CHAPTER 14

Issues in Consultant-Client Relationships

A number of interrelated issues can arise in consultant-client relationships in OD activities, and they need to be managed appropriately if adverse effects are to be avoided. These issues tend to center on the following important areas:

- Entry and contracting
- Defining the client system
- Trust
- The nature of the consultant's expertise
- Diagnosis and appropriate interventions
- The depth of interventions
- On being absorbed by the culture
- The consultant as a model
- The consultant team as a microcosm
- Action research and the OD process
- Client dependency and terminating the relationship
- Ethical standards in OD
- Implications of OD for the client

No simple prescriptions will resolve all dilemmas or problems in these aspects of OD, but we do have some notions about managing these areas.

ENTRY AND CONTRACTING

An initial discussion that can lead to an OD consulting contract can occur in various ways, but typically events evolve something like this example. The telephone rings: An executive has some concerns about his or her organization and the consultant has been recommended as someone who could help. After a brief description of some of the problems and a discussion of the extent to which the consultant's expertise is a reasonable fit for the situation, an agreement is made to pursue the matter over a meal or through an appointment at the executive's office.

During the face-to-face meeting, the consultant explores with the potential client some of the deeper aspects of the presenting problem. If "communications between managers aren't as thorough and as cordial as they ought to be," the consultant asks for
examples to get a better fix on the nature of the problem and its dynamics. Almost inevitability several interrelated problems surface. Or if the potential client says, "I want to move to self-managed teams in Plant B," the rationale and objectives for such a program are explored.

Furthermore, in the first meeting, the consultant and the client probably begin to sort out what group would be the logical starting point for an OD intervention. For example, in a particular manufacturing organization it might be important to focus on the top management team of eight people; or, in a city government it might appear prudent to include 20 key people, which would involve the city manager, assistant city managers, and all of the department heads. Considerable thought must be given to exactly who is to be included—and thus who is to be excluded—in the first interventions. The exclusion of key people, in particular, can be a serious mistake.

If the problems appear to lend themselves to OD interventions, the consultant describes how he or she usually proceeds in such circumstances. For example, the consultant might say: "If I were to undertake this assignment, here's how I would probably want to proceed. First, I would like to get the cooperation of the top management group to set aside, say, two and one-half days for an off-site workshop and to participate in interviews in preparation for that workshop. I would then like to have individual interviews with the entire group, ask each what's going well with the top management team, what the problems are, and what they would like things to be like. I would then extract the themes from the interviews. These themes would be reported to the group at the workshop and the problem areas would become the agenda for our work together."

All kinds of nuances can arise in this discussion. In addition to problems of who can and who should attend a workshop, other matters concern when and where it could be held, whether members of the management group can be away from their offices for the desired period, whether the top person is to be briefed about interview themes prior to the workshop, the extent of confidentiality of the interviews, and so on. An overriding dimension in this preliminary discussion is the extent of mutual confidence and trust that begins to develop between consultant and client.

Among the ground rules Marvin Weisbord has for his consulting relationships are the following:

Any information I collect and present will be anonymous. I will never attach names to anything people tell me. However, in certain situations (e.g., team building) I don't want confidential information, meaning anything which you are unwilling for other team members to know, even anonymously. . . .

All data belongs to the people who supply it. I will never give or show it to anyone without their permission.1

If both parties agree, these conditions become part of the overall psychological contract between consultant and client.

The more formal compensation aspects of the initial contract are also important and need to be clarified for the peace of mind of both client and consultant. One course of action is to have an oral agreement for an hourly or daily fee, with no charge for a brief telephone discussion, and usually no charge for a longer first exploration. There-
after, a bill might be sent for time spent, or a bill might be submitted for the total agreed-upon price for the particular project.

Contracting, in both a psychological and financial sense, occurs over and over in OD consulting. Again, drawing on Weisbord and focusing on the psychological contract:

Contracting, like the seasons, is repetitive and continually renewable. If I have a long-term contract (e.g., four days a month for a year) I also have a separate contract for each meeting, which I present on a flip-sheet and discuss at the outset. If I have a contract with a boss to help him build his team, I need to extend it to the team before we go to work . . . .

In short, I’m never finished contracting. Each client meeting requires that I reexamine the contract. Does it cover everybody I’m working with? Is it clear what we’re doing now? And why?

DEFINING THE CLIENT SYSTEM

The question of who the client is quickly becomes an important issue in consultant-client relationships. (We usually refer to the consultant in the singular, but the points we want to make also tend to apply to consultant teams. Similarly, the initial client may be an individual or a management team.) We think a viable model is one in which, in the initial contact, a single manager is the client, but as trust and confidence develop between the key client and the consultant, both begin to view the manager and his or her subordinate team as the client, and then the manager’s total organization as the client. Ideally, this progression begins to occur in the first interview. Thus the health and vitality of the various organizational subsystems, as well as the effectiveness and growth of all individual members of the client system, clearly become the consultant’s concern.

