Failure in Consulting: Consultation Cannot Fail!

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In Lieu of an Introduction: Anticipation of the Bottom Line

Consultation is a business of contradictions and flux. Consultation is relationship work. There is no right or wrong here. We are not dealing with logical causality, we are dealing with ambivalence, dilemma, paradox, or aporia. Contradictions need to be kept in balance. They are 'trapped' in a continuous process and cannot be 'resolved' by opting for one side of the contradiction and thus rejecting the other. We meet with scenarios of failure whenever we try to dissolve this ambivalence through one-sided decisions.

In all stages of consulting, the consultant faces necessary contradictions that logic cannot resolve. Diverse interests may be contained in the person of the consultant, the relationship with the client, the organizational context and last but not least in an ambivalent client/consultant relationship. The consultation process is shaped by conflicting needs, interests and issues, all of which are equally valid and can only be handled in conjunction, not in isolation.

Dependency and independence (freedom of choice), distance and closeness, guidance and uncertain, diffuse situations, confusion and security, setting, structure and open-endedness, approach, curiosity and appropriate depth, consultations that neutralize and obstruct one another.

In view of the contradictions consultants and clients have to face in a consulting process, we might very well pose the question whether it is at all possible for consultation to fail? If aporetically speaking there is no 'right' or 'wrong', but only differing yet justified interests which are 'accommodated' in a consulting process and are supposed to eventually lead to a solution, consultation cannot fail.

There will be both good and bad ends to a consultation, better and less good results. But the consultation was successful even when consultants think they have

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failed because a client broke off the consultation. A decision was made in the client system, there was some reflection about whether the consultation was promising and satisfactory, or whether it was a disappointment. A process of communication was set off, and in the course of this process a decision was arrived at by reflecting one's situation. Surely that is one of the goals of successful process consulting! So the consultation was successful despite having failed.

After a successful consultation, the consultants have made themselves superfluous. They are no longer needed. It is the task of consultants to recognize, support and develop their clients' strengths and potential. Or, to adapt an old saying: *"Behind every great manager there is a great consultant."* Once I have made my clients 'potent', I am superfluous, I must let the clients go (who are no clients anymore). This 'ability to let go' does not come easy to consultants. Consultants need a healthy measure of confidence, a good perception of their own person and a certain talent in self-presentation if they want to be recognized and respected by potential clients. They must make their clients feel that they, the clients, are in good hands with me, the consultant, and that I will not fall over at the first sign of headwind. It is not at all easy for such characters to accept their expendability in spite of a successful consultation. Consultants need to be able to bow out gracefully! And just so that this quality will not carry over into their private lives, every now and then consultants need a bit of consultation, too.

A certain measure of self-referentiality is thus part of the basic professional make-up. Consultants should have a good knowledge of their own needs and standards and be able to control them—which can only be done by way of continuous self-reflection. In order to keep oneself at a proper distance in a consultation and wholly concentrate on the clients and their needs, it is helpful to know one's weak points: What makes me seducible, what are my personal objectives (or even missions), when do I build up resistance?

Case Study

A colleague whom I highly respect and I collaborated on a consulting workshop which we brought to a successful conclusion—successful, that is, from our perspective. The client system might be graded a 'difficult' one.

There was a lot of resistance which mostly resulted from the clients' fears of one another. The clients' mode of resistance was 'taking refuge in humour'. There was a lot of wisecracking and laughter, every contribution turned into a joke, they made fun of each other. We as consultants joined in the laughter, it was impossible not to. However, there came a point when the laughter lost its hilarity and the jokes began missing their mark. In the end, we succeeded in working on the client system's challenging problems with a certain earnestness. We, the consultants, considered that a great success and thought we did really well. In the final session at the end of the last day of the workshop, we were served rather bland and neutral comments. We tried not to show our disappointment, because we had expected at least a little praise after all that hard work. Even after a summing-up talk over lunch we weren't able to let go of the consultation process and could not say our

