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Contents

Roswita Königswieser | Ebrû Sonuç | Jürgen Gebhardt

An Integrated Approach to Business and Systemic Process Consulting

First published in German in 2005 in “In the Neighborhood of Consulting”,

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Ulrike Froschauer | Manfred Lueger

Reflective-Differentiating Organizational Consulting

Reflections on Combining Systemic and Business Process Consulting

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Kühl S., Moldaschl M. (Ed.), München u. Mering

Introduction

Roswita Königswieser | Martin Hillebrand

Systemic Consultancy in Organisations

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By Roswita Königswieser | Ebrû Sonuç | Jürgen Gebhardt

An Integrated Approach to Business and Systemic Process Consulting

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1. Why Combine Business and Systemic Process Consulting?

In this article we examine the possible benefits to clients of a new business model which combines and integrates two different forms of consulting: business process and systemic process consulting. We report on our own experiences of working in such a combined consulting setting and present the general requirements and success factors for projects of this kind, drawing in the process on conclusions and information from our own research reports.

As systemic organizational developers or systemic process consultants (we use the terms synonymously) we regularly encounter the limits of compatibility of business and systemic process consulting, be it in restructuring projects, in mergers or with the introduction of new production systems. Splitting things up into hard and soft factors, into content and processes is common practice in the traditional Western view of the world with its mechanistic paradigms, whereas the holistic view taken by the systemic approach focuses basically on integrating contradictory positions and extremes (see Chapter 2).

For many years this differentiation also proved useful in determining the various areas of expertise, assigning roles and setting the boundaries between the individual consulting firms and services available. Even clients seemed to find it easy to distinguish between the two consulting approaches, basing their choice on the following simple maxim: "If we need to increase our production levels, we call in business process consultants; if we want to change our corporate culture, then it's systemic consultancy we need."

In the meantime, many clients and consultants (regardless of approach) have come to the conclusion that this division of roles is neither effective nor desirable. Indeed, as former McKinsey associates Tom Peters and Robert Waterman note in their bestseller (cf. Peters and Waterman 1982), organizations achieve the best results when they consider a combination of hard factors ("strategies, structures, systems") and soft factors ("staffing, skills, shared values, style of management").

But theory is one thing and practice another. The lack of a common view shared by managers and consultants alike continues to bring about this split into business and systemic process consulting. This, in turn, can lead to a situation where two different consulting firms with their two different approaches and areas of expertise are hired at the same time by the same company. The arduous task of pulling together the loose, unconnected threads is often left simply to chance, and the results are by no means satisfactory for the client since each firm ultimately bases any proposed solutions on its own particular approach and consulting focus, leaving the client confused by the range and number of different recommendations.

Situations like this only serve to highlight the need for support from the consulting sector itself in bringing together the different approaches, resources and fields of expertise, thereby providing a new level of impetus to consulting and fostering organizational development.

2. Integration Problems – The Main Differences between the Two Approaches

Juxtaposing the ways the two approaches consider themselves provides a strong indication of where the

integration problems might lie. Critics of a business process-oriented approach talk of “extended workbenches” for top management, “selling pseudo-collateral” or “know-it-all consultants” (Zech 2004). Yet from the business process consultants own perspective, it is precisely because they do “know better”, they don’t suffer from “corporate tunnel vision” and they can offer better, more neutral solutions and new ways of solving problems that they are approached in the first place.

Disparagers of systemic process consulting brand it as “on the fence” moderation by “softies” or “fair weather consultants” who “block out the business side of the situation”. But this does not worry the process consultants; they see themselves as coaches and guides on a learning journey and consider their role as one of “changing patterns” and “empowering” people with new skills for the future.

Attempts to establish a neutral, shared definition uncover a number of fundamental differences between the two approaches.

