JOURNAL of PRACTICAL CONSULTING

Editor's Note
We Live in Interesting Times!

Bramwell Osula
Regent University

Welcome to the first issue of 2009! The global economic downturn is the major item on most agendas. While an imploding housing market, crisis in the banking and financial sectors and corporate downsizing with resultant layoffs are the public face of the indelicately labeled "credit crunch," one wonders what may be occurring beneath the surface.

Practically everyone is affected. Governments, large corporations, small businesses, individual investors and consultants are all feeling the effects of the global recession. Whether opportunities for consultants are expanding or shrinking depends on who you talk to.

Clearly, some have been negatively impacted, tied as their fortunes are to that of clients in the established corporate sectors. Yet, the expertise of others is in high demand. The image of consultants as "solutions providers" could serve the industry well, particularly if this is combined with innovative methods that blend economics, cost-containment, human factors initiatives, leadership and a revamped global strategy into the consulting mix. The reality is that even with all the depressing news, we continue to live in interesting times. Consultants should take note.

If you have an unusual consulting narrative, case study, advisory notice, or useful tips on how consultants can not only weather, but perhaps even leverage the current economic crisis to their advantage, JPC would like to hear from you.

By sharing and exchanging ideas—good old fashioned networking—the consulting industry could, in fact, come out ahead. This would be a good starting point from which to assist a range of companies devise much-needed recovery or organizational development plans.

In this issue, we bring together three qualitatively different articles that again reflect on different aspects of consulting. Anderson writes on the role of consultants as brokers of local business development. The case study explores a business community development initiative in London, England, demonstrating how consultants working collaboratively can be agents of significant change.

Berg's more systematic study explores frameworks for conducting assessments, which are the stock-in-trade of the consulting profession. The argument is that appropriate and effective assessments require comprehensive examination of both the individual and the setting. This leads to an interesting discussion of strengths, specific environmental factors and hope.

Journal of Practical Consulting, Vol. 3 Iss. 2, 2009

ISSN 1554-3145, www.regent.edu/jpc

The third article by Hicks and Nair is provocatively titled, “If you can’t solve the problem, change the problem you’re solving,” and this is precisely what the authors recommend. The solution to effective problem solving is to frame or, occasionally, re-frame the problem. It is a case of consultants taking charge or proactively seeking to understand and interpret the needs of their clients.

Once again, we welcome your letters and comments, as well as any ideas you might have for future articles. Expanding our consultant knowledge base and thinking more collaboratively are two strategies we can all usefully adopt.

We live in interesting times!

Bramwell Osula
Editor

To link directly to this journal, go to:
www.regent.edu/jpc

Journal of Practical Consulting, Vol. 3 Iss. 2, 2009, pp. 1-2

ISSN 1554-3145, www.regent.edu/jpc

JOURNAL of PRACTICAL CONSULTING

Practitioner's Corner

Consulting and the Public Sector: The Role of Consultants as Brokers of Local Business Development: A Case Study

Glenroy Anderson
Islington Business Enterprise Team, London Borough of Islington, U.K.

This case study explores the work consultants do for their clients. It also sheds light on the consultant mindset, focusing on how consultants within a large public authority enterprise unit go about the task of delivering urban regeneration benefits from physical construction schemes. The article demonstrates that consultants can work effectively with other council departments and that consultants are able to establish successful enterprise initiatives, which yield significant regeneration results, by using a private sector approach to broker local business engagement.

Local Authority and Business Enterprise

In an era of lean organizations and re-engineered businesses where middle managers are thin on the ground, management consultants are often used as a flexible resource to implement plans, execute projects and deliver results. One of the less familiar roles consultants can also play is that of brokers, people who introduce and bring different parties together for mutual benefit. Consultants are well placed to play this brokering role as they:

- Are independent of the history and normal functioning associated with the commissioning organization
- Can bring new ideas and relationships to meet challenges and chart new territories
- Should be able to bring a fresh approach, a different (and at its best an objective) perspective to situations

It was to a brokering role that consultants were commissioned when the Islington Business Enterprise Team (IBET) was established by the U.K. local government, London Borough of Islington. Working within the economic regeneration department, two consultants were commissioned to broker commercially productive relationships between large private sector developers/main contractors and small local builders and trades companies.

Journal of Practical Consulting, Vol. 3 Iss. 2, 2009, pp. 3-8

ISSN 1930-806X, jpc@regent.edu

Consulting, Brokering and Partnership Arrangements

In common with many consultancy assignments, the consultancy role was not defined as "brokers" when the consultants were commissioned. The assignment started with a clear rationale, that of "maximising the economic benefits (of a major construction project) for local businesses." Whilst not stating exactly which economic factors were to be addressed, this phrase did point the consultants in a clear direction towards the business community. They knew something had to be done, which the local business community would both appreciate and value. Beginning with the basic premise that "all businesses want more business," we decided to try and find out two things. First, if there were any construction businesses in the local area and secondly, if there was any part of a major construction development scheme which had not yet been assigned a builder. If there was a gap, we would approach the developer with the idea of using a local construction team to undertake the work (on the assumption that we could find a builder or form a working consortium). Other aspects of the consultancy terms of engagement that were defined included:

- The length of the assignment (one year)
- The reporting line and the need to agree to a delivery plan (in hindsight I think that the need to agree to a delivery plan was a clue that the assignment needed a clearer definition as to what it was going to achieve and the key performance indicators it could be measured against)
- The requirement to have a good understanding of urban economic regeneration, project management and the private sector
- The target of providing a specific number of businesses with at least two hours of consultancy advice

As the IBET consultancy assignment was directly associated with the physical construction of a mixed construction development that included building a 60,000-seater football stadium, a small amount of commercial space and over 2,000 housing units, it seemed natural to try and engage the local construction trade in all the building work that would be undertaken. The two key early tasks we undertook as consultants were, first to contact and meet the developers, the main contractors and their large sub-contractors, and secondly to research what, if any, local construction companies were based in the area.