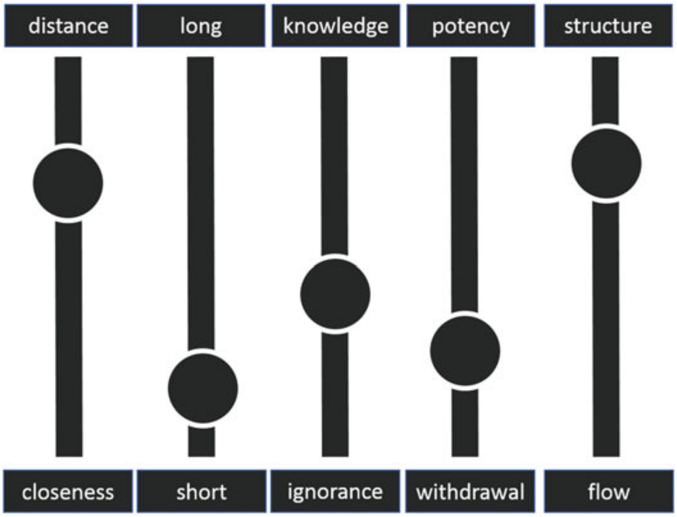

Fig. 1 Contradictions in consulting, which must be balanced

good-byes after the meal, as we usually do. It took a further three hours before we could leave. Not only did we consider the comments inappropriate—we were piqued, our expectations and our need for appreciation had been disappointed.

If whoever uses the term ‘consulting’ in an everyday conversation one can be sure that the other person knows exactly what you are talking about. Consulting is common knowledge. Almost everyone has experienced consulting as a friend, as an employee or as a client. Academically speaking, however, the term consulting cannot be explicitly defined. Especially, if one tries to find the one and only method how to conduct a consulting process no unambiguous assignment will be found. Rather, the theoretical as well as methodical ‘lining’ of consulting refers to different mindsets and theories. The consequences are that in this domain we are dealing with contradictions rather that logical reasoning in an ‘either—or’ mode. These contradictions have to be balanced according to the subject. Hence, in consulting the client—consultant relationship is in permanent flow smoothly sliding between two poles in an ‘as well as’ mode (see Fig. 1).

In the following article, I would like to go into some of the aporia, dilemmas, paradoxes and antitheses that govern consultation, naming and discussing these contradictions.

Customers and/or Clients: The Inversion of Dependency

Consultation starts with a leap of faith in a relationship that is going be formed during the consultation process—or perhaps not. Consultation relationships are indeed shifting asymmetrical relationships whose balance must be created in the course of the consultation process. In accepting the consultation situation, clients surrender their autonomy. They are no longer solely responsible for their problem but rather delegate responsibility to the consultation. Many a client would indeed much prefer the consultants to appropriate and solve their problem and release them from the consultation problem-free. But that kind of consultation success does not come without side effects.

The relationship between consultants and clients is characterized by a dependency inversion. At first, while soliciting, consultants are dependent on the client system. Before a consultation agreement with the client system has been signed, that is to say without an official assignment, the client is a customer to me.

In such acquisition phases, consultants are tenderers. As tenderers, the consultants are dependent on their potential clients. Once the contract has been signed, customers become clients. The dependency relation is now inversed: The new client puts himself and his problem at the mercy of their consultant, hoping that he or she has made the right choice. At the same time, clients and consultants are supposed to meet at eye level. How is that supposed to work?[1]

A participatory working bond between clients and consultants thus moves in a dialectic opposition of liberty/independence and loss of liberty/dependency.

And, to make matters even more complicated, the balance changes in the move from customer to client. Autonomy, if defined as self-government or self-regulation, is then a state only created through managing these reciprocal dependencies by way of the consultation process.

So, my services have been requested and I have agreed, I have accepted the offer. There are certain 'dangers' lurking even in this decision. I know that I have been given the assignment, but I do not know how it is going to be formed. Maybe I have misjudged the assignment, maybe I have let myself be seduced by the clients or by an exciting, challenging subject. Maybe my vanity was tickled by the clients' prominence and I envisioned further attractive and profitable assignments following in the wake of this one. In the actual consultation, the assignment then turned out to have much wider dimensions and to reach much further into the organization than I had assumed at first. (Without my back-up network of colleagues, I would have been well and truly stranded.)