The term business process consulting is used to refer to those consulting services in which specially trained consultants use their expert knowledge in such fields as business studies, engineering, etc. to help companies solve specific business problems. In their consulting activities, they draw primarily on standardized knowledge and their own skills in interpreting the data available. They see this data as problem indicators and use them to identify the reasons behind a specific issue. In this approach, the solution then lies in the proper and accurate selection, linking and interpretation of this data. The logic behind the interpretation and the resultant options it uncovers corresponds to a more or less complicated, complex, yet “rational” cause-effect pattern; a pattern to which social processes have to adapt and comply. The focus of attention lies on function-specific logic, e.g. the logic behind production, purchasing or sales.

This very particular function-specific view of the logic behind processes and structures has far-reaching consequences for consulting practice. Although experienced business consultants do make some use of the tools and techniques available for steering social processes in their assessment of the actual situation and recommendations for achieving the target situation, communication and social interaction do not play a central role in their efforts. They are simply a means to an end; a way of leveraging the functional logic. This logic is based on economic objectives and serves to add value, improve results, increase productivity, raise effectiveness, ensure labor efficiency and eliminate deficits. From the client’s perspective, this approach has a num-

ber of strengths: it helps overcome crises, offers excellent ideas, is based on real business contexts, is measurable, uses words the client understands and, above all, offers certainty in an uncertain situation. “They can do the things we can’t do ourselves.” “We know what we will be getting for our money”.

In contrast, optimizing communication processes within and between organizations and their stakeholders is a central issue in systemic process consulting. Introducing transparency into patterns of thought and action ultimately helps an organization to define its own goals, develop shared values, clarify expectations and reach agreement on how best to implement its plans. Systemic organizational consulting sees and treats an organization as a living organism with the ability and power to develop its own solutions to difficult situations and problems. This approach uses carefully selected interventions to help the organization release blocked energies, reach joint agreements in shared decision-making processes and determine how best to achieve its stated goals.

Ultimately, both approaches aim to help their clients become more successful; they just have very different ways of doing so.

Systemic process consulting is highly context-oriented, takes a more open attitude to results and individual process steps, involves those directly affected by the situation and mobilizes energy. However, it also requires reflection and feedback processes. As a result, it initially produces more uncertainty than certainty. The identification of internal patterns of thought and action, a deeper understanding of how problems arise and an improved ability to communicate and solve problems means that sustainable solutions emerge for the company almost of their own accord. However, systemic process consultants must take care to maintain an appropriate distance to the client system to ensure any “blind spots” are noticed.

Business process consultants often think and act in a similar manner to the client. They install themselves on site within the client system and can therefore be consulted directly, make concrete suggestions and participate in decision-making processes. The implementation of any proposed measures is left to the client.

A further significant difference between traditional business process and systemic process consulting lies in the circumstances and conditions that lead to the selection of a particular approach.

Since systemic consulting ultimately looks to introduce longer-term, sustainable change, organizations who find themselves facing a crisis that threatens their immediate survival generally call in the business

process consultants first. Their hope is that the consultants will provide them with the necessary decision-making basis they seek and recommend short-term measures that will have immediate effect. In times of economic stagnation or depression, when longer-term, positive expectations are overshadowed by more pressing worries about the immediate future, people often lack the time, understanding and insight to think about longer-term, sustainable development. Consequently, the actual needs and expectations of the client system also determine the choice of consulting approach: forceful, clear, profit-oriented, “top-down” measures versus the impetus and motivation to concentrate and reflect on inherent strengths and powers.

In some cases, companies might just be seeking an “alibi”, i.e. looking to hide behind the reputation of a large consulting firm and using its recommendations to endorse the need for the consulting process itself and/or any unpopular measures that might need to be implemented.

Interest in the systemic approach often stems either from some form of prior knowledge, understanding or practical experience of process consulting, or from publications on the subject or through a personal recommendation or contact. Any such background influences not only the project acquisition activities, but also the setting for the initial meeting, mutual expectations, contractual negotiations and the client-consultant relationship. In this sense, not only does each approach get the clients who suit it best, each client also gets the best form of consulting for its particular situation.

3. Does a Combined Approach Offer Added Value for Clients?

In Faust II Goethe already differentiates between the what and the how in the Laboratory Scene, when Homunculus proclaims: “Ponder the What – to solve the How still harder try.”

