



Hiring the Wrong Consultant As A Defense Against Real Change

by Ben Dattner

Ben Dattner reminds us how "psychological" and sometimes "unconscious" organization dynamics can be, and how hiring a consultant isn't always what it appears to be! A few brief examples highlight how consulting work can sometimes miss the mark and even help the organization to avoid real issues and real change.

Organizations, like individuals, are ambivalent about change. Both inside and outside of organizations, people's preferences alternate between the desire to maintain stability and the desire to change in order to adapt to changing circumstances. Real change, while often necessary, is always difficult and anxiety producing, both for individuals and for organizations. Change and growth are much easier to talk about than to achieve.

Ambivalence about change may cause organizations to choose a consultant or a consulting firm who may go through the motions of helping the organization to change, but who, after the process is over, will leave the organization much as it was before. Fearing the pain of real change, the organization's members may choose a placebo—the wrong consultant. Consultants might be "wrong" because they have the wrong area of expertise, the wrong attributes, or the wrong approach.

Consultants with the wrong area of expertise

One way that organizations unknowingly safeguard the status quo is by hiring expert consultants who provide answers, rather than process consultants who can help the organization ask and answer its own questions. While expert consultants can be useful in solving certain kinds of organizational problems, they are often hired to "fix" something when it is the people in the organization that need to do the "fixing".

For example, a company that was technology-driven decided that it needed to become market-driven. To achieve this goal, the company hired a group of marketing consultants to conduct a

customer segmentation analysis. Unfortunately, these consultants had neither the expertise nor the mandate to address the underlying reasons why the company was not market-driven—the financial incentives and deeply rooted structural, procedural, and cultural factors which all served to maintain an emphasis on technical innovation rather than a focus on customers. Not surprisingly, without examining the underlying organizational factors, the company did not change despite a compelling analysis of customer segments.

Consultants with the wrong attributes

Some organizations chose consultants who cannot really be expected to catalyze change given their personal attributes-- consultants who themselves need some sort of assistance, who make themselves the center of attention, or who try to join the organization and befriend its members. These personal styles may provide welcome diversions for the client, but serve to take attention away from the difficult tasks of change.

For example, a company that wanted to foster closer collaboration between its estranged marketing and R & D divisions chose a consultant who was personable and entertaining. However, the consultant's humor and levity also meant that he took no steps to try to address the very serious issue that was at the root of the inter-group conflict-- a personal feud between the marketing and R & D directors who had once been friends. The consultant did not facilitate or even suggest reconciliation, and the conflict between the two directors and their respective divisions grew increasingly worse, until one of the directors quit, at enormous cost to the organization.

Consultants with the wrong approach

Organizations can also select consultants who create the appearance of change without creating the substance of change. One reason consultants might do this is by being unable or unwilling to address the root causes of the client's "presenting problem." For example, a consultant was called in to help a company achieve "more open communication" at an offsite retreat. In order to open up communication, the consultant created an exercise where each department had to stand up and be subject to the public criticism of every other department. As the attendees became visibly anxious, the consultant assured them that they were "going there"—to a new place of openness and candor.

The unspoken deal between the consultant and the organization was that the consultant would make everyone interpret their own anxiety as an indicator that progress was being made, but would avoid the even worse anxiety of a substantive dialogue. Unfortunately, although real organizational change necessitates some anxiety, not all anxiety indicates that real organizational change is occurring. The presence of side effects does not turn a placebo into medicine.

Conclusion

There is a short-term cost of real change for organizations in time, effort, energy, money and stress, which may not pay off in the long term. Therefore, in the short term, a ritualized type of change, might produce better results, with fewer costs and risks, than a realistic and painful examination of the real issues. In other words, a placebo might seem better in the short term than real medicine that can have unpleasant side effects. However, placebos do not usually work in the long term and organizations have to eventually confront reality. Placebos can even be harmful insofar as they delay diagnosis of symptoms and real treatment. Likewise, hiring the "wrong" consultant can be worse than hiring no consultant at all if doing so delays the process by which organizations realize that what has succeeded in the past will not succeed in the future.

In conclusion, the anxiety of potential change causes some organizations to hire the "wrong" consultant who may offer short-term relief at the expense of long-term progress. However, other organizations are willing to examine their fundamental assumptions, culture, structure and processes, and are able to candidly and openly explore their strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. But even picking the "right" consultant is no guarantee that a change effort will be successful. An organization's ambivalence can prevent progress at any stage of the change process, and the organization and the consultant must be constantly vigilant not to succumb to the temptation to reduce anxiety instead of asking tough questions and working together to bring about real change.

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