

## **BAODN Newsletter © 2003**

### ***The Challenge of Transitions by Beverly Scott***

Years ago, like many external OD consultants, I assumed my skills and experience applied whether I was working as an internal consultant or an external consultant. After all, I had strong facilitation skills, I could intervene with great timing, I was a creative and flexible designer, and I built good relationships with my clients and my consulting team members. I was confident I had strong OD competencies based on both client and peer feedback. I learned the basic business issues of clients quickly. And I was committed to the humanistic values of increasing the voice, involvement and participation of employees in decision making, supporting leaders in creating a positive work environment, and helping employees at all levels develop their potential. Yet, when I moved into a newly established internal consulting function, I discovered I needed more than OD competence to succeed and that my valued expertise and experience in strategic organizational change, employee involvement, and group dynamics didn't necessarily open any doors, impress clients or result in high powered projects.

After the first few months, the novelty and cachet of being a successful external OD consultant wore off. I was asked questions about my

tenure in the company, my title, what was my job anyway, who did I report to, what project of his was I working on? The idea that I was an autonomous consultant who did not have to report the details of my activities to my boss and that I even dared to suggest that I would treat information I received confidentially was treated with suspicion and skepticism. Surely I must be promoting the latest human resource project. It was a foreign idea that a person from headquarters might respond to the needs of a manager in a field division. I discovered that by taking this internal position I had picked up unknown baggage more visible to long term employees experienced in the issues of role, status and bureaucracy than to me as a former external consultant who was comfortable with moving freely about the organization working with executives, mid-managers or front line employees.

In retrospect, I learned what most internal consultants who survive and thrive living and working inside organizations learn: With the benefits of more stable job security, opportunity to take on more diverse and varied consulting roles, work on and see the results of long-term change efforts, and find a sense of commitment and belonging come several challenges. The internal has less control with more organizational constraints, bureaucratic inertia, demands for cultural congruence and must learn to cope with the demands of a boss and be politically savvy. I realized that what I

learned by trial and error might be helpful to others who choose to “go inside”, and I began to write about it.<sup>1</sup>

Years later when I decided to return to the “freedom” of external consulting, I discovered the transition to independence could also be a slippery slope. Now instead of building client credibility through a more gradual process of building relationships, I had to learn how to sell myself and my uniqueness, which would be viewed as immodest, arrogant and braggadocio by my former internal peers and clients. I found myself alone in my office without external focus, structure and support to guide my priorities, help me get the administrative tasks done to prepare for client delivery, or talk through the challenges of difficult client situations. Clearly the move from a comfortable internal role to the freedom and flexibility of external consulting wasn’t necessarily easy either. Transitions in either direction can provide unexpected learning or unexpected challenges. When others ask me which is better, my response is always, “It depends”.

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<sup>1</sup> See Scott, Beverly, “Consulting on the Inside: An Internal Consultant’s Guide to Living and Working Inside Organizations”, 2000: ASTD Publishing.