In less poetic terms, this means that each what creates a how and each how is the what in the next step. In an integrative consulting approach, the problem is no longer split into a what (business process consulting) and a how (systemic process consulting). Instead, professional, business related issues are embedded from the start in an appropriate systemic process architecture. The client only deals with one (joint) consultant system and can monitor corporate development as a whole; the links between strategy, structure and culture, between market share, profit margins and other goals are brought together in one single, unified concept. A combined approach offers many benefits for the client, the four most important of which are:

- Independent problem solving competence and sustainability: an integrated development process raises awareness and broadens and strengthens the client system’s ability to solve problems. The transfer of know-how then follows on implicitly, and clients are soon able to apply the systemic process skills needed to steer their organizations and develop the necessary business process skills without external support. Companies who reflect carefully on conflict situations are generally more responsive and receptive to their environments. They adapt better to unforeseen market developments, develop stable early warning systems and deal more quickly and efficiently with any crises that emerge. By becoming “fit for the future”, companies can transform themselves from followers into leaders and develop the strengths they need to move beyond what they thought were their previous limits.
- Reaching goals more easily: in an integrated approach, the design and implementation phases take place simultaneously, not consecutively. The way plans are made and implemented at this early stage, and the people involved, play an important role, since this is where the impetus is set and the attainability of short and long-term goals is gauged and assessed. Many companies have now come to realize that no matter how good a concept might be, it will be of little use if they do not actively promote it and actually do something with it. Only an integrated consulting approach can lead to lasting, forward-looking change: it does not treat organizations like submissive patients who need to be told what medicine to take, but instead encourages them to develop their own powers of self-healing.
- Easing the (internal) potential for conflict: the conflicting paradigms found in the two approaches (and in the client system itself) can be a major source of conflict and usually become most apparent when under pressure. In an integrated consultant system, these paradigms are pre-prepared to perfection and all but pre-digested, thus making them far easier to then reconcile in the client system. The contradictions, differences and advantages of the two approaches are jointly reflected upon by all concerned and the results presented in the form of integrated interventions. In this way, the short-term relief realized through the business consulting measures combines with the long-term support of systemic consulting to produce the best possible overall effects.
- Building a reputation through social responsibility: companies assume a high degree of social responsibility and make significant contributions to economic prosperity and the quality of life. They create jobs and influence politics, education and the Arts. Companies

who opt for an integrated approach are characterized by greater public visibility and market penetration. This social responsibility is apparent in the impetus it gives to the discourse on socio-relevant issues such as the future of work, lifelong learning, the new corporate role in society, the link between sustainability and prosperity, ethics, etc.

4. Systemic Integrative Consulting – A New Business Model?

Although we have many years of practical experience with integrated consulting projects, we are still elaborating a model that does justice to the complexity of an integrated approach to change processes. In our book on systemic integration management (Königswieser et al 2001, p, 53), we introduced a model that illustrates the work carried out simultaneously on the professional, content-related and process levels, which is based on four key factors (structure, culture, strategy and vision) in development processes. The loop between the present and the vision for the future is represented by the continual “systemic reflective loop”. This, in turn, contains the following four iterative steps: gathering information, building hypotheses, planning interventions and intervention (see Chapter 3).

Although this model takes the combination of hard and soft factors and of systemic process and business process consulting into account, it by no means integrates them fully or sufficiently. We have held many discussions and learning workshops with experts and colleagues to try to develop an extended version of this model, a version that can be seen as a “work in progress”. **Figure 1*** shows an example of one such possible draft model.

Fig. 1: SIM2

In our deliberations, we have assumed that much of what really goes on in corporate dynamics is the result of the interaction between and the interspersing of the whats and the hows in strategy, structure and culture. After all, the what cannot be separated from the how; they are dependent on and constantly interact with each other.

If business process consulting traditionally concentrates on the what, then its systemic counterpart focuses on the how. Consequently, as stand-alone solutions, neither can really do proper justice to the issues of corporate dynamics and development, even if an abstract approach and way of looking at the situation might sometimes seem necessary to reduce complexity. Depending on the situation and its requirements, needs and necessities, consulting processes based on this

model vary their interventions between the dimensions in the triangles, without turning them into a uniform mishmash and blurring their limits, yet still introducing a new level of quality. The reflection loops form the links and are closely interwoven with corporate dynamics and development.