One might also suspect a certain sloppiness in the contracting meetings, because a more intense investment in the process might have saved me from surprises.

[1]The dependency inversion addressed here is discussed at greater detail in Lackner (2013).

Success and/or Failure: Who Decides the Outcome?

In consultation, there is no clear distinction between success and failure. Much is decided by the viewer's perspective. A consultation that has failed in the clients' view may very well be seen as successful from the consultants' perspective. By the same token, a consultation that has failed in the consultants' view may very well have supplied the clients with fruitful impulses.

This is because any kind of contact with the consultants already constitutes an intervention in the system—even contacts that have not yet taken place but have merely been announced. Such an announcement will inevitably lead to conversation among affected employees and thus at least to thinking processes and a more or less animated discussion of these thoughts. One might say that the mere words 'consultation', 'supervision' or 'coaching' constitute an intervention whose effect remains unknown for now.

Any beginning from a set of beginnings involves the risk of an indefinite number of possible mistakes. But as a consultant, I can never be sure that a supposed mistake (in my view) is not perceived as helpful intervention by the client, or vice versa. Thus, a brilliant (in my view) intervention might meet with incomprehension, rejection, or resistance in the client system. Or, a third possibility: A remark not intended as an intervention resonates with the client system in an unpredictable way that benefits the consultation process.

Methodology and Flow: Structuring Laissez-Faire

Methodological Handles

Consultants usually bring a plan and a repertoire of methodologies and standard interventions to their work. Such things are learnt in various relevant courses of training and further education. My bookshelf is filled with methodological instruction, diagnostic tools and bullet-pointed how-to lists. I need all these props of consultancy that I have learnt and collected, they provide me with handles in unfamiliar situations with unfamiliar people in unfamiliar settings. And yet it is this exact unfamiliar situation that demands more of me than merely applying methodologies I have learnt. Each consultation is unique, each client is unique, each consultant is unique. An individual, creative, situation-adapted intervention will not necessarily correspond to the clean, professional and methodological procedures laid out in textbooks. So we have techniques, methods, tools and skills for consultation on the one hand. We use these as handles for professional action in consulting. At the same time, these handles obstruct professional action if they serve to obscure our view of the history of the client/consultant relationship. If I let go too much, I lose my grip. If I hold on too hard, I lose contact with my counterpart. The more routine and experience I acquire, i.e. the more professional I become, the less need will I have of my handles: In the textbook sense, I am turning non-professional.

The Order of Space and Time

In consultation, space and time are determined by the setting. A transparent and structured process conveys a feeling of security in an uncertain subject on unknown terrain. Keeping up this kind of frame allows for appropriate depth in the intervention, for just the right degree of irritation to jolt the system out of its own logic without making it fall apart. For all participants, consultations are situations beyond 'normal' routine or procedure.

And since nobody knows what the exact outcome is going to be, the situation is diffuse. Diffuse situations are frightening, but also offer the pleasurable sensation of embarking on an adventure. Between these poles of fear and pleasure (Balint, 1972) lies the possibility of change and development. Too much fear will block things, too much pleasure will make things stray too far from reality.

Free-Floating

My greatest successes in consulting came about when we managed to integrate both sides of the contradiction: To experience a 'consultation flow' within the boundaries of a set framework. Flow describes a side of consulting that is hardly ever written about, which cannot be measured and is not compatible with conventional academic paradigms. This is the down side of a systematically structured profession: The 'incidental music', the uniqueness of a consultation process is irreproducible. The 'vibrations' in a consulting process, the fascination, cannot really be put in words and set down in statistics. There are no key phrases, maxims or mnemonics for this phenomenon. These are transitory moments in which we may be "senselessly happy" (Bischofberger, 2010). Many of these inexpressible phenomena that cannot be described in academic language are reflected outside of standardized and recognized consulting practice, such as in a philosophical talk, a philosophical practice.