Another viable model is one in which a small, top management team (for example, the CEO, vice president of human resources, and another vice president) comprises the initial client group. Still another model of who the client might be is a steering committee comprised of representatives from different levels and functional areas. In this case, if the CEO is not a member, the consultant will need to be sensitive to who represents the CEO, or, in short, who represents the power structure. The whole process will be impotent if a steering committee is not free to act in the absence of the CEO.

Warner Burke presents a provocative, perhaps even more useful view of who the client is: "... I have come to think of my client as the relationship and/or interface between individuals and units within and related to the system. ... This in-between-ness is the main subject of my consulting." 13

He then goes on to remind us that Chris Argyris, in his book Intervention Theory and Method, favored terms such as intervenor and interventionist over the terms consultant or change agent. Further, Argyris defined intervention as follows: “To intervene is to enter into an ongoing system of relationships, to come between or among persons, groups, or objects for the purpose of helping them.” 14

Thus, to Burke and Argyris, who the client is has more to do with interactions, interrelationships, and interfaces than to specific persons or units. This concept is tremendously useful.
THE TRUST ISSUE

A good deal of the interaction in early contacts between client and consultant is implicitly related to developing a relationship of mutual trust. For example, the key client may be fearful that things will get out of hand with an outsider intervening in the system—that the organization will be overwhelmed with petty complaints or that people will be encouraged to criticize their superiors. Subordinates may be concerned that they will be manipulated toward their superiors’ goals with little attention given to their own. These kinds of concerns mean that the consultant will need to earn trust in these and other areas and that high trust will not be immediate.

Similarly, the consultant’s trust of the client may be starting at neutral. The consultant will be trying to understand the client’s motives and will want to surface any that are partly hidden. For example, if the client has hopes that a team-building session will punish an inadequately performing subordinate, the consultant and the client will need to reassess the purposes of team building and examine whether that activity is the appropriate context for confronting the matter. On a positive note, the client may see OD as a means of increasing both the client’s and the subordinates’ effectiveness, plus having hopes that a successful OD effort may bring considerable recognition from superiors. Surfacing such motives and examining their implications for effective behavior will enhance trust between the consultant and the client and will help to assure the eventual success of OD activities.

Trust and resistance problems also center on what we call the “good guy–bad guy syndrome.” Internal or external OD consultants, through their enthusiasm for an exciting technology, may signal that they perceive themselves as the carriers of the message, that is, that they are “good guys,” and implicitly that others are not, or at least are backward. This attitude obviously creates all sorts of trust and resistance problems. People usually want to work collaboratively with others in the pursuit of common ends—but people tend to resist being pushed around, or put down, under whatever banner. No one likes being put in the “bad guy” role, and we mistrust and resent those who seem to be doing that to us. This trap can ensnare not only the consultant but also the overly enthusiastic line manager.

Confidentiality must be maintained if trust is to be maintained, as implied in Weisbord’s ground rules for contracting. Even unintentional errors can be disastrous to the consultant-client relationship. Gavin gives an illustration in which notes made by consultants on the leadership and communication styles of managers were inadvertently duplicated and circulated to participants along with notes on workshop themes and action steps. The consultants had been asked to do the latter; the notes on the managers’ styles had been intended to be used by the facilitators in private counseling sessions with individual managers. As Gavin reports it, “By the time these notes had been circulated, any semblance of trust in the consultants had been destroyed.” We will have more to say about trust later.

THE NATURE OF THE CONSULTANT’S EXPERTISE

Partly because of the unfamiliarity with organization development methods, clients frequently try to put the consultant in the role of the expert on substantive content, such as on personnel policy or business strategy. We believe it is possible, and desirable, for
the OD consultant to be an expert in the sense of being competent to present a range of options open to the client, but any extensive reliance on the traditional mode of consulting, that is, giving substantive advice, will tend to negate the OD consultant's effectiveness. The OD consultant needs to resist the temptation of playing the content expert and will need to clarify his or her role with the client when it becomes an issue. However, we think the OD consultant should be prepared to describe in broad outline what the organization might look like if it were to go very far with an OD effort. Further, as we will discuss later, central to his or her role, the OD consultant must be an expert on process.

Moving into the expert or advocate role—or as Schein says, the “purchase of expertise role” or the “doctor-patient model”6 frequently stems from an overriding desire to please the client. The consultant wishes to maintain the relationship for a variety of reasons—professional, financial, or self-esteem—and naturally wants to be perceived as competent. The consultant, therefore, gets trapped into preparing reports or giving substantive advice, which if more than minimal, will reduce his or her effectiveness. (For alternative metaphors to consider, see C. Ken Wiedner's essay, “The Physician-Patient Metaphor Reconsidered.”7)

At least four good reasons should encourage the OD consultant to avoid for the most part the expert role. The first is that a major objective of an OD effort is to help the client system to develop its own resources. The expert role creates a kind of dependency that typically does not lead to internal skill development.