In fact, in the real and chaotic world, it is this depth of perception which highlights some aspects and hides others, without letting them disappear entirely from view. When we look at one specific dimension in close-up, we can only see the others out of the corner of our eye. Changing the focus opens up the expanse and reveals the other aspects. Specializing in one aspect allows us to develop excellence and depth without losing sight of the bigger picture.

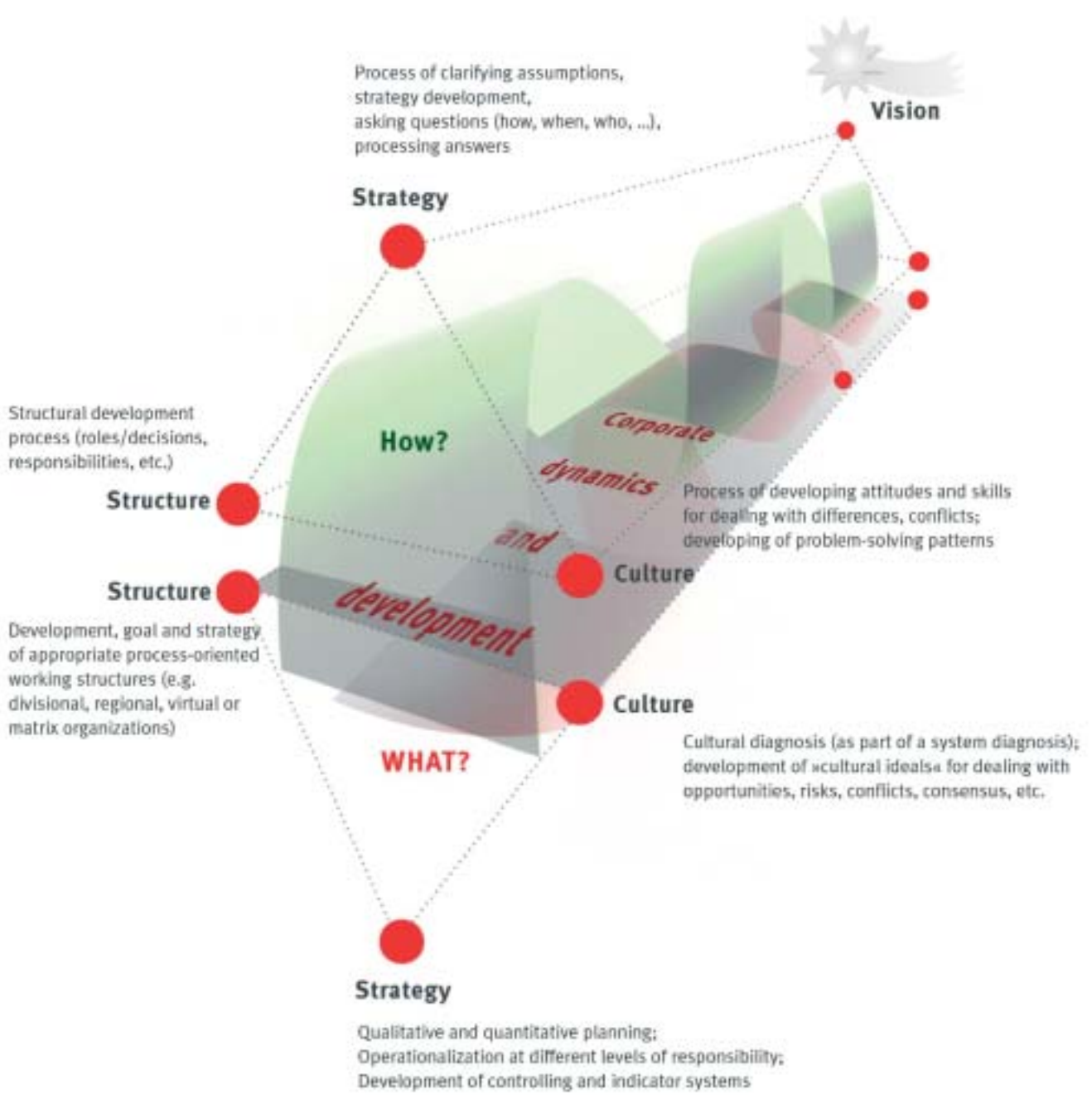
Complementarity theory (cf. Ruigrok 2000) also confirms a disparately high probability of economic success when a simultaneous and complementary approach to development processes results in the establishment of a positive, self-influencing feedback loop.