A former Olympic champion in dressage riding whom I was allowed to interview about her victories and her recipes for success, described this flow as follows[2]:

"In the top segment among the last ten percent of the best, there is hardly any difference in technical and methodological achievement. To put it another way, the top ten all have the technique down pat. In dressage, besides other relevant factors, the relationship of rider and horse is crucial. How well you are synchronized and attuned to each other. The crucial element for victory is a moment—my interviewee called it a sensation—when 'everything clicks'. One cannot describe the why and wherefore, because it is just a sensation. It is not possible to train for a repeat of this sensation. Any such attempt will block the sensation. Much better to employ practices of surrender, of trusting in the sensation happening again. Relax instead of trying, let go instead of cleaving to technique."

[2]See also Freimuth (2018).

For this, you need the security of being fully proficient in what you do. Anyone who cannot ride will seek in vain for the feeling of perfection and rather strive to at least stay in the saddle. I can only let go of the handles once I do not need them anymore, once I have mastered them.

In 1992, Csikszentmihalyi (in Allmer & Schulz, 1998) gave a name to this phenomenon: He calls it “flow”. These are moments when effort becomes effortless, when everything runs smoothly, when time, space and movement become one. You cannot possibly tell how it was achieved—it just happened. For many people, this is reason enough to strive for this moment of happiness over and over again. In the flow, time is suspended. It allows us to linger in the moment of happiness that we feel when we are wholly focused on something, floating in a state that blanks out all other perceptions and sensations.[3]

In a consultation that goes beyond staying rooted in methodological procedure, clients and consultants sometimes experience that flow. The client-consultant relationship is so finely attuned, so perfectly calibrated, that there is a sense of common experience. Space, setting and structure fade into an insignificant backdrop, time seems to take its own course. At the end of the consulting session, one emerges from a far-off entity back into everyday life—sometimes regretful that time has put a stop to the sensation. These are the happy moments in a consultant’s life. Success that cannot be measured. This cognitive process is assisted by what we call analogue intervention which is aimed at the creativity and emotions of the persons involved.

Distance and Closeness: The Affection Trap

One of the elements of professionalism in a consulting process is to create a balance of closeness and distance between consultants and clients and then ‘cultivate’ that balance. By ‘cultivating’, I mean that I need to take care to bolster whichever side is the weaker one in that balance. Any one-sided tilted position will have a counterproductive effect on the consultation process. Broken down to the relationship level, I believe that the art of consultation consists of letting oneself get involved on the one hand and keeping up a sufficient distance on the other hand not to lose sight of the relationship. I am being quasi authentic, so to speak, and then again I am not. In this sense, consultation tools serve to keep a distance between the people involved so as to avoid their becoming so close in their relationship as to be confluent. The passion of the joint thinking you let happen without actually merging with each other bestows a certain quality on a consultation that no tool could.

Consultants are instruments of their own actions. A consultant’s effect on clients, the reactions they trigger, are a factor of influence in the consultation. Consultants must be conscious of their impact. They are professional figures within in the consultation, but they are also characters in their own right. So, one of the major tasks for consultants is the integration of authenticity and professionalism.

[3]The flow experience addressed here was already discussed in Lackner (2013).

Too Much Distance

With too much distance, I will not be able to connect with the client system. I will not be able to empathize with the clients' emotional aspects. As a consultant, I am a seismograph for various kinds of vibes. Be it the mood, the concern, the tenseness of an individual, the atmosphere of the social structure I am working with as a whole, or the culture of the organization context—as a consultant, I must be able to identify these dispositions. I must also be able to discern whether these dispositions stem from the client system or whether they are in fact mine, with a base in my personal biography. I must know whether I am serving as a soundbox for the clients, or whether my personal past has just taken up with me and is being projected on the clients.

In reverse, clients might also be using me to get rid of their own uncomfortable feelings and awkwardness. They might then project their feelings of inadequacy on myself and attack me. Psychohistory (deMause, 1989) speaks of a 'poison container'; psychodynamic theory speakes of projection. The consultant's maxim should be: Never take things personally. When during my schooling I complained that the clients treated me like a prostitute, one of my 'masters' said *"You may be anything to a client."* And he added *"Consider what it says about the clients when they treat you like that; maybe they are feeling just like you are now."* I then used to picture myself as a mirror in which the clients saw their own reflection.

