

Introduction – Why *No More Consultants?*

From time to time, most organisations bring in teams of consultants; perhaps to help develop strategies, advise on policies or solve thorny problems. Your organisation might be planning to move to the next level of performance, and need some inspiration from outside. It could be that you believe that you need professional assistance in introducing change: a new enterprise software platform, a new strategy, evaluating new business opportunities, outsourcing or off-shoring. Consultants are also brought into organisations to help deal with something unexpected; a financial downturn, an opportunistic acquisition or disposal, or the succession of a senior executive.

Why is it that so often the instinctive response to such changes, planned or unplanned, is to employ consulting resources from outside the organisation?

Sometimes we need a neutral agent to disentangle the emotion and politics from hard-nosed business decisions.

Sometimes, the personal stakes are high, and we feel we really don't want to get this wrong.

Sometimes our own internal staff are too busy doing the day-to-day work, so we need to buy in temporary extra capacity.

Sometimes it seems the external consultant's voice carries more weight with senior management, or is considered to be impartial.

Sometimes they are expected to make unpalatable recommendations and it will be cathartic to be able to blame them for the decision (and also if things go wrong!).

Sometimes, however, we just press the consultancy button without really thinking it through. That's not smart.

So the consultants arrive, interview the stakeholders, diagnose the problem and formulate some recommendations. Their recommendations are often afforded a level of respect by the management team, a level which would never be offered to suggestions which came directly from the employees. As a consequence, members of staff are left with a frustration that the consultants drew all of the ideas, solutions and expertise from within the organisation, yet they took all the credit for the recommendations themselves.

Having delivered their finely crafted PowerPoint presentation, the consultancy team exits the stage, leaving behind a set of strategies or solutions to be implemented.

Unfortunately, the staff who are tasked with implementation don't feel that they 'own' the solutions, and the results often fall far short of the PowerPoint dreams from the boardroom.

'Perhaps we need to bring in some trouble-shooters to help us understand why the implementation failed? Now where's that business card that someone gave me ...?'

Stop! Please stop!

Since we left major organisations and became independent consultants we have learned a lot by working with a variety of different groups and organisations. In particular, we have learned that a self-assessment approach is a highly effective way of having the right conversations. The right conversations are the ones which lead you to discover the knowledge and experience which is most important to the organisation, and the actions it needs to take in order to be successful.

Five Key Questions

We believe that there are five key questions for an organisation to pose:

- Can we identify the issue?
- Do we know our internal capability?
- Does anyone do this well internally?
- Do we know who is good at it externally?

- Having identified who does it well, are they available to help us, either by sharing what they know or by implementing it?

Let's explore each of these questions in more detail.

Can We Identify the Issue?

One of the biggest challenges facing an organisation that is striving to improve its performance is to identify the right issue to tackle. Much valuable time and resource can be wasted by people solving the wrong issue. In our experience, the person posing the question 'What's the real issue here?' will get a different response depending on whether the respondent has the title of IT consultant, Business Manager, HR professional or Senior Engineer. If you have a tool in your hand when you pose the question, this will inevitably frame the way you define the issue too. When all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail! But if the real issue was hanging a picture to maximise its impact, then perhaps you should have been considering if the picture was right for the style and colour scheme of the room long before you reached for the wall-fixings.

There have been many instances where lack of diagnosis of the issue has led to a lot of wasted effort in resolving the wrong issue. Time spent analysing the underlying issue is well spent to ensure that the solutions considered address the right issue. Sometimes this can be more obvious to a pair of 'outside eyes', that is, people not too close to the issue and who have the benefit of other

contexts. Are you recognising the symptoms and dealing with those or diagnosing the root cause? After all, it is more effective to do the right thing than do things right.

Do We Know Our Internal Capability?

Donald Rumsfeld the US Defense Secretary is quoted as saying:

I don't know what the facts are but somebody's certainly going to sit down with him and find out what he knows that they may not know, and make sure he knows what they know that he may not know.

Now I don't know if I know what I think he wanted to say ... but many organisations simply do not know what they know.

As individuals, we are usually known for the work we are currently doing, and even if our résumé is up to date and available for others to read, it probably does not describe what we know, merely what our past positions were or what we have done.