The second reason is that the expert role almost inevitably requires the consultant to defend his or her recommendations. With reference to an initial exploratory meeting, Schein mentions the danger of being “seduced into a selling role” and states that under such conditions “we are no longer exploring the problem.”8 In short, finding oneself in the expert role and defending one's advice tends to negate a collaborative, developmental approach to improving organizational processes.

A third reason for largely avoiding the expert role has to do with trust. As shown in Table 14-1, one criterion for resolving whether to provide confidential reports or advice to top management is how such an intervention would affect various client groups in the organization and the consultant's relationship with them. The OD consultant's role is a tenuous one at best. Any impression that the consultant is making recommendations inimical to members of client groups puts the consultant in the role of an adversary. For example, the disclosure that the consultant has made a secret recommendation that the number of divisions and vice presidents be reduced from 16 to 8 is likely to be met with widespread alarm and immediate distrust of the consultant. The question will also immediately arise, What else is the consultant up to that we don't know about? Thus, making recommendations to the top is quite different from confronting the top management group with the data that three-fourths of the members of the top team believe that the organization has serious problems, partly stemming from too many divisions. In the one instance, the consultant is the expert; in the other instance, the consultant is helping the top team to be more expert in surfacing data and diagnosing the state of the system.

A fourth reason has to do with expectations. If the consultant goes very far in the direction of being an expert on substance in contrast to process, the client is likely to expect more and more substantive recommendations, thus negating the OD consultant's central mission which is to help with process.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Intervention</th>
<th>To or For CEO or Unit Leader</th>
<th>To or For Client Team</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Confidential report of advice on qualifications of job incumbents</td>
<td>No.</td>
<td>No.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confidential report or advice on structure of organization or unit</td>
<td>No.</td>
<td>Usually not; at stake is the trust of the various team members. One question for resolving the issue would be, Who would be hurt?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technical report or advice in some area of the consultant’s expertise, e.g., computer applications, or a wage and salary survey, or training in statistical process control</td>
<td>Usually not. One consideration would be, What would this “purchase of expertise” mode of consulting do to the client’s expectations about my role?</td>
<td>Usually not. One consideration would be, What would this “purchase of expertise” mode of consulting do to the client’s expectations about my role?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Describing various options open to the client and the implications of those options</td>
<td>Yes and no. Depends on whether the intervention is seen as perspective enlarging or prescriptive for the CEO or other key client, whether the client and consultant are open with others about the request, and whether considerable trust has been earned.</td>
<td>Yes, providing that the intervention is seen as perspective enlarging and not as prescriptive.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advice on OD strategy</td>
<td>Yes, if it is overall organizational strategy and if shared with top team and more broadly in the organization. Yes, if it is strategy for team, providing that it is shared with team.</td>
<td>Yes, if it is strategy for team. Yes, if it is broad organizational strategy providing that advice is shared widely in the organization.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advice on intervention, e.g., when and how a team-building session should be conducted</td>
<td>Yes, providing that advice is shared with team.</td>
<td>Yes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data feedback to CEO or unit leader from interviews or questionnaires</td>
<td>Yes, if it is data about the leader. Yes, if it is a team or organizational data and others have concurred in the strategy of the top person having a preliminary briefing. No, if the understanding was that the data would be fed back to the team first.</td>
<td>Yes, if it is data about the team. No, if it is data about other teams, unless data have been aggregated to present overall organization averages, ranges, etc., and there has been wide concurrence on the strategy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guidance or moderating of a team-building session</td>
<td>Yes, if it is with concurrence of team.</td>
<td>Yes, if it is with concurrence of team.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Process consultation or coaching on individual behavior or style</td>
<td>Yes, if it is requested.</td>
<td>Yes, if it is requested.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER 14 Issues in Consultant-Client Relationships

Some exceptions to these reasons are described in Table 14-1. For example, it is usually desirable and necessary to give advice on the design of a workshop or the design of a questionnaire. Such advice is usually quite facilitating, providing that the consultant is open to modifications of his or her suggestions by members of the client system. As Schein states it,

The process consultant should not withhold his expertise on matters of the learning process itself; but he should be very careful not to confuse being an expert on how to help an organization to learn with being an expert on the actual management problems which the organization is trying to solve.9

In other words, the OD consultant should act in the expert role on the process used but not on the task.