Too Much Closeness

If one is too close to the client system, the affiliation can obstruct the consulting process. I, the consultant, lose my perspective as an observer—both of myself and of the client system. I run the risk of becoming part of the client system. The temptation is great. Especially when sympathies emerge, when both parties feel they are tuned to the same wavelength, none of the persons involved wants to leave that wave. But this seemingly harmonious accord would be upset immediately should I bring other perspectives into play in my role of consultant, or worse, ask critical questions. With all this confliction I could not be clear anymore and would cause more confusion in my clients than I should. If clients could choose, however, they would much rather work with a consultant who agrees with them, even while knowing it to be the very thing that will not help them. All of a sudden, consultants start feeling responsible for the decisions made in the organization and begin to take an active part in these decision-making processes. That way, a lot of required distance is lost.

Primary Frustration and Secondary Satisfaction

During and immediately after a consultation process, the consultants' need for closeness remains unsatisfied. There is no primary satisfaction of needs. Consultants have to make do with a 'secondary contentment', knowing or sensing that they have done a good job, that they have supported the clients. I refer back to the incident in the aftermath of a difficult workshop with difficult clients I mentioned at the start of this article. We had to put off our departure from the seminar location by almost half a day to 'lick our wounds' because we were unsatisfied with the feedback.

Consultants may be motivated by a primary need to help, narcissistic gratification, gain of knowledge or a desire for applause. If let loose, these needs may harm the consultation process. Clients are then simply a means for gratification purposes, and consultants who are thus unbalanced will hardly have the clients' problems at the centre of their attention. On the other hand, one must admit that it is unthinkable to be a consultant without a certain measure of just these traits. Consultants are people out on a limb who like being at the centre of attention (otherwise, no one would listen to them); their desire to help should only just be great enough to be able to let go after the consultation is over, confident that the clients will now be able to handle the situation on their own. Consultants do not simply make sure their clients are able to work, they make their clients potent. The potency of consultants thus lies in making others, their clients, potent. For this withdrawal from the spotlight (in which they leave the clients to stand and sparkle), consultants need to be conscious of their roles, their functions, and their ego strength.

How Much Longer? How Much Consulting Can One Take?

In his MA thesis, André Schröter (2014) explores how long supervisors stay in organizations. Organizations work with the same supervisors over long periods of time. The average length of supervision relationships lies between 2 and 6 years. Supervisors were found to stay with an organization for periods of up to 14 years. I was surprised myself at the frequency of such long working partnerships.

I, too, have experienced long client relationships in my own consulting practice. In some companies, I worked for several years. There were advantages: The organization and its culture, idiosyncrasies, processes, decision makers—all of this was familiar, I didn't have to ask any questions.

Change was more frequent in the executive personnel than in the consultants—and knowing more about the organization than a newly hired executive indeed supplied the consultants with an advantage. I often asked myself at which point I'd stop being a mere consultant and become part of the company. My vision had become blurred. The carefully adjusted balance of distance and closeness was in danger of being upset. In perfect adherence to Max Pagès' (1974) theory of the development of the joint feelings that are developed and shared in groups, a sense of affiliation with the clients emerged. There was a mutual feeling of sympathy. Thus, I ran the risk of letting myself be drawn too far into the client system and neglect the distance which is necessary in consultation. Also, it became increasingly difficult not to take part in decision processes.

At the same time, the increasing affiliation made the client system depend on my consultation. This gradual process of increasing mutual dependency was further supported by the consultant's economic interest in not giving up a secure source of income voluntarily.

Again, reflexion helped to recognize this process and to find a way out of the consultation in cooperation with the client.

Knowledge and Ignorance: Searching for Information

No consultant will go into a first meeting with clients without some preparation. Information about the clients' field, organization structure, product or services can be found on the web, and will be called up and studied. Sometimes industry experience helps, the consultant already knows his or her stuff. But industry experience can also be obstructive. Knowing an organization's or company's products and structures might suggest that you know everything, and get in the way of the curious gaze for what is special about the clients you are to consult. Again, a balance must be achieved. I cannot keep asking for information in the consultation process—sooner or later the clients will get impatient and question my competence. But if consultants do not ask any questions at all, the other side might read that as a lack of interest. Curiosity is thus a necessary element and a constant companion in the process. Consultants who have lost their curiosity due to experience and routine deprive their clients of important processes of experience and cognition.