Structure and Process

The identity and formal contact details of the developers and main contractors were known and easily obtainable from documents submitted for formal planning agreements with the Islington Council town planners. Early meetings with the town planners, to understand more fully what the terms and obligations were for the developers/main contractors to work with us and to glean any useful intelligence about things in general, were met with uneasy suspicion. The town planners were not used to working closely with other departments or their consultants. Nevertheless good cooperation was forthcoming once the planners understood that we were engaged to assist the developer/main contractor meet their "best endeavours" obligation "to wherever possible work with and involve local businesses" in the construction scheme.

Journal of Practical Consulting, Vol. 3 Iss. 2, 2009, pp.3-8

ISSN 1930-806X, jpc@regent.edu

Arranging a meeting directly with the relevant senior management of the developers required that we be persistent and firmly insist that they needed to meet with us (despite them meeting regularly with our planning colleagues), as we had a distinct set of requirements that needed to be addressed. The meeting itself, when held, was reasonable and resulted in both parties having a clear understanding of their responsibilities and the next steps each would have to take. For the developer this meant agreeing to meet with us again in six months and writing to their main contractors, reminding them that they were under an obligation to use their "best endeavours to work with and involve local businesses" in the building project, and advising them to "meet with IBET to see how best they could progress this matter."

Business Benefits of Local Companies

Once the developer's letter was sent, we followed it up with a telephone call to the contractor to set a date and time for meeting them. From our conversations with the town planners, we were aware of the tight timescales for completion of the building and so worked with equal haste to meet with the main contractors. Again, our meeting with the main contractor was reasonable and resulted in a similar outcome with the scheme's developers: an agreement to meet again and an opportunity to meet with their sub-contractors. It was at these sub-contractor meetings that we were able to advance the business benefits of using local companies; that of lower cost, better logistics and the opportunity to bench mark and refresh their existing supply chain. At these meetings, we also introduced and brokered local companies for consideration for different work packages.

Alongside meeting with the developer and the contractors, as consultants we had to quickly research and identify local companies who could possibly contribute to the development. Once local firms were identified, we had to enquire if they were interested in winning work on the development. Some firms were not interested either because they were busy enough, or they did not believe it was worth their while participating because the main contractors and large sub-contractors had their own supply chain in place and so they would not seriously consider using them. We were aware that this concern was widely held and knew it had some validity. Our response was to openly discuss this with the contractors and receive an undertaking from them that they would not do this; and for our part we would monitor closely whether local companies were just being used as "tender fodder" by contractors who had no intention of awarding work to them.

Matchmaking and Performance Measures

We tried to meet all the local companies that were interested in tendering for work to understand what they did and also confirm that they met a minimum set of criteria, including policies, procedures and industry accreditations which the contractors had told us they required if local companies had any chance of being approached or invited to tender for work. Local companies that had these qualifications were profiled and listed in a directory we produced and circulated to the contractors.

Early on we arranged for a specific briefing event to take place where the developer, their main contractor and the large sub-contractors outlined to all the interested local companies what they were seeking to achieve, how they were going about their work and how local companies could possibly get involved and win work from them.

Journal of Practical Consulting, Vol. 3 Iss. 2, 2009, pp.3-8

ISSN 1930-806X, jpc@regent.edu

Our work then essentially was to ensure that the main contractor and their large sub-contractors reviewed their procurement requirements on an on-going basis to identify any work packages that local companies from our directory could potentially undertake, so they could approach and invite them to bid for work. Of course, this match making and brokering of relationships involved much effort and goodwill from all parties involved. Sometimes the work packages were slightly larger than the contractor would usually place with a new supplier. At other times small local companies had to make certain organizational investments before receiving tender invitations which were not guaranteed. The outcome of these adjustments and our brokering was that local companies were given the opportunity to tender for work and work packages were indeed awarded on a competitive basis.

The results achieved through this brokerage service were measured across three key performance indicators: the number of local companies who received pre-tender enquiries, the number of local companies formally being invited to tender for work, and the total value of contracts won by local companies.

Table 1
Achievements in the first year

Number of local companies who received pre-tender enquiries	95
Number of local companies being invited to tender for work	67
Number of companies winning contracts	12
Total value of contracts won	£3.0m (approximately $5m USD)

These outcomes were considered of sufficient merit by both the local authority and the regional government funders. As a result, we were retained as consultants for a further year to expand the local procurement project across all construction developments that took place in the defined local authority area. Again, using the same methodology, results achieved in the second year were credible.

Table 2
Achievements in the second year

Number of local companies who received pre-tender enquiries	130
Number of local companies being invited to tender for work	109
Number of companies winning contracts	26
Total value of contracts won	£6.8m (approximately $11m USD)

The project was then asked to expand its offer to service a large £2bn, 10 year regeneration construction scheme, which was taking place in a neighbouring borough. The results for year three are shown below and confirm that the project could be expanded not only within local administrative boundaries and continue to deliver results, but outside and across administrative boundaries.

