

From Vision / Action: The Journal of the Bay Area OD Network, Fall, 1997:

"LIVING AT THE EDGE"

"The psychological contract is qualitatively different for internals. If something goes wrong, you're still in the system. It's a different mentality if you are committed to the system for a long time. You grow up with people, see them evolve and know their history, fears, struggles and what they are working on. There is a level of personal vulnerability that is different. The external has professional vulnerability. Internally your clients are also your friends and colleagues. It feels real different and you can't easily walk away --- well you can leave but that is not your mind set. You live and work with your reputation and the consequences. If a piece of work doesn't go well, the effect is far more personally devastating. It is much more of a challenge to your personal sense of self-worth."

(Interview with Internal with company for 22 years)

As the quote from an interview above suggests, consultants who live inside their client organizations meet some very different challenges than the external hired for specific expertise or wisdom. They must learn to balance paradoxical issues with no easy answers. Some of these issues were published in Vision / Action in the internal consultant panel interviews over the last year and include:

MARGINAL ROLE: The internal consultant as a full member of the organization must also, in the classic view of our practice, maintain objectivity, neutrality and distance.

MULTIPLE ROLES: Because the work is driven by the needs of the organization, internals have more opportunity and are expected to take more varied and diverse consulting roles. The roles demand a breadth of expertise: neutral facilitator, executive coach, expert on organizational behavior, task force leader or member, or change management consultant.

SUPPORTING CAST VERSUS STARRING ROLES: The internal must work backstage, be a supportive cast and team player, while externals often are viewed as stars, prophets, or gurus to their clients.

POLITICALLY NEUTRAL OR POLITICALLY SAVVY: Internals often are victims of internal political battles because of reporting relationships, major clients or involvement in risky or unpopular change initiatives.

BALANCING THE BOSS-SUBORDINATE RELATIONSHIP: Maintaining the role of a neutral consultant may be a challenge with a boss who doesn't like surprises and wants to be kept in the loop.

LIVING AT THE EDGE

In this first feature of "Living Inside", I would like to explore in more depth the paradoxes of the classic marginal role of the internal. A marginal role in the sociological sense is to stand and work at the boundary, to be in the organization and to be outside the organization. To be marginal is to be a bridge between two worlds with differing values and norms. The internal consultant is in the organization as a member, but must stand outside the organization to view it with objectivity and distance. The external consultant also serves in a marginal role as someone who stands outside the organization and enters it to consult. Externals run the risk of becoming emotionally involved with the organization. Unless they become employees, however, they are never literally members. In contrast, internal consultants are

defined as employees on the payroll and subject to the organizational policies and procedures, influenced by the norms and culture, and directed by management in the performance of their jobs.

An OD practitioner who works in an organization over a long time, becomes invested in the health of the organization and its employees. As we internalize the norms and values of the organization, conform too much to the expectations of management, and fully embrace organizational membership, we may no longer be viewed as valuable consultants who bring objectivity, neutrality, and new and different perspectives. As a consequence, the role of the internal is a stressful one because we must constantly calibrate our positions. First we shift to be more congruent with our clients in order to be acceptable, to build relationships, and to increase trust. Then we shift to a more neutral outsider stance in order to bring alternative perspectives, hold up the mirror, or introduce new alternatives. To maintain our objectivity and neutrality, we will never quite belong or identify fully as members. We will always be marginal.

Yet internals committed to a system for a long time live intensely what they do. We get to know people, watch them grow and evolve. We know their history, their struggles. Clients are colleagues and friends in whom we invest. We build relationships with people who know us: our competencies and our weaknesses. We live and work each day with our reputations and our credibility. If we violate a confidence or a trust, it is damaged or lost. We feel responsible and committed to the organization and its business success. That commitment makes us valuable business partners. Yet it challenges the traditional OD role of neutrality and objectivity.

Over the almost 15 years I was internal in one organization, balancing commitment and objectivity was a continuous challenge. As a member of corporate staff, I brought a more objective and outside perspective to my clients in the field. However, at times they weren't always sure if I was neutral, since, in their eyes, I might represent Corporate. I consistently made it a practice to clarify my role and let my clients know if I carried baggage, biases, or opinions. That also required that I be honest with myself, a degree of perfection I did not always achieve. When I recognized that I was pushing an agenda, I acknowledged it or went back and cleaned it up. I know in retrospect, however, that there were times when I was truly unaware of my own position.

My neutral, objective role was complicated much more when I worked with Corporate Staff Departments or when I was mandated to lead a project and carry it throughout the organization. These circumstances only increased the importance of my integrity with my self and my clients regarding my role, my biases and my charter. In leading mandated projects, I carried the reputation and the agenda of my sponsor. As a facilitator I often had long term personal knowledge of members of a team. At other times, I unintentionally carried the biases or baggage of my boss.

TACTICS TO MANAGE INTERNAL OBJECTIVITY

How does a long term internal hold on to objectivity and neutrality and not " get too worn out in the system," as one interviewee described it? Some of the following tactics work for me. Perhaps you have used others.

KNOW MYSELF: I use therapy, counseling, personal growth groups, and other self assessment tools to continuously learn about myself, my strengths, and my weakness show they play out in my organizational role. The more I know about myself, the better I can manage my biases and my weak points.

PROFESSIONAL MEETINGS: Attendance at professional meetings has provided me with an informal way to benchmark. I learn what others, both internal and external, are doing in their practices and how that compares to what I am doing.

PRESENTATIONS: Making presentations at professional conferences describing an intervention, a change effort, or helpful tool gains the critical review of colleagues. Presentations have been a great way to check myself and hold my work up for scrutiny.

FEEDBACK AND EVALUATION: I have made it a continuing practice to solicit feedback and evaluation from: 1) clients, especially those I work with often; 2) peers who are co-facilitators; 3) external consultants I work with as partners; and 4) colleagues with whom I lunch or participate in a professional support group, where I can ask for input or feedback about projects, interventions, or issues which I describe to them.

SPIRITUAL PRACTICE: Taking time daily in quiet meditation to review my work, my role, and outcomes, both successful and problematic, and to question my intentions and my integrity.

HONESTY WITH MYSELF AND MY CLIENTS: Acknowledging when I was not neutral, labeling my biases and admitting my agendas.

BECOMING A PARTNER OR A MEMBER WITH THE CLIENT SYSTEM: As some have suggested in applying the New Science theory and the self-organizing systems approach, marginality and neutrality may be less important (refer to Vision/Action, Summer, 1997). My experience in some of my internal work supports that.

Despite these tactic, to remain marginal over several years and live within an organization is almost impossible. I believe I over-stayed my ability to do so. The investment in the success of the organization, the relationships established, the person information exchanged with colleagues, friends, and clients, and the system's knowledge of what one as an internal has to offer can wear out one's usefulness to the client system. But perhaps even more significant, these same factors can be blinders to the awareness that it is time to move on.