The reflective aspect inherent in the systemic loop is an indispensable element in a combined consulting approach. At the initial meeting with the client, it serves to establish a basic assessment of any manifest and latent issues that might be affecting the client system, an assessment which will later influence the choice of consulting staff, the project goals, the priorities set and the methods chosen.

This reflective meta-communication between the business and systemic process consultants remains an essential component throughout the entire consulting process, from the initial diagnosis, through to the project milestones and the ongoing discussions that take place with the client and in the consulting team. It is through this ongoing communication that any previously unnoticed incompatibilities will ultimately be revealed. If this reflective element does not become a matter of course in a mixed consulting team, our experience shows that the combined energies in this team will not be released.

Hand in hand with the reflective, discursive clarification of the effect of interventions comes a further process element, namely feedback. This includes the feedback processes both within the combined consulting team, between the individual units in the client system and between the client system and the consultants. It is important to ensure that sufficient time and space is given to this form of communication and that it is seen and understood by all as a self-organizing process of learning.

The fascination of this “twin turbo consulting”, as one colleague neatly put it, lies not in the theory, but in the actual consulting activities themselves. These requi-



re a shared understanding of project goals, concurrence on procedures, compatible values and a general setting and framework that can accommodate the process ideals behind this model.

If the common goals of an integrated consulting approach are a sustained, qualitative increase in the available options for action coupled with greater “mindfulness” (cf. Weick and Sutcliffe 2004) and greater success for the client in its business activities, then it is the “attitude” adopted by all the consultants involved that makes such an approach work (see Chapter 3). “Attitude” is the way we relate to ourselves, our colleagues, our clients and our general environment; it is the way we think. It controls our categories of perception, ways of doing things, priorities, intervention strategies, limits and conditions.

5. An Integrative Approach to Consulting

Integrated consulting works best and produces the most professional results when representatives of both approaches work together either in tandem or as members of a mixed team. Of course, this is only possible if the team members on both sides are familiar with the tasks, goals, methods and mental models used in the alternative approach and everyone is prepared to look at organizational development from a unified perspective. This approach provides access to know-how from both fields, which can then be turned into hypotheses and applied as required to suit the actual context and situation. Business process know-how is thus used not to set and plan requirements, but to ask the kind of questions that will eventually lead to solutions. In other words, business process consultants act as expert sparring partners for their systemic process counterparts, adding a further option to proposed solutions and opening up new ways of looking at innovative measures.

Combining this aspect with systemic process know-how means that the effects of any planned interventions at the architecture, design and tools levels are constantly reflected upon and adapted as required to suit the process. This process of professional reflection is a central element in the model and produces a qualitatively different view of the issues. The more intelligent use of expert knowledge and analytical planning strengths that comes with the addition of the process focus simply enhances their existing strengths. For example, cost-cutting measures are far easier to sustain if their effects are considered and the people they affect are involved in the decision-making process.

The use of reflection loops and self-observation techniques helps companies to develop new ways of loo-

king at their own organization. This, in turn, equips them with new ways of steering the organization and new problem-solving patterns. The model also allows the consulting team to intervene in extreme situations and share in the work of dealing with a difficult problem.

One of the key elements in this model is its flexibility: it enables consultants to respond to a specific situation and opt for the type of know-how that best fits current gaps. What is “right” for one company, might just as easily be “wrong” in another. Like managers, who have to adapt their behavior to compensate for the specifics of a given situation, consultants who work with this approach leverage the actual level of development in the client system.