Journal of Practical Consulting, Vol. 3 Iss. 2, 2009, pp.3-8

ISSN 1930-806X, jpc@regent.edu

Table 3
Achievements in the third year

Number of local companies who received pre-tender enquiries	195
Number of local companies being invited to tender for work	160
Number of companies winning contracts	55
Total value of contracts won	£11.5m

Future Brokering Prospects

Now in its fourth year, the business brokerage project is on target to again double the value of contracts won by local construction firms to over £25m. The project is also now beginning to assess its impact in terms of employment, the number of jobs which it has created or safeguarded and the work which has been won through its specific "brokerage" services. An exit strategy which proposes the establishment of a permanent business brokerage team is also being drawn up to put the project on a more permanent footing.

Key factors which have contributed to the success of this business brokerage and which may guide other consulting organizations with a broad community or public sector remit include:

1. *Professional partnerships*
   Consultants build professional partnerships where they work with town planners and other regeneration officers who have previous experience of working with the developer or main contractor.

2. *Service ethic*
   It is important for consultants to bring a responsive service ethic to their role.

3. *Customer orientation*
   Consultants should employ an effective customer relationship system, which tracks, reports and raises reminders as necessary.

4. *"Positive engagement" and trust*
   This is the determined, professional approach adopted by the consultants who pursued small wins and pragmatic solutions. The consultants on this project were friendly and open, not demanding compliance or officious exchanges; they were able to build trust with both the large contractors and local companies, and not become distracted with sly taunts or unproductive arguments.

5. *Understanding and confidence building*
   The consultants made an effort to try to understand the work of both the contractors and the local companies. This resulted in the consultants having confidence in the work of the local companies they brokered.

Journal of Practical Consulting, Vol. 3 Iss. 2, 2009, pp.3-8

ISSN 1930-806X, jpc@regent.edu

Conclusion

The results of this assignment show that the use of consultants as business brokers can work and yield positive outcomes. IBET demonstrated that using consultants as a flexible resource to implement and test the viability of an innovative idea and gain added value, has been successful. Central to the success of the assignment was the positive, pragmatic professionalism of the consultants. This is something commissioning clients typically seek and conscientious consultants should be keen to deliver.

About the Author

Glenroy Anderson is the director of the Islington Business Enterprise Team (IBET), which is a key department of the London Borough of Islington in London, UK. He holds an MBA and Masters in Economic Development and specializes in urban economic development and regeneration, specializing in small- and micro-enterprise development. Mr. Anderson has worked as an enterprise projects and policy adviser with a number of public organizations and private companies at both local and regional government levels. With a particular interest in corporate social responsibility as a tool for unleashing the potential of small local business through enterprise initiatives, Glenroy continues to direct and accept consulting assignments as a business enterprise leader and mentor.
Email: glenroy.anderson@islington.gov.uk

Journal of Practical Consulting, Vol. 3 Iss. 2, 2009, pp.3-8

ISSN 1930-806X, jpc@regent.edu

JOURNAL of PRACTICAL CONSULTING

A Comprehensive Framework for Conducting Client Assessments: Highlighting Strengths, Environmental Factors and Hope

Carla J. Berg
Department of Medicine, University of Minnesota Medical School

Consultants are often asked to conduct comprehensive assessments of clients, which must be conducted in a way that affords the most complete and accurate data to inform the ensuing recommendations. Appropriate and effective assessments require comprehensive examination of both the individual and the setting. Attending to strengths and weaknesses within clients and the client's environment allows for a more complete understanding of a client's situation. Specifically, professionals must attend to four aspects of a client: (a) the client's psychological and behavioral strengths, (b) the client's psychological and behavioral weaknesses, (c) the strengths in the client's environment and (d) the weaknesses in the client's environment (Wright, 1991). In addition, this approach can be enhanced by using hope theory (Snyder, 1994) as a framework for understanding client goals, along with the routes to those goals (pathways thinking) and the motivation to use those pathways (agency thinking). Finally, the advantages of using this innovative assessment approach to inform the recommendations and professional interactions are considered.

The ultimate goals of consulting are ameliorating problems, increasing functioning, and developing and strengthening resources for fending off future problems. The degree to which interviews and assessments answer these questions will shape the ensuing recommendations to the client. In this way, conducting the assessments and interviews as a consultant plays a powerful role in people's lives. Our thesis is that it is important, even crucial, to examine the "good" along with the "bad" in people, attempting to understand their strengths as well as their weaknesses. In addition, to fully understand a person and his or her behaviors, the environment in which they exist must be explored.

Journal of Practical Consulting, Vol. 3 Iss. 2, 2009, pp. 9-13

ISSN 1930-806X, jpc@regent.edu

Not Oversimplifying the Complex

People are not completely autonomous beings who operate in a vacuum. Instead, they and their behaviors (both good and bad) exist in a variety of contexts. Hence, it is important to understand the situations in a client's life and work, along with the extent to which that client does or does not alter behaviors across different situations.

Not only do people exist in contexts, but so too do their problems. By attributing the source of all of a client's problems to the person's biases consultants hamper their abilities to assist clients effectively in achieving their goals. By assessing a client's environment, consultants increase their ability to detect the various sources of the client's problems. This is a crucial aspect of assessment because the assumed source of problems influences the intervention approaches that are used (Wright & Lopez, 2002). For example, one may find that the optimal client treatment simply is to change the environments in which that client places himself or herself. Without knowing anything about the context in which the problem presents itself, it is difficult to infer that it is partly an environmental issue, rather than simply a matter of changing a client's maladaptive behavior. In addition, examining the environment helps delineate how pervasive or circumscribed any particular problem might be.