Another exception consists of providing a range of options open to the client. For example, if issues include how a unit or organization should be structured in terms of which functions should be grouped together or who should report to whom, the OD consultant can be helpful by presenting some optional forms and discussing the possible implications of each. However, such an intervention should ordinarily be presented in a team situation so as not to be misinterpreted, must be timely in terms of its relevance and acceptability, and should be essentially perspective-enlarging in contrast to prescriptive. We believe that the more extensive the OD consultant's knowledge of management and organization, the more effective the OD consultant can be. But beware of the difference between being essentially a facilitator-educator and being essentially an advice-giver. Even the presenting of options can be overdone. If the consultant's ideas become the focal point for prolonged discussion and debate, the consultant has clearly shifted away from the facilitator role. Obviously, the situation is not an either/or matter; it is a matter of degree and emphasis.

DIAGNOSIS AND APPROPRIATE INTERVENTIONS

Another pitfall for the consultant is the temptation to apply an intervention technique he or she particularly likes and that has produced good results in the past, but may not square with a careful diagnosis of the immediate situation. For example, giving subgroups an assignment to describe “what is going well in our weekly department head meetings” and “what is preventing the meetings from being as effective as we'd like” might be more on target and more timely than launching into the role analysis technique with the boss's role as the focus of discussion. It might be too soon; that is, too much defensiveness on the part of the boss or too much apprehension on the part of subordinates might be the case and prevent any productive discussion from taking place. As Herbert Shepard has said, the consultant should “start where the system is.”10

We think a consultant should do what he or she can do, but the intervention should be appropriate to the diagnosis, which requires an intensive look at the data, for example, the themes from interviews. The wider the range of interventions with which the consultant is familiar, of course, the more options the consultant can consider. The more
the consultant’s expertise and experience, the less agonizing is likely to be required in selecting or designing appropriate interventions.

DEPTH OF INTERVENTION

A major aspect of selecting appropriate interventions is the matter of depth of intervention. In Roger Harrison’s terms, depth of intervention can be assessed using the concepts of accessibility and individuality. By accessibility Harrison means the degree to which the data are more or less public versus being hidden or private and the ease with which the intervention skills can be learned. Individuality means the closeness to the person’s perceptions of self and the degree to which the effects of an intervention are in the individual in contrast to the organization. We assume that the closer one moves on this continuum to the sense of self, the more the inherent processes have to do with emotions, values, and hidden matters and, consequently, the more potent they are to do either good or harm. It requires a careful diagnosis to determine whether these interventions are appropriate and relevant. If they are inappropriate, they may be destructive or, at a minimum, unacceptable to the client or the client system.

To minimize these risks, Harrison suggests two criteria for determining the appropriate depth of intervention:

First to intervene at a level no deeper than that required to produce enduring solutions to the problems at hand; and, second, to intervene at a level no deeper than that at which the energy and resources of the client can be committed to problem solving and to change.

To Harrison, these criteria require that the consultant proceed no faster or deeper than the legitimation obtained from the client system culture and that he or she stay at the level of consciously felt needs. We believe these are sound guidelines.

Harrison does recognize, however, and we agree, that the change agent is continuously confronted by the dilemma of whether to “lead and push, or to collaborate and follow.” Harrison’s orientation is to the latter, but we are inclined to be slightly less conservative. We think that, to be effective, the consultant needs occasionally but prudently to take minor risks in the direction of leading and pushing, but these risks should not be quantum jumps. As the consultant develops expertise in diagnosis and in making interventions, the risks that are run are mainly the risks of a rejected suggestion. We do, however, agree with the essence of what Harrison is suggesting and agree with his criteria.

Another way of viewing depth of intervention might be to think about the performance of units by descending order of systems and subsystems. Data about the behavior and performance of the total organization are perhaps the most accessible and the least personal and perhaps create the least personal anxiety and defensiveness. Performance and behavior data about me in an organization are perhaps the least accessible and the most personal. The consultant, then, needs to have the skills to intervene effectively down through these progressively smaller systems—frequently simultaneously—according to whether the issue is
CHAPTER 14 Issues in Consultant-Client Relationships  261

How well are we performing as a total organization?
How well are we doing as a large unit?
How well are we doing as a team?
How well are you and I working together?
How well are you doing?
How well am I doing?

The concept of depth of intervention, viewed either in this way or in terms of a continuum of the formal system, informal system, and self, suggests that the consultant needs an extensive repertoire of conceptual models, intervention techniques, and sensitivities to be able to be helpful at various levels. The consultant’s awareness of his or her own capabilities and limitations, of course, is extremely important.

ON BEING ABSORBED BY THE CULTURE

One of the many mistakes one can make in the change-agent role is to let oneself be seduced into joining the culture of the client organization. Even though one needs to join the culture enough to participate in and enjoy the functional aspects of the prevailing culture—an example would be good-natured bantering when everyone is clear that such bantering is in fun and means inclusion and liking—participating in the organization’s pathology will neutralize the consultant’s effectiveness.

