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Finding the Right OD Consultant – one size does not fit all

By Maria Seddio

Certain “truths” become apparent with time and experience. For instance, no matter what the package says, one size does not fit all. This is true whether we are talking about socks, t-shirts or consultants. Too often, the term “consultant” is used as a generic prescription for whatever ails the business. This prescription can be charted across a continuum: from “We need some help here, call in the consultant,” through “We are innocent, the consultant made us do it,” and finally, “Let’s hang the consultant!”

In addition to understanding this continuum, it is important to differentiate the three major categories of consulting. The first category, outsourced functional expertise, represents a significant shift in the demographics of doing business. Over the last decade, the trend toward a non-permanent workforce has encouraged many businesses to outsource functional areas to service providers who are experts in their fields. All or part of a department’s core responsibilities may be contracted out to an external vendor (i.e. Contracts for the Legal Department; Staffing and Recruiting for Human Resources) over an extended period of time. Many organizations combine internal and external resources to accommodate the ebb and flow of business cycles. In this way, organizations can expand their workforce without the risk or burden of permanent payroll.

The second category, subject specific expertise, is related to the single or infrequent need for a specific task, evaluation or opinion in an area that is outside the resident knowledge base of the organization (i.e. Ergonomics consulting; SAP implementation; Web-site design). The role of the consultant in this category is to bring new or highly specialized information or products into the business. The consultant may partner with the organization for an extended period of time but for the most part the consultant’s involvement is bracketed by a specific initiative and when the initiative is complete, the consultant is free to seek greener pastures.

These first two categories of consulting are fairly clear cut – the expertise, whether functional or subject specific, can be evaluated against industry norms and best practices. The desired outcomes (what will constitute “success”) can be well defined and understood by all involved. When an organization selects a vendor/consultant to outsource a function or to access its subject specific expertise, it can go about the selection process using well-established criteria (i.e. delivery timeline, cost, quality assurance, acceptable milestones, etc.). This is not necessarily true for the third category of consulting. Universal standards or criteria are rarely used to evaluate the third category of consulting, the roadmap is not as clear cut or well-defined. The third category of consulting deals with uncharted waters, new experiences.

Here, track record and fit are what counts -- what the consultant has achieved in other settings and how well the organization and the consultant can join together to define and achieve desired outcomes.

Organizational Development or “O.D.” consulting, is the area of consulting that examines and seeks to replicate the processes involved in creating and sustaining a healthy, resilient and innovative business. These processes focus on the development of the organization through the engagement and interaction of the people involved. They include how the organization learns, the philosophy of leadership that guides decision-making and the setting of strategic direction, the ways in which the organization understands and leverages change, the emphasis on people development and planning for the future. It is through these processes that the organization manifests its *raison d’être* and establishes a cultural climate within which it can succeed.

The OD consultant is brought in to help the organization with its people. This may mean helping the organization to develop a leadership team that works effectively together, or to create a communication strategy for rollout to their membership community, or to embed a learning culture that fosters innovation and the sharing of information, or to make sense of changes taking place in their corner of the new-world economy.

At the end of the day (and each and every day), the organization needs to find a way to keep itself alive. It must follow the same basic mandate that applies to all living systems: “*adaptation through variation*,” which roughly translated means, “*change or die*.” The role of the OD consultant is to use a big-picture perspective – understanding how elements small and large interconnect and influence the business – to help the organization disrupt the status quo and introduce change -- in essence, to innovate. The goal for organizational health is perpetual innovation (see grid). The OD consultant is fundamentally a *purveyor of difference*. Whatever theory, approach or methodology (from the sublime poetry of David Whyte, to the confrontational conversation of Fernando Flores) that is used to guide their work, OD consultants are there to help the organization *do something differently* (i.e. to change from within). This means that they engage in processes having to do with identity formation and self-discovery as the organization understands, adapts and renews itself in order to survive and thrive in changing circumstances. Track record and fit build trust in trying times and allow the consultant to work with the organization’s leadership and employees to transform fear and apprehension into creative energy and a reaffirmed sense of purpose.

What are the core competencies for OD consultants?