Searching for Information: The Curiosity Drive

Seen from a behavioural perspective, curiosity is instinctive behaviour that helped our ancestors to survive (anthropologically speaking, we are set back by 3.5 million years).

Nomadic tribes had to keep exploring their surroundings in order to identify potential dangers in time. Once the relevant information had been ascertained, the curiosity drive was satisfied, and the information-seeking behaviour stopped.

Presumably our ancestors, just like us, would not willingly expose themselves to a dangerous situation. So behavioural science speaks of pre-programmed behaviour, or behavioural disposition. Man is a product of evolution, governed by a distinct system of drives and instincts. At the same time, however, man is also a product of the views, thoughts and conclusions about himself in which he can engage. Human beings may reflect on their dispositions and decide whether to follow them or not.

A well-balanced interplay of drives to be satisfied (drive strength), stimuli (trigger mechanism) and appetence behaviour was intended to maximize the chances of survival (cf. Lorenz, 1978; von Cube, 1997). The law of dual quantification says that a compulsive act—in our consultation scenario, the curiosity drive—is triggered when there is a high drive strength. The organization's need for change is urgent and inevitable. The organization is forced to accept the risk of a change process with an uncertain ending. In this case, a mild stimulus will suffice to trigger the respective behaviour. The organisation will e.g. opt for consultation.

If, on the other hand, there is a strong stimulus (e.g. a change in market conditions, competing suppliers who can market their product more quickly, slumping sales, political decisions resulting in need for action), a low drive strength will suffice (we do not really want any changes in our organization right now, but outer pressures force us to make some).

If there is an imbalance of stimulus strength and drive strength, there can be unintentional learning effects in the organization. If there is neither a strong stimulus nor a strong drive, but the organization keeps staging change after change just because it seems opportune, their sensitivity for organizational acting and operations may become blunted. In my long years as a consultant in financial services companies, I have experienced several waves of IT-supported programmes for risk evaluation and minimization in financial transactions. Decisions about loans were taken out of the employees' hands. Reactions were ambivalent. On the one hand, the IT system offered security. The employees did not have to make any effort or take on personal responsibility in deciding about a loan. On the other hand, they felt degraded in their expertise. They were robbed of the pleasure of getting their teeth into a case and employ their knowledge and experience to contribute to the solution. An exciting challenge turned into boring routine. This constellation entails the danger of a certain blunting, of becoming used to risk.

Another finding of behavioural science which is directly linked to the law of dual quantification is about what we call appetence behaviour. This behaviour is marked by actively looking for trigger stimuli once the drive strength rises (i.e. not waiting around until the horse has bolted). The important thing is that appetence behaviour is associated with effort. Consequently, searching for information and a need for risk minimization and orientation will be right at the top of the agenda in a consultation process.

Applying this regularity to consultation processes leads to certain consultant attitudes. Clients need to be aware of their problems to a certain extent and must accept their need for consultation. The problem or topic addressed in the consultation should be relevant for the organization. (I mention this because clients sometimes do not approach us with the actual problem, but rather choose surrogate issues. It is only in the course of the consultation process that we find out the real matter at hand is a completely different one.)

Staying in the thought pattern of behavioural biology, 'cultivating' sufficient appetence behaviour is part of my tasks as a consultant. I must not anticipate solutions, or rather, I must take care not to make it too easy for the clients to work out solutions. They must be able to feel their success, their triumph in having come to grips with their problem. I will not spare them the necessary effort.

"Achievement as effort with an explorative component, as coping with tasks, solving of problems, mastering of risks, as turning uncertainty into security, as flow, is rewarded with pleasure: the pleasure of the security drive. Evolution has programmed us for effort, not for the land of milk and honey. But evolution also rewards us for that effort: Through the pleasure of drive satisfaction" (von Cube, 2001, p. 5).