Once you have the issue clear, ask yourself 'do you know if anyone is already doing this in-house?'. The emphasis here is on the *knowing* because frequently we do not know what the organisation knows. If someone does know and has experience of doing it, we can then check if they do it well and if they are available to help us. If we do not know whether or not we have good practice in-house - and in our experience this is most often the case - then

finding out if the knowledge exists in other departments or project groups is a good first step. If you do have a way of finding out that the knowledge exists then getting together to share that knowledge may be all that is required to tackle the issue yourselves. In previous books, we have written about bespoke ‘yellow pages systems’ to share who we are, what we know and what we are prepared to share. In today’s Web 2.0 world we can use any number of social networking sites to achieve the same end. It’s often easier to discover the abilities and experience of your work colleagues through LinkedIn, Facebook or Xing, than it is to use the formal corporate systems.

Does Anyone Do this Well Internally?

Find out who does it well, where the strengths lie in the organisation. Too often we look only at the current competencies being used and are ignorant of what additional strengths people have that are also available to the organisation. It is possible that all the knowledge and resources you need may be there, but since this is not a business-as-usual activity, it can be worth having a coach help the team get to ‘match fitness’.

For example, in any change programme it is common to assemble a task force from those in the organisation who are likely to have to live through the change and to make it happen. One reason for doing this is to ensure ownership of the solution; there is nothing worse than feeling that you are having change imposed upon you. This task force team might comprise a wide range of people, levels

and roles. A temporary project team such as this, which includes accountants, engineers or nurses, may or may not feel confident to facilitate brainstorming sessions or draw process flow diagrams. Their diversity is positive when it comes to understanding the issue but it may need harnessing.

Do We Know Who is Good at it Externally?

If we know that we don't have the capability in-house, then who does possess the key knowledge that we could reach out to? By extending our social networks further, we might identify and be able to approach 'people who know' in other organisations. If you are not competing directly with the organisation, or if the issue is not commercially sensitive - Health and Safety for instance - then people are normally receptive to requests to share good practice. People feel appreciated for their strengths, and it gives them a sense of pride to be helping others.

Are the People with the Knowledge Available to Help Us?

We may have the capability and know-how, or have learned it from others, yet because of competing priorities, a matter of timing or a surfeit of initiatives from HQ, we need additional people to help deliver a solution. Here the politics of hierarchical organisations can prove a barrier. Different parts of the organisation and different managers have their own objectives and priorities and may feel possessive about the resources they control.

Do we need to hire staff on a permanent basis or do we just want to outsource this particular task? In a cost-conscious, competitive world it does not make sense to maintain staff levels for all eventualities but rather to err on the lean side and recruit short-term labour with the relevant skills to manage the peaks of work. Conversely, you might perceive an ongoing need and take steps to recruit people with the right skills and knowledge.

If the knowledge lies outside the organisation will they be prepared to assist us? Do we have an existing relationship? Is there something we can offer that they need, to reciprocate the help? Or is this a conversation we can both benefit from?

How to Read *No More Consultants*

People are often looking for the proverbial 'low hanging fruits' - the quick wins to achieve a marked improvement in performance without a big initiative or extra resources. In the book we explain in detail an approach which covers identifying an issue, generating ownership of that issue, developing a self-assessment tool and using it to identify strengths, a way of visualising different strengths in different parts of the organisation, and how to learn from others. The approach helps people to focus their sharing and learning on the practices which are already proven to work elsewhere in the organisation, or in other organisations. In short, it helps you accelerate around the learning cycle.

If you want to tap into what is already known in order to resolve your big issues then this book is for you.

The approach will enable you to take an overview of the current capability of the organisation and identify the variations across it. To raise the overall capability levels, you need to get the right people sharing their expertise with those who are keen to learn. This book contains step-by-step guidance, and a number of powerful examples to inspire you.

Perhaps you are looking for the key practices, need some external focus or support in order to improve? You want to know exactly where to target training, mentoring or new ideas from other organisations but you can't be certain that you're shining the spotlight in the right places. Maybe you have been challenged to demonstrate progress in improvement and want a way to measure the increase in capability over time, highlighting where improvements have been made, and where they need to be made.

