A CASE STUDY IN COLLABORATIVE CONSULTATION

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Abstract

This case study examines the specific behaviors of a consultant who wishes to use a collaborative approach. Many consultants fail in dealing with non-technical topics in agriculture because they try to be experts in a setting for which they have little or no experience. The author reviews theories about consultation and leadership then adds his experience to develop and facilitate a workshop on teamwork and program planning in Mexico. Experiences gained from other consulting assignments are combined with the experience of this case study to describe, in a list of principles, the collaborative consultant approach.

Sometimes the consulting job you accept is different from the job you encounter when you arrive on site. A variety of problems can occur in obtaining a clear description of the job to be done and the employer's expectations. Communication involving different languages and cultures can break down. Often other groups and individuals, who are affected but not consulted initially, have different opinions than your employer. Conditions may change after you agree to consult and before you arrive. Expectations of your employer can change.

Uncertainty was a dominant characteristic of the consultant assignment in this case study. What started as an invitation to present a week-long workshop on strategic planning and teamwork changed dramatically. Without previous experience in collaborative consultation and a sound understanding of the workshop content the author might have been unable to adapt to the new situation and lead a successful workshop which satisfied the participants.

Background to the Assignment

The author had previously taught a course in leadership for community development at the University of Monterrey, Mexico (UDEM), during the spring semester of 1995. UDEM invited him back in April, 1996, to present a week-long intensive workshop on the same topic to a group of faculty and staff that had not taken the course. They indicated that the emphasis would be on "teamwork and program development." When he arrived in Monterrey the day before the workshop, however, he learned of a few new details: (a) the participants were the members of UDEM's three non-academic departments (physical education, extra-curricular music and drama, and community service), (b) the department head of physical education had just been fired, (c) a new

position, division director, had just been created (and filled by the Rector) to administer and unify these three previously independent departments, and (d) the consultant was being brought in to meet with the faculty and staff (together for the first time) to help them "begin to work as a team" in this new administrative unit.

Purpose and Method

The new division director and the consultant agreed that the focus or purpose of the workshop would be to help the group learn to work as a team, which would include their input on their new division's plan of work. The difficulty in accomplishing this purpose was how to structure the workshop process and content so that participants would voluntarily accept and accomplish the purpose. The consultant was especially concerned about (a) the particular consultant role that he would use, (b) the leadership styles he would use, and (c) the choice and sequence of workshop activities.

The Consultant Role

Blake and Mouton's book, *Consultation* (1976) describes different approaches that a consultant can use. They describe five alternatives: (a) prescriptive, (b) theories and principles, (c) confrontation, (d) acceptance, and (e) catalytic (collaborative) consultation.

In prescriptive consulting the client is told what to do. The consultant takes the responsibility and makes the decisions. Theories and principles is a kind of intervention where the consultant helps the client to internalize the consultant's theories in order to deal with

situations using the new theories. Confrontation means challenging the client's assumptions to get the client to see the situation from a new perspective. Acceptant consulting means reassuring and supporting the client's proposed (or historical) approach to dealing with a situation. In acceptant consulting no new theories or solutions are suggested. Both the acceptant approach and the confrontation approach may be used along with the first two consulting approaches.

The last of these alternatives, catalytic (collaborative) consulting, fits best when the consultant is trying to work with local leaders, empower them, and leave them competent so they are not dependent on the consultant. In consulting, as in chemistry, the catalyst is an agent which, when added to other substances, causes a change in the speed of reaction but does not get used up in the process. This approach to consulting works best for non-technical topics and it works best when the consultant assignment is changing due to dynamic field conditions, including uncertainty.

The new division director and the consultant agreed on a collaborative workshop emphasizing participation rather than prescription. They agreed to avoid the prescriptive, expert, confrontational, or acceptant roles.

Leadership

Most writing on leadership refers to three styles of leaders: directive, democratic, and non-directive (Block, 1996; Hersey & Blanchard, 1972). These styles can be defined according to the following leader behaviors:

Directive	Democratic	Non-Directive
Initiates	Asks questions to involve others	Fades out gradually
Structures	Leads discussion	Uses silence
Motivates	Tests to see if consensus exists	Gives non-verbal support
Delegates	Encourages others to take responsibility	Refuses to make decisions for others
Praises		
Reprimands	Confirms commitments	

Different situations require different styles of leadership. Evacuation of a burning building calls for directive leadership. Deciding among several suggestions for an organization's social event calls for democratic leadership. Helping qualified, experienced, enthusiastic committee heads calls for non-directive leadership.