In my role as consultant, I have to keep remembering this insight. After so many years of consulting organizations and coaching, I sometimes tend to make hasty assumptions. I feel that I can see the specific core of a situation, be it a problem, some other issue, or a certain interplay of various factors, more quickly than my clients. To give feed-back too quickly, speak out too early, would cut short appetence behaviour and save time, but would leave my clients' curiosity drive unsatisfied. Of course, I could fall back on the methodology of solution-oriented consultation and tell myself that I should not be interested in the problem as such. But then it would need strong curiosity drives and stimuli on the clients' side in order to keep up their appetence behaviour, their active search for a solution.

Again, I settle for a balance between irritation, exploration and support.

Variety of Consultation and/or Exclusive Consultation: Consultation Failing Because of Consultation

I will provide two examples.[4]

Case Study

In a large organization in the social sector, employees who are faced with stressful situations in their job practice are supported by receiving regular individual supervision. Newly employed executives receive additional individual coaching. There were two consultation requests from this organization: The first was in relation to one of the teams. There was some 'disquiet', as the clients put it to my colleague who was to take over that consultation. The second request was related to the executive team. They were supposed to solve and decide lots of questions relating to the organization, but nothing was happening. They never discussed pertinent issues. Instead, they had established a highly appreciative way of dealing with each other, and an inoffensive, hypocritical conversation culture. An analysis of the situation revealed the following picture: All important topics relating to either the team or the organization were discussed in the individual supervision or coaching sessions. Whatever came up in the meetings of the executive team were thoroughly thought out views on the results of the individual coaching. This romanticized presentation lacked any kind of energy or emotion. Critical situations that the organization or team were facing suddenly appeared quite harmless, so that I began asking myself what exactly I as consultant was supposed to do here. Instead of the five executives, there were in fact ten people sitting around the table. Their respective coaches were invisibly hovering in the background. Productive work did not start until we agreed on the individual supervision and coaching being suspended for the period of the consultation. Only then were the actual conflicts and misunderstandings, conflicting interests and contradictions brought forward and could be dealt with.

[4]The episodes of the first example were already discussed in Lackner (2008) and Krainz (2008).

Another example demonstrates the reluctance of an organization to implement the results and measures arrived at in a successful consultation process.

Case Study

In reply to the consultant's summing-up question what their next steps were going to be, who of the people present would take on responsibility for which issues, and by which date this was going to happen, the clients stated in perfect agreement: *"Well, first we'll be going into supervision and reflect the results."* A novel way of putting off necessary organizational decisions. In that case, I advised the client system to suspend supervision and consultation, to 'go to work', and only sum up and reflect the results after successful implementation. Breaking off this consultation was not only a clear ending, but also a final intervention.

Too much consultation is just as unproductive in my view as no consultation at all. Again, a balance must be achieved.

Can Consultation Fail?

If a consultation process means successful joint mastering of conflicting situations, then consultation cannot fail. It might, however, lose its balance in a contradictory milieu. But if we do speak of failure, then that failure is the result of interpretations by the parties and/or systems involved. Clients might be dissatisfied with the result because what they had imagined could not be achieved. When consultation is 'decreed', taking place against the will of the individuals and/or groups involved, failure is inevitable. I would not speak of consultation in this case but rather of a compulsory measure decided upon by the organization. Consultation can also founder because of the organization if necessary consultation steps are not commissioned. Cancellations are not always due to resistance in the system, sometimes they simply do not have the money.

The minimum requirement for consultation is an opportunity for reflection and analysis, and the possibility to discuss one's own situation and oneself. It is impossible to foresee how such a process will turn out. The effect of the consultants' interventions may only be measured by the clients' reaction. Which is to say: Failure in consultation can usually not be observed objectively, it rather lies in how the process is evaluated from the observer's perspective. The success of consultation interventions does not always show immediately. Some interventions have a delayed effect and only show their potency at a much later point in time.

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Online Resources

On the book website, additional content on failure is provided. Please visit: www.artop.de/en/failure