One of us recalls an experience in which the most critical issue to surface in preliminary interviews with members of a professional staff group—we’ll call it an engineering organization—was who would be the new manager. The current manager’s promotion was to take effect in a few weeks, and he was anxious that the group members provide some input on the selection of his successor as well as that they tidy up a number of unresolved communications and administrative matters. One obvious candidate for the promotion was a senior engineer who was highly respected for his professional competency—clearly an engineer’s engineer. However, younger members of the staff privately expressed fears to the consultant that the senior engineer would be too authoritarian if he assumed the manager’s role, and they did not want to lose his accessibility as professional mentor. On the other hand they had strong concerns that they would seriously hurt the man’s feelings by openly confronting the issue of his style and that he might resign if the matter were confronted. As a result, the consultant team acquiesced in not feeding back to the group the issue most troubling them. In effect, everyone but the senior engineer conspired to protect him, to pretend that he was a strong candidate for promotion, and to postpone the decision. As a result, the group was partly paralyzed for weeks. The immediate effect of the team-building session was one of frustration for all of the participants. In retrospect, the consultant’s view is that the client system could probably have worked through the matter and that the senior engineer would have proved to be the strongest and most adaptable there that day, including the consultants.

The dilemma created when a client subgroup describes an issue to the consultant but says, “We won’t deal with it and we won’t let you surface it in the total group,” is a troublesome one. One way out of the dilemma may be to discuss the
likely consequences of not dealing with the issue. One consequence may be that the recipient of unclear communication develops a kind of paranoia from the confusing or distorted signals he or she is receiving. Another consequence is that a norm may be implicitly created that says all negative interpersonal feedback is off limits, which has the deeper consequence that the entire group is denied data about problem areas that could be constructively worked on. Another consequence might be that the group is denied the capability of sharing much positive feedback for fear that such sharing could spill over into qualifying statements that begin to get into negative areas. Confronting the subgroup with the dilemma and outlining the consequences of inaction, then, may be much more constructive than succumbing to the pressures of the culture.

Reddin provides us with a delightful account of another instance of the consultant’s being absorbed by the culture.

The chairman of a 10,000 employee subsidiary of a British industrial giant invited me to dinner with his board at their country house training centre. It was an epic meal and the vintage port flowed. The conversation was witty and I had to lean on my limited classical education to keep up with the literary allusions. In preparation for an MBO conference I had in fact recently re-read Thucydides’ History of the Peloponnesian War and this gave me some good lines. My first error was accepting the first invitation and then my next was visiting in similar circumstances yet again. It was a superb, if unconscious, seduction job by the client. My relationship to this client became intellectual witty companion. My attempts to change it were met with incredulity.\textsuperscript{15}

Although Reddin did not elaborate, the implication is that once the consultant became the “intellectual witty companion,” the chairman resisted any efforts to be guided, along with the board members, toward examining the functional and dysfunctional aspects of the culture of the organization. Perhaps the only course of action open to the consultant, once he realized he had been absorbed by the culture, would have been to express openly his feelings and concerns about the situation to the chairman. Such an intervention might or might not have shifted the relationship more toward an OD consultant-key client mode. Again, in this illustration, being absorbed by the culture of the client organization immobilized the change agent.

Internal change agents may be even more susceptible to absorption by the prevailing organizational culture than are external change agents. As long as they work with people and units that have considerable “political distance” from their own unit, their objectivity may not be any more vulnerable than that of a consultant from the outside. On the other hand, if their own unit (whether they are specialists who are part of a human resources or an OD unit or have a home base in some line department) is somehow engaged in maneuvering for resources or power in competition with their client, they may inadvertently be drawn into the politics of the situation. Rather than helping to surface the dynamics of dysfunctional rivalry under appropriate circumstances, the change agents may become part of the problem, thus helping to submerge an issue or contributing to tactics incompatible with the helping role and thereby alienating the client or potential clients.
Another important issue is whether change agents are willing and able to practice what they preach. In the area of feelings, for example, the consultant may be advocating a more open system in which feelings are considered legitimate and their expression is important to effective problem solving and at the same time suppressing his or her own feelings about what is happening in the client system. In particular, this problem can be a frequent one for the less-experienced practitioner, and it usually has an impact on this person’s feeling of competency: “If only I had said...” The more one learns to be in touch with one’s own feelings, the more spontaneous one can be and the greater the options open for interventions. (For this reason, we recommend extensive T-group experience for OD consultants.) However, the client system is not the appropriate ground for working out any problems the consultant may be currently experiencing. On the other hand, being too aloof emotionally will tend to minimize the possibilities of helping the client.

As another example of modeling behavior, the OD consultant needs to give out clear messages—that is, the consultant’s words and apparent feelings need to be congruent. The consultant also needs to check on meanings, to suggest optional methods of solving problems, to encourage and support, to give feedback in constructive ways and to accept feedback, to help formulate issues, and to provide a spirit of inquiry. We are not suggesting that the OD consultant must be a paragon of virtue; rather, we are suggesting that to maximize one’s effectiveness, one must continuously practice and develop the effective behaviors one wishes to instill in the client system.

