eager to get involved and be supportive, and an already existing floor warden system established in both of the buildings. In the first scenario there were no existing inspection forms. In the second scenario, there were the inspection forms created by the first scenario.

In the first scenario, the ES&H consultant developed an office inspection form based on other inspection forms already created with other companies, as well as outdated forms in existence within the company. The consultant, realizing that all the floors needed to be inspected, sent a communication to the management office sharing the form with them and asking if they had any information to add to the form they had already created. The management company indicated they did not, but were happy to assist in the inspection process. The ES&H consultant, having obtained agreement for the form, then developed a schedule for themselves, the staff person, and the management person to share responsibility in walking each of the floors to inspect for office hazards. It was agreed that any building or structural hazards would be corrected by the management team, and any other type of hazards that were individual or behavioral in nature would be forwarded to the Floor Wardens to take care of. The schedule was implemented, the office inspections completed, and the corrective actions forwarded to both the building management team and the Floor Wardens. The first scenario was completed within the allotted timeframe of 1 month, and kept within the anticipated budget.

In the second scenario, a second ES&H consultant was asked to again institute an office inspection program, since the first scenario had failed to produce results. According to management, the hazards from the first inspection had never been corrected and a second inspection to be scheduled 6 months after the first had failed to materialize. The second consultant started to gather information from the first scenario and discovered the following problems or concerns that were communicated by people involved with the first scenario:

- Safety Department support staff – they did not want to participate in another inspection and to please not ask them. In the first scenario they had been yelled at, felt insulted, were made to be the “bad guy” when telling people what needed to be corrected, and felt like they were burdened with all of the work. They were also concerned that last time they had asked for clarification on the form, but had been instructed just to look for items on the form. When issues came up, it was advised to write down the concerns and send them to the Floor Warden to resolve.
- Management company staff – this time they were not eager in getting involved in the inspection process. They had spent time walking the floors and they also had felt belittled and insulted from the people on the floor. They didn’t fully understand the inspection form, but since they were not the expert on these requirements, felt it best the safety department did this work on their own.
- Floor Wardens – they did not believe they or their department should have any responsibility for correcting hazards identified during the inspection, since it was not their responsibility to conduct the inspection. While some of them had gotten involved, they did want to do so for the future. This was the safety department’s responsibility and they should be taking care of this task.

Let’s recap, while the first scenario had accomplished the task at hand, the results of the work had left the clients and stakeholders involved with an understanding that safety was the safety department’s job and they should not be involved. More importantly, they saw no reason why they should care about the inspection results or the process to get the inspections completed. Let the experts handle this work.

The question the second consultant started asked themselves is what is the bigger purpose for conducting office inspections? How does any inspection process fit into the company’s strategic objective of integrating ES&H practices into the overall business? How does one engage and involve people to recognize safety, even as simple as office inspections, as being within their sphere of control and enabling them to take part in and be accountable for the results? To answer these questions, the second consultant used an already existing safety communication forum to engage and involve the senior leaders that had employees working for them within the two high-rise buildings. The consultant developed a strategy to sit down with the leaders that would engage them in thinking how the office inspections, involved in and supported by them, could move the company forward in its ES&H thinking. Having gained the leaders support, the ES&H consultant moved forward on the agreed-upon inspection process that the senior leaders developed. The process looked as follows:

- A team consisting of the ES&H consultant, 1 senior leader, management representative, and 2 individuals selected from the two buildings would develop a new inspection form. The form would be based on the previous one, though incorporating lessons learned from the staff assistance and management representative.
- Once the form was completed, a meeting was held with a representative from each of the major departments that occupied the two high-rise buildings. Some of these were Floor Wardens, but others were not. These representatives were selected by their leadership to participate in the inspection process. During this meeting they were walked through the form, asked for input, and the form was updated to include their comments and insights. During that

same meeting a process for conducting the inspections was presented, which was again revised, updated, and improved upon based on their comments.

- The final inspection process worked something like this – a management representative, department representative, and ES&H consultant or safety staff person would conduct the inspection. Since there could be several departments occupying a floor, then several department representatives would be included within the floor inspection. This made it easier to address inter-departmental hazards identified.
- The department representatives were responsible for communicating to their floors several weeks ahead of time that a floor inspection was to be conducted, asking people to take this time to straighten up their offices. The inspection form was circulated to everyone involved – there would be no surprises.
- During the inspection the department representative were responsible for documenting the inspection, as well as any corrective actions. Following the inspection the representatives sat down with their managers to discuss the results and agree to follow-up. Each manager was responsible for submitting their corrective actions and dates these were taken care of.
- Following the two building inspections, the senior officers awarded those managers who had 1) no corrective actions for their department, and 2) submitted completed corrective actions within a two-week timeframe. According to the building management, they took on additional maintenance staff for one month to make all the corrections being asked of them by the managers.

The second scenario took two months longer to complete than the first. There were additional costs in labor and time. The inspection process itself has been self-sustaining and continuously improving over the past four years. While the inspection process is still coordinated by the safety department, it is more from a communication standpoint to initiate the activities. The senior management team takes it from there, appointing a project planner to coordinate the effort, always understanding that an ES&H consultant is available to serve in the collaborative roles of enabler and strategist.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to provide a four-step model that is based on Block's consultant roles of pair-of-hands, expert, enabler and strategist. ES&H professionals have a choice to make each and every time they interact with clients, what role are they going to operate from? No decision or choice of roles is incorrect. Rather the question is what is the legacy you want to leave behind for your clients? The choice and decision lies within you as a professional. Clearly the client is not holding you accountable to any of these roles. Yet realize they are continually reacting to and interacting with you based on the roles you choose to put into action. As an ES&H professional you cannot be all things to all people, but you can be conscious and self-aware of what you do, contribute, and how you continuously interact with your clients. The choice is yours – to be the best at your game of ES&H excellence.

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