Leadership will be most effective if a leader can look at a situation, decide what style of leadership is needed by the group, and act accordingly. When a leader is able to use each of the three leadership styles appropriately, this may be called **facilitator leadership** (Etling, 1975)**.** A facilitator may, therefore, direct, use democratic leadership, or intentionally let the group provide its own leadership. The style used will vary according to the leader's formal role within the group, the size of the group, the skills and experience of group members, and the motivation and goals of group members. It will also depend on group maturity - the ability and willingness of group members to set goals and work toward the accomplishment of those goals. An effective facilitator leader will learn to quickly consider all of these factors and choose the best leadership style for the situation.

A comparison of the traditional directive leader and the facilitator leader is appropriate since most people in the United States, as well as Mexico, tend to equate leadership with the directive style of leadership.

<u>Directive Leader</u>
Leads from in front
Uses one style
Gives orders, makes statements
Focuses on leader's strengths
Person of action
Know-it-all
Says, "Don't just sit there, do something."

<u>Facilitator Leader</u>
Often leads from behind
Uses all three styles
Relies more on questions and suggestions
Focuses on group's needs
Sensitive, thoughtful person
Seeks help from others
Says, "Don't just do something, think about it first."

As skill increases a facilitator will be able to shift from a directive to a democratic to a non-directive style as appropriate. When the group is able to make decisions and take responsibility for its own concerns, the facilitator will be prepared to relinquish leadership and give attention to other opportunities. The new division director and the consultant agreed that facilitator leadership would be appropriate to meet the purpose of the workshop.

Content of the Workshop

As a part of the course taught at UDEM in 1995 the author had used a textbook, "Getting Results: A Guide to Effective Leadership", which he had developed at The Pennsylvania State University and translated into Spanish. The chapters of that textbook were:

1. What is your leadership style?
2. Habits and attitudes of leaders
3. Group identity and direction
4. Teamwork
5. Getting people to support your cause
6. Motivating people in volunteer groups
7. Speaking up for yourself
8. Teaching others
9. Resolving differences
10. Resolving conflicts
11. Moving from ideas to action
12. Managing projects
13. Making formal meetings work
14. Making informal meetings work
15. What's wrong and how to fix it

Each chapter includes background material on the topic, questions for group discussion, and

exercises for learning skills and applying them to community situations outside the classroom.

The new division director and the consultant had agreed to use this textbook for the workshop and concentrate on chapters three and four. A copy of the textbook was provided to each participant prior to the workshop.

Sequence of the Workshop

The new division director and the consultant agreed that they needed to assess participants' feelings about the new administrative structure, and get their suggestions as to the choice and sequence for the workshop. On the other hand, some structure was required to get started, and give the participants some basis for making choices. So, an agenda for the first day, Monday, was planned to give an overview of content options and get participant feedback. The agenda for Tuesday was left to be determined after evaluating participants' reactions to the first day.

Monday's session went according to plan. Meeting at 8:30 a.m., participants heard the new director describe the new administrative structure and explain how this workshop was designed to (a) foster teamwork, and (b) initiate a plan of work for the new unit. These were the suggested workshop goals. Participants were asked to interview and introduce a colleague that they did not know very well. One of the interview questions was, "how do you feel about the workshop goals?" Discussion after the introductions revealed that people were not clear about the new administrative structure but accepted it and were willing to work to accomplish the suggested workshop goals.

The consultant introduced the topic of teamwork, behaviors that contribute to team building, and types of teams typically found in a university setting. Participants were asked to rate their group (all workshop participants) in terms of their ability and willingness to operate as a team (see evaluation details in results section).

Next, participants were led through several small group exercises to help them identify their own leadership styles, set personal and professional goals for the next year, use self-management techniques, identify their expectations for the workshop, and evaluate the workshop content and process for the first day. Evaluation results indicated satisfaction with the workshop process and content. Participants rated themselves low as a team (see results section). The consultant and the division director determined the next day's agenda based on participant feedback.

Tuesday started with a report on the evaluations from the first day and the "expectations for the workshop" identified individually by participants. A major team building exercise was initiated. Four small groups were formed to design a logo to represent the new unit. The groups reviewed examples of logos from magazines. They discussed, debated, and drafted a design to show to the other groups. Lively participation resulted from this competitive exercise which lasted the rest of the morning.