In summary, comprehensive and balanced assessments need to provide information regarding the individual's assets and environmental settings. Conducting a balanced assessment provides a more complete (and therefore accurate) conceptualization of the person and the surrounding environment. In the remainder of this article, we will outline a particular method for achieving these desired results in assessing a client and in formulating the subsequent recommendations.

An Approach to Balanced Assessment

To ensure that the assets and weaknesses of the client and his or her environment are assessed, the use of a four-corner matrix (see Figure 1) may be helpful. A first aspect of this matrix is *valence*, with two subsets: the client's assets and weaknesses. A second aspect of this matrix is *source*, with two subsets: factors within the client and factors within the client's environment. Thus, the 2 (valence: assets vs. weaknesses) by 2 (source: within Client vs. within environment) matrix has four quadrants:

- Quadrant 1: assets; within client
- Quadrant 2: assets; within environment
- Quadrant 3: weaknesses; within client
- Quadrant 4: weaknesses; within environment

As the interview unfolds, the interviewer uses this matrix to collect and organize information about the client.

By using this approach, the interviewer is prompted to explore other aspects of the client. It is important that the information recorded on the matrix includes more than simply the client's self-report. The consultant must also pay attention to the behaviors exhibited by the client during the assessment process. Again, client strengths can be noted, such as having good interpersonal skills (e.g., maintaining appropriate eye contact), showing evidence of intact reality testing, or displaying psychological insight. The consultant can explain to the client how these observations

Journal of Practical Consulting, Vol. 3 Iss. 2, 2009, pp. 9-13

ISSN 1930-806X, jpc@regent.edu

normally would be interpreted in the report in easily understood terms. Clearly distinguishing between aspects of the person and aspects of the environment may be challenging. Part of the consultant's task is to recognize these types of interactions and how they impact the client's life.

Furthermore, extrapolating the extent to which certain attributes are strengths or weaknesses may be difficult. One reason for this is that a characteristic may be adaptive in one setting and detrimental in other settings. For example, spontaneity may serve a client well in recreational activities, whereas it may interfere with a job that requires a more serious, calculating approach. In addition, strengths may become weaknesses when they are overused or used inappropriately. Therefore, although a client may have a great sense of humor, that humor may be inappropriate at times. Appropriate categorization of the interactions between an individual and his or her environment can be difficult, but it is useful for accurate case conceptualization and treatment planning.

Integrating Hope in the Assessment Process

In addition to making the concerted effort to examine a client's strengths and environment, incorporating hope theory (Snyder, 1994) in assessment may also be beneficial. Hope theory consists of three components:

- *Goal-directed thinking* is the cornerstone of hope theory. Goals are the mental targets of an individual's purposeful efforts. People are predominantly goal-oriented beings.

- *Pathways thinking* is the perceived capacity to produce routes to desired goals.

- *Agency* is the motivation to use those routes under both normal and impeded circumstances.

In the context of the four-corner matrix, there are two reasons to use hope as an additional variable in the assessment processes. First, hope theory offers a useful model for understanding people. By asking about goals, pathways and agency in the context of each of the four aspects of our clients' lives, we are gaining a comprehensive yet concise overview of the crucial variables in a client's life. Thus, hope theory offers a framework for more balanced data gathering and case formulation.

A second reason for using hope theory in interviewing and assessment is that it gives the consultant insight into assessing the exact variables (pathways and agency thoughts pertaining to the client's goals) that subsequently will play important roles in the treatment process. Hope provides a common factor that underlies the workings of all interventions (Frank, 1968). In summary, the concepts of goals, pathways and agency of hope theory enable the consultant to gather specific details about a client in the context of the four-corner matrix. The resulting assessment will contain information on the very elements that will guide the client's success, regardless of the recommendations that he or she is given. Client conceptualization should guide subsequent interventions, and the use of goals, pathways and agency of hope theory within the four-corner matrix approach facilitates doing so.

Journal of Practical Consulting, Vol. 3 Iss. 2, 2009, pp. 9-13

ISSN 1930-806X, jpc@regent.edu

Advantages of This Approach

The proposed assessment approach offers a multitude of advantages to clients and consultants alike. From the point of view of a client, there are several advantages. First, clients are likely to realize that the consultant is trying to understand the whole person or organization, rather than focusing on the client's problems. Second, clients come to see that they are not being equated with "the problem." Third, this approach is likely to facilitate an alliance of trust and mutuality in the professional relationship. Hence, including strengths may increase a client's hope, which has a robust relationship with having a stronger professional alliance.

This approach to assessment also has advantages for the consultant. First, it provides a more accurate picture regarding the extent of the client's problems and overall level of functioning across situations. Hence, the information gathered provides a better measure of functioning and makes it easier for professionals to construct accurate reports. Second, assessing a person's strengths gives the consultant clues as to client assets that can be tapped to aid in the intervention process. A balanced approach to assessment is likely to uncover client strengths and should be woven into recommendations and interventions and will allow clients to derive maximal benefit from the assessment process. Finally, the bond of mutuality and trust that is fostered between the client and the consultant is likely to make the consultant's job much easier, as the quality of the professional relationship is predictive of intervention success (Martin, Garske & Davis, 2000). As such, it is in the professional's own best interest to use techniques that will nurture this relationship.