Developing a relationship of trust with the client is particularly important in an integrated consulting model. After all, client expectations play a decisive role in the process. If a client expects and demands security, clarity, decision-making support, specialist knowledge and a constant on site consultant presence, a cautious process of persuasion will have to be initiated to encourage them to change their outlook and venture into an unsettling reflection process. In such cases, the systemic consultants will initially have to assume a coaching role to guarantee the desired outcome.

Proximity and distance have different, yet equally valid functions in each of the two approaches. Business process consultants are actively involved in operations and have to provide the client with support in day-to-day business activities. Their presence is required on site. Systemic process consultants, on the other hand, can only properly fulfill their task if they maintain a healthy distance, provide an external perspective, intervene as required but then withdraw again to avoid endangering the autonomy of the client system.

As a result, coordinating a tandem or team-based integrated consulting project is no easy task and must above all factor in a considerable amount of time on top of any on site consulting activities for joint reflection.

All these issues serve to shape the profile of a suitable “candidate” for integrated consulting. In addition to business or systemic process know-how, an integrated consultant must also exhibit a certain degree of maturity. This does not mean they have to be absolutely perfect; it simply means they must be able to accommodate their own strengths and weaknesses – and those of others – in a reflected and deliberate manner. This is generally referred to as “social competence”.

6. The Main Challenges and Difficulties of a Combined Approach

The theory sounds relatively simple: bring together, combine and integrate different types of knowledge and expertise for the good of the client. But, in fact, practice shows it to be an extremely difficult, often almost impossible undertaking, even if the client expressly requested an integrated approach. So why should this be the case? Based on our experience, we can offer the following three explanations:

- “The differences are too great”
Business and systemic process consultants base their work on different theoretical models, constructions of reality and values. They represent two contrary schools of thought. The specific competences available to each of the two approaches, the way they are applied and the purpose that they serve are rooted in different, often contradictory basic assumptions. True integration would only be possible if either business process consulting were to drop its linearity and rational unity or systemic process consulting were to give up its openness and assumption of complexity. In other words, both approaches would have to either disassociate themselves from or reassess and redevelop their basic assumptions. In our personal encounters with representatives of large, traditional consulting firms who had invited us to take part in joint projects, we observed a similar set of fears on both sides. Both are stunned by the huge and unsettling differences that separate them and threaten their individual identities. They put each other down to protect their own identities and territories. Sutrich (2003) refers in this context not only to the “new horizons” appearing on the consulting scene, but also to the inhabitants of two different groups of islands – history made them arch enemies and they still keep up this tradition today.
- “This is pioneering work; it needs to be tried, tested and learned.”
Since the underlying paradigms, models and experiences behind each approach are so different, the motivation behind any attempts to address the challenge of integrating them has to be very strong. Nonetheless, before any such attempt can be made, both sides have to first acquire a basic understanding of what their counterparts do and how they achieve it. There is a far greater risk of competition (“Who is better?”), power struggles (“Who has a stronger influence on the client system?”) and identity crises (“Which approach does the client seem to prefer?”) in a “mixed” consulting

team than there is in a homogenous one. If the members of such a team do not accept each other, if they can’t adopt an attitude of complementarity, if they are not flexible enough to swap the “lead” to suit the actual situation or willing to vary their approach as required, any attempts at cooperation will falter at the first hurdle, i.e. at the first sign of criticism from the client.

- “Without the necessary structural framework, it simply won’t work.”
Even if the relationship between the tandem partners can withstand the strain and everyone sees and accepts the differences between the two approaches as a valuable resource, successful cooperation still needs an appropriate framework and conditions if it is to work.

7. Case Studies

The following case studies illustrate some of the practical issues facing an integrated consulting business model. They were chosen both for the insights they offer into positive (successful) and negative (unsuccessful) projects alike, as well as for the valuable lessons that can be learned from them.