Core Competencies

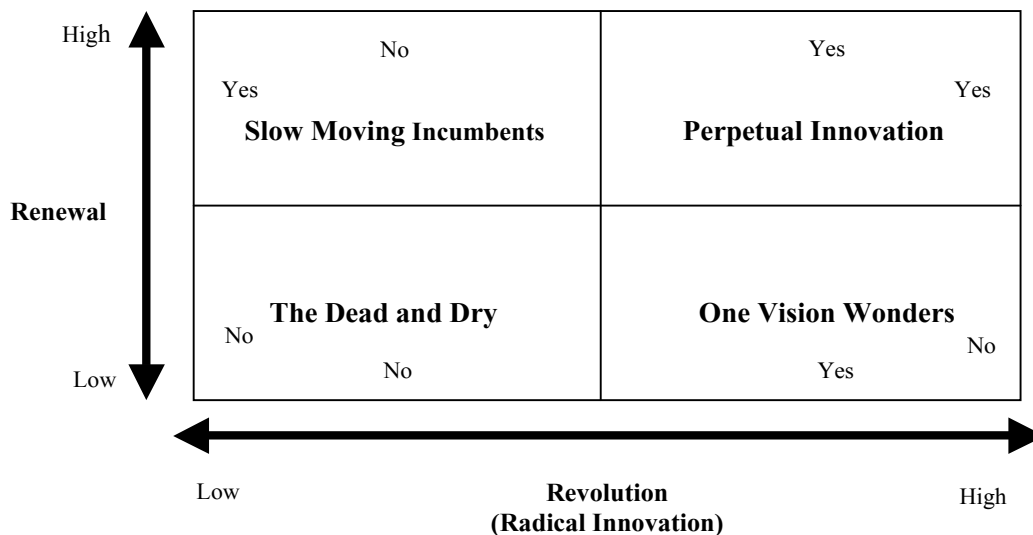
The core competencies for OD practitioners are not the same as functional consultants or subject specific consultants. The core competencies for OD consultants are process oriented and include:

- ❖ **Understanding** the business context and challenges; including the organizational history, short-term financial expectations, external, market-driven pressures and strategic vision for the future.
- ❖ **Joining** the organization and becoming a member-at-large in order to understand and empathize with its constituents.
- ❖ **Assessing** opportunities for growth and development; for closing the gap between the current and desired state for the organization and for putting in place a process for ongoing renewal and revitalization
- ❖ **Influencing** key stakeholders to take ownership for success of change initiatives and the development of the organization and its people
- ❖ **Coaching** for leadership at every level and having the skill set to assess, define and implement personal and professional development strategies to achieve desired outcomes.
- ❖ **Enrolling** the organization in a process of self-discovery and identity formation; generating excitement and interest in strategic questions that foster self-reflection and broad inquiry
- ❖ **Observing** (keenly) the relationships and interactions that form the complex adaptive system that is known as “the organization.”

How do you select a consultant for organizational development?

Criteria for selection

- ❖ **A systems orientation** – do they see the big picture? Do they know how to connect the dots? Do they understand how to use the system to leverage change?
- ❖ **A theoretical foundation** – Is their education, training and experience to anchored to sound theory and practice? Is there a body of research or inquiry that supports their way of working? Can they explain their theoretical foundation in a way that makes sense to others and can be integrated or merged with the organization’s culture?
- ❖ **A learning perspective** – do they ask good questions? Are they curious and provocative in their thinking? Are they able to stimulate discussion in a way that engages the imagination of the organization and calls into question the status quo?
- ❖ **A leadership philosophy** – do they embody elements of good leadership? Do they understand the impact of change on others? Are they courageous and willing to speak up for unpopular issues? Do they see the potential in others and are they willing to put themselves at risk so that that potential may be realized?
- ❖ **A psychological stronghold** – can they help the organization to manage its worries? Can they act as a filter and absorb the anxiety in the organization, allowing it dissipate or foster appropriate action. Can they ruffle feathers? Can they soothe the nerves?



*Credit to Gary Hamlet, *Strategies for the Innovation Grid*