Closing Thoughts

Consultants must look at both the strengths and weaknesses in the client as well as in the client's environment. The four-corner matrix approach described here offers a template for comprehensively examining a client. The use of hope theory fits within this balanced perspective. The examination of client goals in each of the four quadrants leads to an interview and derived report that provide ideas about how to intervene with the person as a whole to improve functioning and life satisfaction. Therefore, the evaluation of a client's weaknesses and assets is a highly beneficial method for creating a thorough picture of the client.

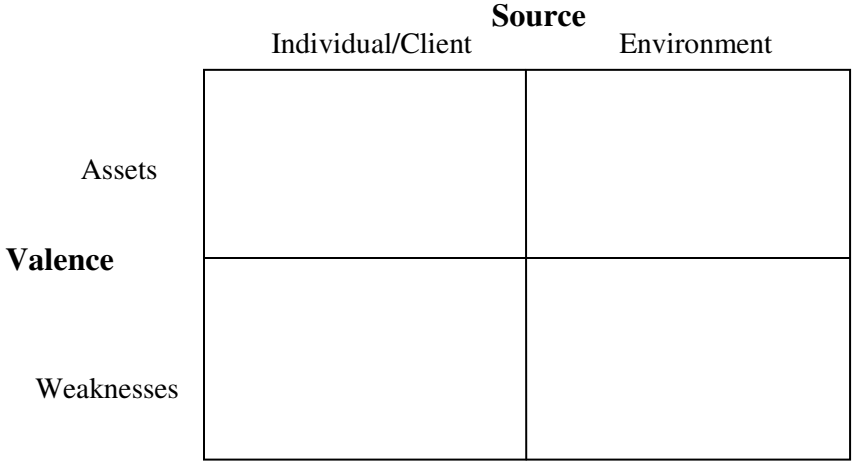

Figure 1. The four-corner matrix for client assessments.

Journal of Practical Consulting, Vol. 3 Iss. 2, 2009, pp. 9-13

ISSN 1930-806X, jpc@regent.edu

About the Author

Carla J. Berg, Ph.D., is a clinical psychologist whose main research interest is enhancing positive coping skills to foster adaptive functioning. She is particularly interested in the young adult population and improving health behaviors. She is currently a postdoctoral fellow in the Department of Medicine at the University of Minnesota.
Email: cjberg@umn.edu

References

Frank, J. D. (1968). The role of hope in psychotherapy. *International Journal of Psychiatry, 5,* 383–395.

Martin, D. J., Garske, J. P., & Davis, M. K. (2000). Relation of the therapeutic alliance with outcome and other variables: A meta-analytic review. *Journal of Consulting andClinical Psychology, 68*, 438– 450.

Snyder, C. R. (1994). *The psychology of hope: You can get there from here*. New York: Free Press.

Wright, B. A. (1991). Labeling: The need for greater person-environment individuation. In C. R. Snyder & D. R. Forsyth (Eds.), *Handbook of social and clinical psychology: The health perspective* (pp. 469– 487). New York: Pergamon Press.

Wright, B. A., & Lopez, S. J. (2002). Widening the diagnostic focus: A case for including human strengths and environmental resources. In C. R. Snyder & S. J. Lopez (Eds.), *Handbook of positive psychology* (pp. 26– 44). New York: Oxford University Press.

Journal of Practical Consulting, Vol. 3 Iss. 2, 2009, pp. 9-13

ISSN 1930-806X, jpc@regent.edu

JOURNAL of PRACTICAL CONSULTING

If You Cannot Solve The Problem, Change It! Techniques For Effective Problem Design

Jeff Hicks
University of Twente, The Netherlands and University of Texas, Dallas

and

Padmakumar Nair
University of Texas, Dallas

Clients often turn to consultants for assistance with problems that are complex or seemingly unsolvable. In our experience, however, we find that in many cases, much of the difficulty comes from the way the problems are framed. In this article, we offer some specific techniques for not just *finding* problems, but for proactively *designing* them to be more actionable and solvable in the first place. We demonstrate the application of these techniques with a case study.

What is your approach when you or the client team you are working with find yourselves stuck on a particularly complex or difficult problem? Many respond by gathering more data, doing more analyses and digging ever-deeper to find a solution. In our consulting experience, however, once a team has become stuck, continued number crunching and brute force analysis are certain to lead to fatigue, but seldom to actionable answers. Instead, we consistently see that breakthroughs come when team members take a step back and re-define or re-frame the problem into one that can be more effectively addressed by their skills, resources and aspirations. Project teams, nevertheless, often treat the nature of the problem as a given, as being beyond their control, and thereby forego their opportunity to proactively design a problem that is more amenable to resolution. In this paper, we offer some specific techniques for not just finding problems, but for designing them to be more actionable and solvable in the first place. These techniques include problem framing, the idea of "affordances" and sensemaking, all of which are enabled by a certain "thought style" that is more concerned with being useful than with being right. We demonstrate their application in practice, drawing from our consulting experience with client teams in North America, Western Europe and across Asia, and representing a number of different industries. We begin with an example of problem framing during a recent client

Journal of Practical Consulting, Vol. 3 Iss. 2, 2009, pp. 14-21

ISSN 1930-806X, jpc@regent.edu

engagement with the Japan operations of a global telecommunications provider we will refer to as ClearCom.