The consultant-key client viewed as a team, or consultants working as a team, can profitably be viewed as a microcosm of the organization they are trying to create. In the first place, the consultant team must set an example of an effective unit if the team is to enhance its credibility. Second, practitioners need the effectiveness that comes from continuous growth and renewal processes. And third, the quality of the interrelationships within the consulting team carries over directly into the quality of their diagnosis, their intervention designs, and their interventions. To be more explicit about the last point, unresolved and growing conflict between two consultants can paralyze an intervention. Or simple lack of attention to team maintenance matters can produce morale problems that reduce spontaneity and creativity in planning sessions or in interacting with the client system.

A related issue is whether the OD process itself will be subject to the ongoing action research being experienced by the client system. The issue of congruency is, of course, important, but the viability of the OD effort and the effectiveness of the consultants may be at stake. Unless feedback loops relate to various interventions and stages in the OD
process, the change agents and the organization will not learn how to make the future OD interventions more effective.

Feedback loops do not necessarily have to be complicated. Simple questionnaires or interviews can be very helpful. As an illustration, we recall having lunch with the key people who had been involved in a problem-solving workshop, and upon asking several questions about how things were going "back at the shop," we found that problems had emerged centering on who had been invited to attend the workshop and who had not. This feedback, at a minimum, has caused us to pay even more attention to prework and to helping workshop participants plan how to share effectively what has occurred with those not attending.

THE DEPENDENCY ISSUE AND TERMINATING THE RELATIONSHIP

If the consultant is in the business of enhancing the client system’s abilities in problem solving and renewal, then the consultant is in the business of assisting the client to internalize skills and insights rather than to create a prolonged dependency relationship. This issue tends to be minor, however, if the consultant and the client work out the expert versus facilitator issue described earlier and if the consultant subscribes to the notion that OD should be a shared technology. The facilitator role, we believe, creates less dependency and more client growth than the traditional consulting modes, and the notion of a shared technology leads to rapid learning on the part of the client.

The latter notion is congruent with Argyris’s admonition that if the consultant intervention is to be helpful in an ongoing sense, it is imperative for the client to have “free, informed choice.”16 And to have this free choice, the client requires a cognitive map of the overall process.17 Thus the consultant will have to be quite open about such matters as the objectives of the various interventions that are made and about the sequence of planned events. The OD consultant should continuously be part educator as he or she intervenes in the system.

An issue of personal importance to the consultant is the dilemma of working to increase the resourcefulness of the client versus wanting to remain involved, to feel needed, and to feel competent. A satisfactory solution to this dilemma, we believe, is a gradual reduction in external consultant use as an OD effort reaches maturity. In a large organization, one or more key consultants may be retained in an ongoing relationship, but with less frequent use. If the consultants are constantly developing their skills, they can continue to make innovative contributions. Furthermore, they can serve as a link with outside resources such as universities and research programs, and more important, they can serve to help keep the OD effort at the highest possible professional and ethical level. Their skills and insights should serve as a standard against which to compare the activities of internal change agents. Some of the most innovative and successful OD efforts on the world scene, in our judgment, have maintained some planned level of external consultant use.

Another dimension of the issue arises, however, when the consultant senses that his or her assistance is no longer needed or could be greatly reduced. For the client’s good, to avoid wasting the consultant’s own professional resources, and to be congruent, the consultant should confront the issue.
A particularly troublesome dilemma occurs when the use of the consultant, in the judgment of the consultant, is declining more rapidly than progress on the OD effort seems to warrant. It would be easy to say that here, too, the consultant should raise the matter with the client, even if the consultant risks appearing self-serving. In such situations we wish more were known about the dynamics of OD efforts’ losing their momentum. Such additional knowledge would help consultants and clients to assess more objectively the extent of need for consultant assistance, how to improve the skills of the consultant and the client in managing the OD effort, and how to rejuvenate the OD effort if rejuvenation is warranted.

Tannenbaum believes that many OD programs taper off because not enough attention has been given to helping people and units let go of matters that need to be laid to rest, to die. He believes that in a real sense, facilitators should be able to assist in a mourning process, but to be of help, facilitators must be able to confront their own tendencies to want to hang on and their own vulnerability.