If you have mentally, or physically, nodded through any of the above, then as you read through the book, have a topic in mind. Is there a topic or capability which your organisation needs to develop or improve in order to perform better?

As we go through the book we are going to introduce you to a number of illustrative stories - real practical examples - from a number of sectors.

In BP, a top-down directive was to focus on Operations excellence, improving the operational capability of more

than 800 separate operational sites and pursuing an improvement prize worth in excess of \$400 million.

Nine regional government offices in the UK learned where their strengths in knowledge management were and how to build capability in those practices where they were weak.

Nationwide Building Society developed its Supply chain to make sure the links of the whole chain were supporting one another.

The National Health Service (NHS) is developing a knowledge culture. Staff at Great Ormond Street hospital recognised that one of the most vulnerable times was in transferring sick babies or children from the operating theatre to the intensive care ward.

In Thailand, the Khao Kwan Foundation is helping rice farmers to shift to organic farming methods.

At Oracle they are strengthening their international professional communities so that they contribute to the company's goals.

OneSixSigma is a cross-industry consortium of business improvement experts, extending its area of interest beyond Six Sigma to find new, additional topics around which they could connect and discuss. But how could they find the right topics to maximise the potential of the group?

The United Nations' UNAIDS organisation identifies good practice but was challenged to effectively share globally

the local responses to AIDS as their big issue. This challenge has been taken up by the Constellation for AIDS Competence who are now working to reveal strengths and connect local responses around the world.

The UK's National School for Government realised they could improve their Learning & Development capacity by sharing across the network.

The United Nation Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR) has a Decentralised Cooperation programme which connects cities around the world to learn from each other and share their strengths.

We hope that aspects of each of these stories will help you identify the needs of your organisation, and inspire you deal with them.

This book will give you all you need to build a common framework and language to allow sharing to take place. In turn, this framework will enable different groups to self-assess and discuss their collective competence and share experience; what works and what doesn't. People can identify their current strengths and prioritise areas to improve, sharing the improvement and the learning with others in the organisation. When the same groups repeat the exercise six months or a year later, they have a measure of how effective they have been at building up their capability.

As you read through the chapters try to suspend your search for comparisons; 'Isn't this just like balanced scorecards?', or 'APQC have a self-assessment questionnaire' or 'This is Appreciative Inquiry'. There are some

common elements, but there are also some significant differences which you may miss if you put it in the same ‘pigeonhole’ as another method. Suspend evaluation and learn afresh. You can make comparisons later and adapt the approach we are sharing to your own needs.

The following chapters will take you through the context and the steps required to identify the practices which are important, engaging a group to help define the levels of competence, having a conversation to determine current and desired levels and identifying how to get to your desired level. We also explain how to revisit the self-assessment framework, firstly to improve to the next level and then to amend the framework to keep you striving for improvement. We’ll show you some creative and innovative ways of looking at the performance information to help anyone in your organisation to readily identify who they can share your strengths with and in return, who they can learn from to improve.

Chapter by Chapter

Here’s what you can expect to find in each chapter:

Chapter 2 – Finding the River

This is the introduction to the approach which will enable you to recognise and harness the capability that already exists somewhere inside your organisation, in order to reach your objectives. We’ll explore why this is relevant, what the next steps are to help you achieve what your

dream of success looks like, which tools and resources are available and how you might apply it in your own organisation or community.

The common language that a self-assessment framework provides is very effective in identifying opportunities for learning and sharing, but if a picture is worth a thousand words, how can this huge improvement potential be visualised and communicated in a memorable way? The ‘River Diagram’ provides this perspective, and has become a powerful metaphor. This chapter introduces the River Diagram, and explains how to use it to start a knowledge-sharing revolution. It will help you examine the distribution of performance across your organisation, and if you watch the river over time you can track the improvement in performance.