Problem Framing at ClearCom Japan

With an annual turnover of more than US$150 billion, Japan's telecom market is one of the world's largest and most competitive. To improve their financial performance, ClearCom's senior management wanted to reduce the cost of so-called "indirect" sales, which referred to sales of ClearCom products made by independently-owned retail stores. Due to the fact that independent retailers receive commissions, indirect sales are more costly than direct sales, which are sales made by ClearCom-owned retail stores or internet sales. While a shift toward direct sales promised to improve profitability, it also meant diverting sales away from independent retailers. A few of the smaller, independent stores, so-called "mom and pop" stores, had already threatened to discontinue ClearCom products if direct sales efforts were increased. For months, the ClearCom management team had been experimenting unsuccessfully with numerous ratios of direct-to-indirect sales, trying to find a balance between commission savings on one hand versus potential lost revenue from disgruntled retailers on the other. Finally, exasperated over their inconclusive deliberations, ClearCom asked our firm to assist them in answering the question: "What is the optimal ratio of direct to indirect sales?"

After reviewing the analyses that had already been completed, we reported to ClearCom management that, while the rationale behind their question was understandable, we could not answer it with a sufficient degree of confidence. Was the optimal ratio 30-70 or perhaps 40-60? Whatever ratio we might derive, an equally strong case could be built in support of another. In our view, the question as posed was essentially unanswerable. As is often the case when teams find themselves stuck, however, a kind of myopia has already set in that prevents them from seeing the problem in any other way. If and when alternatives do emerge, voicing them may be discouraged because so much has already been invested along a previous line of reasoning (see also Staw, 1987). Attention often becomes fixated on one or two seemingly immovable constraints, in this case channel conflict, back to which all analyses seem to inevitably lead.

In an attempt to break the impasse, we initiated a series of discussions, trying to identify any underlying assumptions and ultimately to re-frame the problem into a more productive one. From these discussions, it became apparent that the biggest threat for ClearCom was not necessarily the loss of revenue from the mom and pop stores, which was but a fraction of the much larger "big box" retailers, but rather the potential loss of valuable customer information. While the larger retailers concentrated on high-volume sales, the mom and pop stores had a slower pace, which allowed for more personalized service and more knowledgeable sales staff. As a result, they were the richest source of information about customers' preferences, likes and dislikes. It also became clear that each of the retail formats would require a very different approach. Of course this was known before, but had been obscured by the framing of the problem as "direct versus indirect," which resulted in combining two very different formats into a single category of "indirect retailers." The categories of direct and indirect made sense for doing financial analyses, but were less useful when format-specific plans became necessary. The team then broadened their focus to consider the non-financial aspects of channel performance as well, such as customer insights, and now considered the problem to be: "How can we maximize the total performance, both financial and non-financial, of the retail channel?"

Journal of Practical Consulting, Vol. 3 Iss. 2, 2009, pp. 14-21

ISSN 1930-806X, jpc@regent.edu

With this re-framing, the forward momentum of the project improved significantly, as plans and strategies appropriately tailored for each retail format began to emerge. The mom and pop stores, for example, were positioned as "customer listening posts," and ClearCom began discussions with store owners about new initiatives and technology to support them in this role. Commissions were left unchanged. For the big box retailers, however, ClearCom designed a new multi-tiered commission structure to reward the highest volume retailers, but lower the total commission paid by ClearCom. Finally, ClearCom also began developing, in consultation with all the retailers, a list of locations for new ClearCom-owned stores that, by agreement, would be built outside the areas served by the existing retailers. In summary, an "either-or" trade-off between lower commissions and disgruntled retailers had effectively been re-framed. ClearCom was able to achieve both lower commissions and the support of retailers, in addition to a better understanding of customer preferences.

From "Being Right" to "Being Useful"

There are important differences between more traditional problem solving methods and what we are proposing (Table 1). This alternative approach involves a certain thought style that is more concerned with being "useful," according to the project team and key stakeholders, than with being "right," according to an external reference or standard. In the ClearCom case, the framing of the problem as direct vs. indirect was not wrong, but neither was it useful nor actionable.

Another difference with the traditional approach concerns the locus and nature of the problem itself. In a traditional approach, problems are thought to be "out there," beyond our control. A primary task of the team, therefore, is to find the problem and to define it. Analyses strive for problem definitions that are *accurate*. The result is a highly accurate description of a particular problem that is not fully actionable by that particular team. In an alternative approach, a problem, or better yet, that which gets treated as problematic is to some degree a matter of choice or design. That choice can be guided by analyses, but also according to which view is likely to be most *useful* in moving the team forward.

In a traditional approach, a "root cause analysis" seeks to find the real problem. As most of us may have experienced, however, problems differ according to the perspective from which they are viewed. Marketing believes product prices are too high, while finance believes they are too low. Which view is right? What is the real problem? Perhaps, as is often the case, they are both real and right. Similarly, a gap analysis seeks to clarify the gap between the capabilities of the team and what is considered to be necessary for addressing the problem that is out there. A gap analysis, however, is also based on a number of assumptions: that the problem will "hold still" while we implement; that resources and expertise will perform as expected, when expected; and more importantly, that project outcomes are predictable and controllable, such that we can know beforehand specifically which resources and expertise we are going to need. However, as experienced consultants and project managers know all too well, projects rarely move in a linear, predictable manner, but unfold and emerge often in unexpected ways, calling for unique expertise. If we will only allow them to, project heroes can often come from unlikely places.