My hunch is that after we get beyond those attitudes and behaviors most individuals and groups are relatively willing to alter, we then begin challenging the more central fixities that define individuals and organizational units at their cores. Holding on at this level becomes crucial. Yet we keep working on processes that focus on change, and do not do very much about facilitating mourning and the dying process—helping units let go.18

We also suspect that OD efforts frequently flounder because of internal power struggles that have not been sensed early enough by the consultant or understood well enough for anyone to intervene constructively. For example, some relatively powerful person or group may be fearful of losing status or influence and may be mobilizing support for the status quo through such tactics as distorting information or discrediting whoever is seen as the threat. The threat may be the practitioner or the OD effort or the threat may be wholly unrelated to the OD process. But if people in the organization get caught up in the political power maneuvering, the OD effort may be immobilized. This interference appears to be what happened to the highly successful STS and self-managed team approach that had flourished at the General Foods pet food plant in Topeka for several years.19 While much more needs to be known about these occurrences as they relate to OD efforts, it would seem that these situations, if sensed, need to be surfaced and confronted head on. Such shadowy struggles are usually dysfunctional whether or not an OD effort is under way, and the remedy may need to be a prompt description of reality by the chief executive officer. While a long-term OD effort should replace most such covert maneuvering with an open, working through of issues, these situations can and do occur while an OD effort is under way. (For more on power and politics and OD, see chapter 16.)

Sometimes the organization may simply be temporarily overloaded by externally imposed crises occupying the attention of key people. Under such conditions, the best strategy may be one of reducing or suspending the more formalized OD interventions and letting people carry on with their enhanced skills and then returning to the more formalized aspects at a later date. If the dynamics of these and the other circumstances we have described were more defined, the resolution of the problem of what to do when the OD effort seems to be running out of steam might take directions other than reducing or terminating the involvement of the change agent.
ETHICAL STANDARDS IN OD

Much of this chapter and, indeed, much of what has preceded in other chapters, can be viewed in terms of ethical issues in OD practice, that is, in terms of enhancement versus violation of basic values and/or in terms of help versus harm to persons. Louis White and Kevin Wooten see five categories of ethical dilemmas in organization development practice stemming from the actions of either the consultant or client or both. The types of ethical dilemmas they see are: (1) misrepresentation and collusion, (2) misuse of data, (3) manipulation and coercion, (4) value and goal conflicts, and (5) technical ineptness.20 (These five types largely encompass the several ethical dilemmas reported by Susan DeVogel in a survey of OD practitioners.21)

We will draw on and modify their categories to suggest what we see as some of the more serious areas for potential ethics violations in OD consulting. Some of these areas apply not only to OD consulting, but to management consulting in general. The illustrations are ours and are only hypothetical.

Misrepresentation of the Consultant’s Skills

An obvious area for unethical behavior would be to distort or misrepresent one’s background, training, competencies, or experience in vita sheets, advertising, or conversation. A subtle form of misrepresentation would be to let the client assume one has certain skills when one does not.

Professional/Technical Ineptness

The potential for unethical behavior stemming from lack of expertise is pervasive in OD. To give one example, using Harrison’s concept of depth of intervention, it would seem to be unethical to ask people in a team-building session to provide mutual feedback about leadership style when neither preliminary interviews nor the client group has indicated a readiness or a willingness to do so. Another example would be as follows: A preliminary diagnosis suggests the appropriateness of a feedback intervention, but the consultant has no experience from which to draw in order to design a constructive feedback exercise. The consultant goes ahead anyway. It would be unethical for the consultant to plow ahead without some coaching by a more experienced colleague. (This situation may call for the “shadow consultant,” the consultant to a single individual, in this case another consultant.22) Thus, we have hypothesized two violations of ethical standards: (1) using an intervention that has a low probability of being helpful (and may be harmful in this circumstance), and (2) using an intervention that exceeds one’s expertise.

Misuse of Data

Again, the possibilities for unethical behavior in the form of data misuse on the part of either the client or the consultant are abundant. This is why confidentiality is so important in OD efforts. (See Weisbord’s ground rules for contracting earlier in the chapter.) Data can be used to punish or otherwise harm persons or groups. An obvious example would be a consultant’s disclosure to the boss the names of those who provided information about the boss’s dysfunctional behavior. Another example would be showing climate survey results from Department A to the head of Department B without Department A’s authorization.

Serious distortions of the data would also be unethical. Let’s imagine a scenario in which the consultant interviews the top 20 members of management and finds sev-
eral department heads are angry about the behaviors of fellow department head Z and the practices in Z's department. Further, Z is hostile and uncooperative with the consultant in the data-gathering interview. The consultant is now angry but is not conscious of the extent of the anger. When the consultant feeds back the themes from the interviews to the group, his or her anger takes the form of overstating and overemphasizing the dysfunctional aspects of Z's unit. (In an ironic twist, the group might turn on the consultant and defend Z. As a colleague of ours says, "Never attack the 'worst' member of the group—the group will reject you."