During the afternoon session the director presented a draft mission statement for the new unit that had been written by an advisory committee to the Rector. Lengthy discussion resulted in contradictory viewpoints and some polarization of opinions. Workshop participants were clearly divided in their support of the mission statement. Participants expressed strong objections to different phrases in the mission statement. One of the participants volunteered to reconcile contradictory viewpoints in a new draft that he would present the next morning.

Wednesday started with his presentation. After some discussion and amendments, workshop participants enthusiastically approved the amended mission statement. The consultant then led a nominal group process to determine program priorities that would be consistent with the new mission statement. The priorities that resulted from the nominal group process were assigned to small groups formed according to

participants' interests. Each small group discussed one or two of the priorities and wrote plans for them that detailed activities, responsibilities, and deadlines. The plans were presented to the workshop assembly, then discussed and modified.

Thursday started with a discussion on implementation of the plans. Participants decided that they needed to address the issues of promoting the plans within UDEM, and fundraising to finance the activities. They were concerned as to how to delegate responsibilities for implementing the plans. They also wanted to discuss how to (a) recruit and work with volunteers, (b) resolve interpersonal conflicts, (c) organize orientation and inservice training sessions, (d) solve problems, and (e) evaluate results. The consultant provided mini-lectures on each of these topics and cited additional information that could be found in the textbook.

On Friday, each small group presented its recommendations for the overall plan. Discussion was followed by individual expressions of commitment to implement the overall plan and to coordinate efforts with other individuals as they worked on their parts of the plan. Friday afternoon was devoted to a summary and evaluation of the workshop.

Results

The group rated the content and process of the workshop to be useful to them. Results of a questionnaire administered at the end of the first day (Monday) and again at the end of the workshop (Friday) are summarized below.

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Workshop Evaluation

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1. Please rate this workshop on the basis of the following criteria.

Low	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	**High**

	Monday	Friday
a. Participation	4.96	6.58
b. Productivity	4.96	6.63
c. Team Building	4.53	6.53
d. Effectiveness of Consultant	5.37	6.63
e. Consensus Building	5.37	6.28
f. Interest and Cooperation	5.26	6.61

2. What were the strong points of this meeting?

Monday
(26 comments included:)
clarified workshop objectives -8
clarified our integration -4
introducing a colleague -2
information on leadership -2
participation -2

Friday
(36 comments included:)
we worked as teams -8
interesting work -4
participation -3
strengthened our integration -2
our plan -2

3. What were the weak points?

Monday
(14 comments included:)
workshop direction was not clear -4
we sat down together with colleagues
  from the same department -2
workshop was too informal -2

Friday
(15 comments, 11 of which
  were "no weak points")

4. What improvement would you suggest?

Monday
more interaction -4
quiet people need to speak up -3

Friday
no improvements needed -7

A teamwork self-evaluation instrument was also administered Monday and again on Friday. The 13 criteria below were put on a wall chart. Each participant was given a red marker to indicate, on the chart, how the group scored on each of the criteria.

Teamwork Self-Evaluation

Evaluate how well this group is operating as a team. Rate each variable by marking under one of the numbers on the 1 to 7 scale. This will indicate how close you feel your group is to either extreme.

	Bad	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	**Excellent**

1. Intimacy and Respect

2. Open Communication

3. Listening

4. Clear Objectives

5. Mutual Support

6. Consensus Decision-making

7. Facilitative Leadership

8. Fun

9. Use of Members' Resources

10. Mutual Trust and Confidence

11. Conflict Management

12. Involvement

13. Flexibility

The marks tended to cluster around 3 on Monday for all of the criteria. On Friday the scoring was repeated on a clean wall chart with a black marker. The marks tended to cluster around 6 at the end of the workshop. Since precise numbers were not circled, averages cannot be calculated. This fact is a problem in communicating results clearly in this paper, but it was very effective in demonstrating progress in a graphic manner for the workshop participants.

From these two evaluations the consultant concluded that the workshop goals were met. Six months later participants reported that they were still following their plan and that some of its objectives had been met.

Conclusions

The workshop was successful. The keys to the success of this workshop, and to acting as a collaborative consultant were the following: (a) thorough preparation for possible workshop topics must be tempered by flexibility in presenting those topics, (b) initial structure is necessary but it must be balanced by the needs of the participants, (c) options are necessary at each step in the workshop, (d) choice and sequence of the topics came from the needs of participants as they worked on workshop goals, (e) group exercises were important to allow group members to practice teamwork and program planning without having the outcomes determined in advance, and (f) use of workshop participants to present topics and to summarize group work helped bridge the gap between the local culture (including UDEM) and the experience of the consultant.

