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Where Are You in The Hierarchy?

"As an internal you have a boss who gives you raises and evaluates you for promotions. The boss needs to have an understanding of the role and how consulting is different than the other positions that may report to him. I worked that through when I was hired. We spent time discussing the confidentiality issues, that I needed his confidence and respect. He acknowledged that it made sense. But when I said, 'There will be things I can't tell you,' he said, 'How do I evaluate you?' I replied that he would have to evaluate my relationship with him and get data from projects or interventions that involved him such as how I am perceived by others when he was involved. He accepted that." (Former Internal Consultant)

The impact and pressure of the hierarchy is a constant presence for the internal. Imbedded in the hierarchy amidst the white water of the turbulent changes in today's fast paced environment, not only must we live in the turbulence of the organization and be able to take alternate, fresh, or different positions to assist our clients and the organization, we must also satisfy the boss and perhaps senior functional management as well. Many OD consultants strongly advocate reporting to the President or other top executive so all parts of the organization can be clients and not "bosses". However, in most organizations, OD professionals are more likely to report through Human Resources and be positioned more in the middle of the organization.

Reporting to HR

Yet reporting to HR can seriously compromise the OD consultant's credibility if the reputation of the larger Human Resource function, its staff and the functional leadership is weak among senior management. A poor reputation by HR not only hampers the credibility but it also becomes a barrier to over-come in establishing autonomy, confidentiality and trust. However, if there is a strong H.R. function which is well respected in the organization, this positioning can be a definite advantage. Human resource managers can identify O.D. needs and can serve as a partner bringing expertise in other human resource areas resulting in a more powerful impact in the organization.

In response to this issue, a former internal confessed, "I learned through the years. Originally the consulting function was very separate from HR because they didn't have a good reputation. That changed during the time I was there. They became more of a business partner. That is the way it is today in most organizations, I believe. HR should be approached as partners. They ought to be doing more OD consulting themselves. My advice is to work through a process with HR of how to get clients through them and how to keep them informed. Work with the decision processes and honor them. As an internal you can't circumvent HR processes, you have got to work with them because of the need for internal relationships."

The Internal's Status

One of the most challenging structural barriers to consultant effectiveness is the status and reporting level of the internal consultant. One consultant said flatly, "Organizations don't know how to level internal consultants." In most organizations staff functions who bring specific expertise such as organizational development are usually not managers and often have a mid-level grade reporting in to a mid-level in the Human Resource function.

In tall hierarchies where exaggerated importance is often placed on status, access to higher level managers as clients can be severely hampered. Consultants are utilized because there is recognition that they are capable of helping the client manager solve a problem or address an issue. Ed Nevis points out in his Gestalt approach to Organizational Consulting, that this small recognition that the consultant has wisdom or objectivity elevates the consultant above the client and brings hints of superiority. These hints of superiority increase the ambivalence of a senior manager working with a lower status consultant especially in status sensitive organizations.

Senior managers may also confuse open and honest feedback with insubordination and may damage the consultant's reputation or even covertly threaten to fire the internal. Even when managers directly ask for feedback they may not really want to hear it and the power of senior managers over the internal's position can be very threatening. One of my most senior executive clients who had a reputation for yelling and firing people on the spot, asked for some feedback. However, as I began to describe how his behavior undermined his leadership and the trust of his staff, it became evident that he really didn't want to hear it. As he lashed out at me and accused me of telling tales, I searched for ways to calm him down since it was clear that he really wasn't prepared to receive the feedback.

The pressure of the hierarchy is also felt in the freedom to refuse a client. When clients make outrageous requests or want unrealistic interventions, internals often feel they cannot say no. They must start with where the client is, take unproductive or impossible assignments or work with difficult clients because either their boss or another senior level manager makes those demands. One of my interviews reported an experience when she was asked by her boss to help "fix" a problem manager under the guise of team building. Although she felt it was an impossible setting and that executive management needed to resolve a performance problem, with the pressure from her boss, she believed she had to try. The intervention became a huge disaster and she ultimately recommended that the manager needed to be fired for illegal and immoral behavior.

Boss-Subordinate Relationship

Balancing the boss-subordinate relationship and the realities of organization politics with the ethics of client confidentiality and the neutral role of consulting is another challenge. Many bosses don't like surprises and expect to be kept informed and it may be difficult for your boss to understand why the work requires confidentiality. If there are strong political camps within the organization, you may be expected to keep your boss apprised of the maneuvering of your clients in other camps. Working with senior management as client's may threaten the HR "boss" who does not work at that level or truly understand the work of the internal OD consultant. This is what leads many internal organization development consultants to request and prefer reporting directly to the senior line executive to help minimize this troubling status issue. However, that is not always feasible or realistic.

Our Own Issues

We must also address our own issues with authority which may limit us from taking controversial positions or giving feedback to senior level clients. Many of us have a hard time saying no or disagreeing with senior managers. We may also have a hard time working with and establishing relationships with people we don't like or to challenge peers and colleagues, putting our daily work relationships on the line.

Coping with the Hierarchy

Success as an internal consultant as one internal suggested requires staying congruent, balanced, and marginal. It may necessitate exploring our own issues in a therapeutic setting, building our own internal strength. Power based on status and position is different than the power we bring based on expertise and competency. For me acknowledging my own power based in my experience, skills, ability and knowledge has helped me equalize the imbalance in positional power and approach my work with high status clients as a partner and an equal. To remain marginal as the consultant referenced above is a challenge we have discussed before in this feature. Strong needs to belong and be accepted will undoubtedly undermine our ability to stay marginal. Such needs may drive some to other professions. This consultant also suggested that we often “need to ventilate and commiserate or we will blow up”. She highly recommended finding one person you can “be an employee with” who you trust implicitly to share your feelings as an employee fed up with the hierarchy. After you ventilate with that one person, then you can return to being a consultant.

Joel Henning in his book, *The Future of Staff Groups* observes that both clients and staff groups “must change if the full measure of the staff’s contribution to the business is to be realized.” For internal OD consultants, it means becoming clear and compelling about the value their expertise brings to the organization’s business objectives and strategy. He also urges managers to give up the belief that they know best how to use staff expertise and take seriously the staff recommendations of how they can contribute to the business. This suggests a need to educate managers not only about how to use OD expertise but also that using such expertise is irrelevant to grade level in the organization.

Addressing the status barrier becomes a matter of personal style and expertise. Acknowledging the client’s expertise, inviting partnership, and confidence in offering our own perspective, skills and experience begins to minimize the inequality and lead to collaboration on an equal basis. In addition, being clear about what we can offer, how we can have an impact, and what are the boundaries of our own capability conveys confidence to our clients. Because we operate within the system, our ability to build relationships, hold true to our values and trust our competence establishes our credibility to work at all levels in the organization.