Collusion An example of collusion would be the consultant agreeing with the key client to schedule a team-building workshop when department head Z is scheduled to be on vacation. (This maneuver is hardly the way to deal with the problems created by Z, is likely to create reduced trust in the consultant and the key client, Z's boss, and is likely to intensify Z's dysfunctional behavior.) Another example illustrating the power that a consultant with expertise in group dynamics can wield for good or harm is the consultant colluding with other members of the group to set up a feedback situation in which Z's deficiencies will be all too apparent, particularly to Z's boss. Instead of creating a situation in which everyone, including Z, has a chance of improving performance, this collusion is aimed at Z's undoing. (We've picked on Z enough; if he or she is this much of a problem, Z's performance should be confronted head on by the boss, outside of the team-building setting, and preferably well in advance. If OD interventions are perceived as methods for "getting" anyone, the OD process is doomed to failure.)

Coercion It is unethical to force organizational members into settings where they are, in effect, required to disclose information about themselves or their units which they prefer to keep private. The creation of a T-group with unwilling participants would be an example.

A troublesome dilemma occurs in the case of a manager and most of his or her subordinates who want to go off-site for a problem-solving workshop but one or two members are strongly resisting. If friendly persuasion and addressing the concerns of the individual(s)—not painful arm-twisting—do not solve the matter, perhaps a reasonable option is for the manager to indicate that nonparticipation is acceptable and that no one will be subject to recriminations, but those individuals should understand that the group will go ahead and try to reach consensus on action plans for unit improvement without their input.

Promising Unrealistic Outcomes Obviously, this is unethical and counterproductive. The temptation to make promises in order to gain a client contract can be great, but the consequences can be reduced credibility of the consultant and the OD field, and the reduced credibility of the key client within his or her organization.

Deception and Conflict of Values Deception in any form is unethical and will destroy trust. In chapter 12 we gave the example of a telephone company that embarked on a major reengineering effort after giving assurances of job security, and then proceeded to lay off a huge part of the workforce. The layoffs came after the company had promoted teamwork and empowerment and secured employee cooperation in streamlining operations. For an OD professional on the scene under such circumstances, the ethical course of
action would be to press top management to look at the probable consequences of re-engineering, to look at possible options, and to be completely open with employees about the implications of whatever change strategy was selected. And the ethical responsibilities of the OD professional and company management extend, of course, to mitigating the impact of any change effort on the lives of individual employees.

Thus, the values underlying ethical OD practice are honesty, openness, voluntarism, integrity, confidentiality, the development of people, and the development of consultant expertise, high standards, and self-awareness.

**IMPLICATIONS OF OD FOR THE CLIENT**

An OD effort has some fundamental implications for the chief executive officer and top managers of an organization, and we believe that these implications need to be shared and understood at the outset. Basically, *OD interventions* as we have described them, are a conscious effort on the part of top management:

1. To enlarge the database for making management decisions. In particular, the expertise, perceptions, and sentiments of team members throughout the organization are more extensively considered than heretofore.

2. To expand the influence processes. The OD process tends to further a process of mutual influence; managers and subordinates alike tend to be influential in ways they have not experienced previously.

3. To capitalize on the strengths of the informal system and to make the formal and the informal system more congruent. A great deal of information that has previously been suppressed within individuals or within the informal system (e.g., appreciations, frustrations, hurts, opinions about how to do things more effectively, fears) begins to be surfaced and dealt with. Energies spent suppressing matters can now be rechanneled into cooperative effort.

4. To become more responsive. Management must now respond to data that have been submerged and must begin to move in the direction of personal, team, and organizational effectiveness suggested by the data.

5. To legitimize conflict as an area of collaborative management. Rather than using win-lose, smoothing, or withdrawal modes of conflict resolution, the mode gradually becomes one of confronting the underlying basis for the conflict and working the problem through to a successful resolution.24

6. To examine its own leadership style and ways of managing. We do not think an OD effort can be viable long if the top management team (the CEO plus subordinate team or the top team of an essentially autonomous unit) does not actively participate in the effort. The top team inevitably is a powerful determinant of organizational culture. OD is not a televised game being played for viewing by top management; members of top management are the key players.

7. To legitimize and encourage the collaborative management of team, interteam, and organization cultures. This broad intervention goal is largely the essence of OD.

We think that these items largely describe the underlying implications for top management and that the OD consultant needs to be clear about them from the beginning and to help the top management group be clear about them as the process unfolds.25
CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Numerous issues regarding the client-consultant relationship need to be addressed and managed in a successful OD effort. These issues have to do with establishing the initial contract, identifying who is the client, establishing trust, clarifying the role of the consultant, determining the appropriate depth of intervention, examining the consequences of being absorbed by the organization’s culture, viewing the consultant and consulting teams as models, applying action research to OD, terminating the relationship, and ethical standards. These issues have important implications for practitioners, top management, and the organization.

Notes

2. Ibid.
9. Ibid., p. 120.
12. Ibid., p. 201. [Harrison’s emphasis.]
13. Ibid., pp. 198–199.