Chapter 3 – Building the Framework

This chapter takes you through building your own self-assessment framework. The self-assessment framework is the key tool in this approach, because it provides both the breadth of the topic and the common language which you can use to share experience. However, this is not an end in itself. We have all had the experience of discussing something familiar using common words and phrases only to learn afterwards that we were talking about something different. I recently launched into a conversation about ‘networks’ only to discover that the other person was talking about the wires and routers that link computers, whilst I was talking about people connected by a common interest.

Perhaps you've discussed an issue with someone in a different department and they have assured you 'Oh yes, I already have that covered', only to discover later that what they were referring to was only a portion of what you had in mind - you didn't both share the same view of the bigger picture. The role that the self-assessment framework plays is to agree on the language so that knowledge can be shared easily. The framework contains a number of practices and five levels of competence for each practice. The framework is designed to create the right conversations and also to encourage ownership of the problem and solution. Consequently, the approach takes communities and organisations from a victim mindset, to owning both the issue and the response to it. The resulting actions are dependent on the diversity of people involved in the conversation.

Chapter 4 – Applying the Approach

We have a choice. We can choose to focus on what works or we can look for what doesn't work. Whatever we look for is what we are likely to find! That's the essence of Positive Deviance; all too often we choose to view the world as problems to solve, and quite often we find that we chose to solve the wrong problem!

This chapter explains how the approach shifts the paradigm from making an intervention to solve someone else's problem (and in the process making that someone else the victim) to facilitating a group to identify their own strengths and support them to build on these to arrive at their own solutions. Experiences are shared and compared with the words in the framework to ensure that

the breadth of the practices is covered. Together the participants can then decide how to adapt those experiences to their own situations. The power of the approach is in the ownership it engenders through conversation.

Chapter 5 – The Role of the Facilitator

Facilitation is essential to ensure that the space exists for people to learn from one another and to build common understanding and expertise. We look at the role of a facilitator from first principles, and help you to define this important activity. Facilitation is key to enabling the free flow of knowledge.

Chapter 6 – Creating the River

Having introduced the concept of the River Diagram earlier in the book, this chapter looks at the details of how you build and use your own version of the river, and how you take others with you on the journey. We look at several practical ways to create a River Diagram for different audiences, using a variety of media and locations; flipchart paper, Microsoft Excel, in a village square and on a houseboat on a river in Kerala, India.

This is performance improvement with a difference!

Chapter 7 – Learning from Experience

Creating a self-assessment framework and presenting the results visually can stimulate an organisation into action,

but just knowing that there is someone with whom you can share - or someone that you can learn from - is often insufficient. By bringing together those with strengths to share and those with something to learn, a tremendous amount of sharing can take place, based on real experiences. However, the apparently simple logic of connecting sharers with learners (balancing supply with demand) can become derailed with the reality of human behaviour. Pride, reticence, a desire to invent and political self-sufficiency and are just some of the behavioural barriers which are erected against the flow of learning. We investigate some of barriers to sharing and suggest practical steps to overcome them, and keep the momentum building.

Chapter 8 – Improving and Sustaining

There is nothing magical about the selection of practices and levels, other than that they are agreed upon by people with access to expertise and experience of applying that expertise. Perhaps after having used the framework for a year, you decide that other practices are more relevant, or good practices have pushed the boundaries of competence to a higher level. This is what continuous improvement is all about. A balance must be struck between improving the framework and the ability to compare and measure progress. This process is all about continuous improvement; having a framework to check your current capabilities and a process to improve. By repeating the process after an interval, it is possible to measure progress and create momentum such that, over time, this becomes the way of working.

Chapter 9 – So What Do We Do Now?

Are we really suggesting that consultants are not needed?

No, we are not. However, we can be more purposeful in whom we select, and why and when we bring them into our organisations.

By the time you get to the end of the book you'll be feeling confident to run a meeting to set up a self-assessment approach and you will know how to take it forward. You'll understand how to use a structured process for engaging your organisation in dialogue about the relative strengths and weaknesses and the variations across the organisation, without egos and competition getting in the way.

This final chapter revisits the role of consultants and with the help of a simple flow-chart, helps you validate your decisions at each stage.

Following the flow-chart will ensure that you get best use and best value from what you know - and from the added value that consultants, when used appropriately, will bring.

You know more than you think. We want to help you to think more about what you know.

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