In summary, our skill in choosing and designing problems is directly related to the success we have in solving them. In fact, one of the most important and frequently occurring factors negatively affecting team performance is the teams' underestimation of the opportunity for proactively designing problems to be actionable in the first place. In the next section, we

ISSN 1930-806X, jpc@regent.edu

introduce additional techniques for designing problems that are actionable and that take better advantage of the creativity and innovative abilities of all project team members.

Table 1
Being right versus being useful: two approaches to problem solving

		Problem Solving Approach	
		Being Right	**Being Useful**
Characteristics of Approach	Assumed nature or treatment of "a problem"	Exists "out there" and is independent of the perspective from which the team views it	Product of project team's design, according to team's chosen interpretation
	Quality indicator for problem definition/design	Accuracy	Usefulness, actionability
	Primary team activity	Finding, analyzing	Designing
	Number of possible problem definitions/design	Single	Multiple
	Relation between problem definition/design	Separate	Connected, reciprocally influencing
	Relation between problem definition/design and team capability	Problem defined intentionally, separate from team capability; gaps filled at outset	Problem designed to maximize team contribution; remaining gaps filled as necessary

Affordance

Emerging from the fields of psychology and industrial design, an affordance is simply an opportunity for action (Gibson, 1977; Greeno, 1994). A river, for example, affords an opportunity to swim. That same river, however, also affords an opportunity for moving cargo downstream. By viewing familiar objects or situations in new and different ways, new and different opportunities for action are afforded to us. In project environments, when changes occur and our project plans no longer help us move forward, we are afforded an opportunity to ask: "Where can we go from here? What opportunities does our current situation afford?" While the next steps in a project plan are pre-determined, the affordances of any situation are limitless. Instead of looking down at the project plan, we can look around. Instead of asking, "What is next?" we can ask, "What's possible?" In the ClearCom case, the mom and pop stores were

ISSN 1930-806X, jpc@regent.edu

initially seen as the source of channel conflict. After discussion and reframing, however, these very same stores afforded a unique opportunity for learning more about customer preferences.

Sensemaking

Based largely on the work of Karl Weick (1995), sensemaking is simply making sense of any activity or situation. Sensemaking occurs when, for example, during our morning commute the car in front of our own suddenly brakes and we must quickly make sense of what is happening in order to avoid a collision. In his studies of accident investigations, Weick demonstrates how failure to make sense of an unfolding situation can have disastrous consequences: an entire fire fighting crew was killed in a mountainous region of the US state of Montana after failing to pick up on several signals that the "routine" blaze they were battling was anything but routine (1993); two jetliners collided on a runway in the Canary Islands after crew and ground control personnel failed to make sense of the dangerous situation developing, despite information and a number of warning signals that were fully available to them (1990).

Fortunately, the situations faced by most project teams are rarely life-threatening, but the lessons these examples provide are still quite applicable. Sensemaking reminds us of the importance of being attentive to and making sense of the signals we receive, and in particular those we do not understand. In the ClearCom case, for example, the difficulty the team experienced with their original framing of the problem was a clear signal that the way they were making sense of the situation was problematic. Questioning the usefulness of the framing earlier in the project might have avoided some of the delay in getting started in a more productive direction. Other examples of signals indicating that the way we are making sense of a particular situation might be problematic include: a small piece of information that, while seemingly inconsequential, directly contradicts our conclusions or findings; or even the nagging feeling of an experienced executive that the temporary downturn in contract signings may not be so temporary. In our experience, these are just the kind of weak signals we often decide to ignore, usually because if we accept them and the implications they bring, they threaten to turn our current conclusions upside down. However, like small cracks in a windshield, they are also the kind of signals that we ignore to our peril, as they often grow larger if left unattended. Finally, and more positively, they are often signals of opportunity for creativity and innovation, if we can fend off time and budget pressures long enough to follow-up on them. Every unexpected event, positive or negative, is an opportunity for us to ask, "Why?" Key insights can be gained when, instead of treating something as "odd," we ask ourselves: "In what situation, and under what circumstances would this seemingly odd event make perfect sense?"

Creativity Killers

In this final section of the paper, we explain four commonly observed practices that lessen the effectiveness of these techniques for designing actionable problems. We refer to them collectively as "creativity killers."

Premature Framing

Effective framing can lend actionability to the problems we design. However, time and other pressures on the project team often result in premature framing of the problem. Pressure

ISSN 1930-806X, jpc@regent.edu

placed on the consultant to play the role of the expert and to have the answer(s) also lead to premature framing. This negatively affects not only actionability, but also the opportunities for innovation and creativity. In our experience, when teams settle on a particular framing of a problem, there is a general underestimation of the number of assumptions and decisions, explicit or otherwise, that have already been made; and an underestimation of the number of possibilities that have already been excluded from the possible solution set. Many of us have heard the expression, "when the only tool you have is a hammer, all the problems look like nails." This expression works the other way around as well: if you have already decided that the problem is a nail, chances are the only solution you are going to take notice of is the one that looks like a hammer! One way to evaluate whether a given problem may have been prematurely settled upon is to simply poll the members of the project team as to what the next steps are to address the problem. In our experience, the greater the variation in the responses, the greater the likelihood that the problem may have been hastily settled upon and that a review of the current framing might be in order.