From this consulting experience and similar experiences of the author in Indonesia (Etling, 1977), Navajo Nation in 1983, Durango, Mexico in 1986, Costa Rica (Etling, 1991), and Puerto Rico in 1992 and 1994, the author developed and recommends the following list of principles to guide a collaborative consultant during various phases of a consultancy.

Preparation

1. Get as much background as possible on the situation.
2. Clarify my own values about education as they relate to the situation.
3. Anticipate issues and problems.
4. Prepare alternative approaches for resolving the issues and problems.
5. Review this checklist before working directly with the local group or community.

My Personal Value Positions

1. The learner should help determine learning objectives.
2. Educational efforts should increase the independence of learners.
3. Collaborative consultation efforts should encourage local initiative, self-help and innovation.
4. Collaborative consultation efforts should foster critical awareness to identify and analyze problems.
5. Collaborative consultation efforts should promote action to resolve problems.
6. Collaborative consultation efforts should emphasize common sense approaches as much as theoretical approaches.
7. Collaborative consultation efforts should have immediate and practical benefits to learners.
8. Collaborative consultation efforts should avoid excessive structure, programmed systems, and centralization.
9. Educators (community leaders) should treat learners (community members) as subjects, not objects.
10. Collaborative consultants should help find local solutions to local problems.

Introducing Myself

1. Start with an informal dialogue in a relaxed environment.
2. Establish credibility by showing interest, asking questions, and indicating preparations made to work with the group or community.

3. Invite community members to describe the situation, then clarify it by tactfully asking questions.
4. Accept the needs identified by clients as the starting point.
5. Establish myself as a collaborative consultant by:
   a. dialogue on personal values
   b. encouraging teamwork
   c. modeling facilitator behaviors
   d. emphasizing the problem rather than my expertise.

When I am Viewed as an Expert

1. Offer options not solutions.
2. Dialogue, explore alternatives.
3. Emphasize their expertise.
4. Demonstrate respect for others.
5. Build confidence in others.
6. Support their efforts to define or redefine the problem.
7. Question, listen and point out possible solutions from the answers.
8. Use nonverbal communication to support others.
9. Avoid paternalism and manipulation.
10. Keep the responsibility for solving the problem on the members of the group/community.

As the Situation Develops

1. Transfer leadership to others but share responsibility.
2. Transfer skills and information to make myself more dispensable.
3. Try to lower my own profile as time passes.
4. Observe local ceremonies, customs, and hierarchies while keeping the problems and values in focus and foremost.
5. Emphasize participatory and "hands on" discussion and learning.
6. Avoid "pulling rank" by using my titles or experience as a defensive or offensive weapon against those who disagree with me.
7. Suggest procedures that might be followed to gather more information.
8. Treat others as equals as much as possible - slightly more than the client is comfortable

with, but not enough to destroy communication.
9. Avoid taking myself too seriously.
10. Review this checklist occasionally.

Analyzing Alternatives

1. Consider the effects on all involved.
2. Check each alternative against personal value positions.

Post Mortem

1. Communicate problems/issues yet unresolved in a final discussion or by letter (preferably both).
2. Communicate confidence in community members to carry on.

Why are collaborative consultants desirable? In order to promote people's participation. Why is participation desirable? According to many authors (Ford, 1990; Kindervatter, 1977; Smith, M., 1989; Smith, R., 1991) people's participation is necessary for effective education programs and for community development.

In this century most of the world population has been deeply affected by colonialism, World War II, the Cold War, independence movements which have often been turbulent, and a period of regional wars and tensions. With few exceptions, world leaders during this time have used an authoritarian (directive) leadership style. Military leaders, political strongmen, and fundamentalist religious leaders have far outnumbered leaders like Gandhi and Martin Luther King. Even in newly independent nations the leaders have usually imitated the leadership style of colonial administrators rather than attempting participatory programs. Most decisions affecting people have been made "at the top" rather than at a "grassroots" level.

In times of turbulence and scarce resources, such a "top down" mode of decision making is understandable. Even in extension work, technology transfer and innovation have been consciously directed toward the "better-off" farmers who are the innovators and early

adopters. This approach, however, is being questioned. The Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) of the United Nations held a global consultation in Rome in December, 1989, on the need to improve extension services. "The consultation found that the *trickle-down* theory of extension--that extension messages flow from the better-off to the poor--had *limited validity* " (FAO, 1990, p.17). The consultation concluded, "In many countries, the extension service will have to make greater efforts to adopt the participatory extension approach and mobilize farmers' and other community organizations" (FAO, 1990, p.17).

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