Bullet Points

Because of email overload, multi-tasking and time pressure in general, we are often encouraged to deliver "clear" and concise communications and presentations, using bullet points and discrete, non-overlapping "chunks" of information. These techniques may be useful, but during problem design, they often result in a loss of the detail and nuance that help make problems locally-meaningful and actionable. The point may sound trivial, but we often see non-trivial improvements in problem design when we ask project teams to simply expand their bullet-point problem descriptions into full sentences or even paragraphs. In the ClearCom case, for example, the term "channel conflict" had become over-used and taken for granted, a kind of "black box." It was only after our discussion and unpacking of the assumptions within this phrase that the team began to make progress. Unnecessary detail can always, if necessary, be trimmed away later, after fuller discussion and description. Better yet, full problem definitions can later be distilled into definitions that are shorter, but rich with meaning for the project team. Often this distilled language, as discussed in the next section, can take the form of team-specific or project-specific jargon.

Unnecessary Avoidance of Slang and Jargon

Most of us, at one time or another, have probably been advised to avoid the use of slang or jargon in our own writing. While their over-use can indeed be problematic (and annoying) slang or jargon can also be a kind of non-ambiguous shorthand for those on the team. For example, we once worked with a chemical manufacturer who served a particular market segment that, for a number of reasons, was quite difficult to define. In conversation, the market segment was often described as being "funky." Often such words are excised from the official project documentation, to make it appear more rigorous, scientific or smart. Used appropriately, however, jargon can capture and communicate the locally-meaningful essence of even complex issues. At the client's insistence, the word funky remained in our final report.

Journal of Practical Consulting, Vol. 3 Iss. 2, 2009, pp. 14-21

ISSN 1930-806X, jpc@regent.edu

Conclusion

In this article we have presented techniques for an alternative approach to problem solving in organizational contexts, for use by consultants and project teams who find themselves stuck on a particularly difficult problem and without a clear path forward. This approach has been quite successful for us in practice, but no doubt some readers will be sceptical of it. For them, changing the problem will always be simply another name for avoiding the problem and one's responsibility for solving it. To this, we would respond that these techniques should be considered a supplement to, rather than as a replacement for, more traditional techniques.

Others may wonder how these techniques can be used, when the wider group of project stakeholders is still expecting to see more traditional analyses and clear rationale in support of team decisions. Meeting the reporting expectations of such stakeholders does not preclude the use of these techniques to arrive at initial decisions (that are often more innovative and creative), which can then be validated, and reported on, using more traditional analyses. For those who object to what they see as post-hoc reasoning, we propose this is not dissimilar to the way many project decisions are currently being made anyway!

A more difficult constraint is often simply finding the time, and courage, amidst pressure-filled project environments to step back periodically and reflect on the problem(s) you are trying to solve. We are surprised at how often project teams do not have good, clear answers to questions like: “Let us assume for the moment we have the answer to the problem you are now working on, now what? What is next?” In our experience, periodic discussions on the problem(s) we are trying to solve give a very high return on time invested, by ensuring that the project team stays fully engaged with rich, actionable problem designs. Even a couple of hours of in-depth, honest and open-ended discussion, at the beginning and periodically throughout the project, can have a significant positive impact.

Summary of key points

- Do not just find problems, design them in your favor to begin with. In other words, if you cannot solve the problem, change the problem you are solving.
- These techniques are supplements to, not replacements for, more traditional problem solving methods.
- Ask not only, “What's next?” but also, “What's possible?”
- For unexpected events or results, ask yourselves: “In what circumstances would these unexpected events/results make perfect sense?”
- Time spent reflecting on the problem you are solving is time well spent.

Finally, it is our belief that use of these techniques can make the task of problem solving more personally fulfilling, through closer alignment between the work itself and the hopes, desires and capabilities of project team members.

Journal of Practical Consulting, Vol. 3 Iss. 2, 2009, pp. 14-21

ISSN 1930-806X, jpc@regent.edu

About the Authors

Jeff Hicks is currently a lecturer at the School of Management and Governance, University of Twente, in the Netherlands; executive in residence at the University of Texas at Dallas; and founder of Constructive Consulting, an independent business consultancy. Before entering academia, Jeff spent 12 years in management consulting, doing organizational change and strategy work for clients in the U.S. and across Asia. The current focus of his research and practice is on the development of alternative approaches to organizational change and consulting specifically designed for dynamic and continuously changing organizational environments.
Email: j.n.hicks@utwente.nl

Dr. Padmakumar Nair is currently academic director at the Leadership Center, University of Texas at Dallas. His research and teaching interests include organizational performance, leadership, entrepreneurship and organizational change and consulting. He has taught in the United States, Japan, China, India, Korea and in the Netherlands. Dr. Nair holds a Ph.D. from the University of Twente, the Netherlands, and a Dr. Eng. from the University of Tokyo. He has published more than 40 papers in internationally recognized, peer-reviewed journals and has also been invited to speak at several international venues.
Email: padmakumar.nair@utdallas.edu

References

Gibson, J. J. (1977). The theory of affordances. In R. Shaw, and J. Bransford (Eds.), *Perceiving, Acting, and Knowing* (pp. 67-82). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.

Greeno, J. (1994). Gibson's affordances. *Psychological Review, 101*(2): 336-342.

Staw, B. M. (1987). Knowing when to pull the plug. *Harvard Business Review, 65*(2): 68-74.

Weick, K. E. (1990). The vulnerable system: An analysis of the Tenerife air disaster. *Journal of Management*, *16*, 571-593.

Weick, K. E. (1993). The collapse of sensemaking in organizations: The Mann Gulch disaster. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, *38*, 628-652.

Weick, K. E. (1995). *Sensemaking in organizations*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.

ISSN 1930-806X, jpc@regent.edu