7.1 Project A (Terminated)

Background

A leading automobile parts supplier had decided to extend its portfolio to include the development of complete vehicles and the construction of niche vehicles. To do so, the supplier had already acquired another company specialized in the field of automobile development. They approached us and enquired about specialist coaching for setting-up an automobile manufacturing plant. The contact came through one of our partners, who had extensive knowledge and experience of the automobile industry.

In our initial meetings with the client, we signaled the complexity of the situation and drew their attention to the fact that business process consulting alone would not satisfy their requirements and address the impact of the impending change process. The two companies had very different cultures: one was a manual, manufacturing environment, the other a creative, development organization.

Project Goals

Company management saw no need for additional systemic coaching: all they wanted to do was build their manufacturing plant. They did not feel coaching or gui-

dance would facilitate the integration process. After all, “Plenty of other manufacturing companies had been successfully integrated in the past without the help of consultants.” However, when they realized that they could only have the business process consulting if they agreed to combine it with systemic consulting for the entire change process, they somewhat reluctantly gave their consent.

Architecture/Design

We proposed a process architecture and began with a system diagnosis. The results of this diagnosis were used to build a set of hypotheses, which were then presented to company management and used to determine the starting points for the consulting process. A steering group was set up and defined a number sub-projects to address particular individual areas where improvement was required.

We considered the “Planning the Manufacturing Plant” sub-project to be an integral part of the whole change process, since once completed it would lead to a reorientation of the entire company. As a result, we proposed that the leader of the “Vehicle Manufacturing” sub-project should also be included in the steering group. But this proposal was rejected by management on the grounds that they needed to produce rapid results if they were going to win new projects. The sub-projects therefore ran in parallel with no attempts to cross-reference results.

After a second “sounding board” session, the clients decided they no longer required a combined consulting approach in their integration process. We were asked to moderate future workshops, but we would no longer be able to steer the entire process. We declined this new arrangement: for us the project was effectively over.

Results

The “Vehicle Manufacturing” project had by then reached the stage where it was ready to hold initial discussions with potential clients. However, a subsequent slump in the automobile industry coupled with an economic downturn in the company, led to the project being shelved.

Lessons Learned

One of the major problems in this project was the fact that the two different forms of consulting were “bought” as separate entities and therefore ran alongside each other from the start. The business process approach was pushed into the leading role, while the significance of systemic process consulting and its purpose in the deve-

lopment process was kept deliberately vague and undervalued. Consequently, no coordination of efforts and synergies between the two approaches was possible. The client accepted neither the need for an integrated approach nor, for that matter, a systemic approach at all. This highlights the importance of a joint approach and consensus for the planning and definition of projects of this kind. If the client neither appreciates nor embraces an integrated approach, it will be doomed to fail from the outset.

7.2 Project B (successful)

Background

A subsidiary of a large, German industrial group was facing difficult times. Its market share was decreasing, its quality levels no longer met customer expectations and high production costs made it increasingly uncompetitive. It had already undergone a long-term cost cutting program, which had succeeded in returning the company to profit, but the program had also clearly left its mark on the organization: the workforce was demotivated and staff turnover was high.

Project Goals

Management decided to initiate a change process that it hoped would turn the company into the industry leader in terms of price and quality. They engaged the services of the consulting firm they felt was best equipped to implement this change process. We were asked to provide support and coaching for the “Production” division. The change process in the Production division was led by two senior consultants, one from a traditional consulting background, the other with systemic know-how and expertise. A further five consultants were also involved in this part of the project.

Architecture/Design

The company had already decided to introduce a new production system and, since their US-based parent company had also recently introduced such a system, they felt it would be advantageous to use the same one. However, the system could not simply be implemented as it was: some customization was needed to address both cultural differences and local technical constraints. Introducing a production system of this kind would mean a complete change in workflows and the way things were done – both at management and grassroots level. Basically, they were trying to introduce more teamwork, to delegate responsibility for quality and productivity and create awareness of the need for discipline and standard procedures. A target system that took into consideration

both hard and soft factors was also developed and integrated into a balanced scorecard.

The architecture agreed upon for this project allowed people both to contribute to and at the same time learn about the new production system. When the system was later introduced across all manufacturing plants, what had been learned in this initial phase was then passed on to the remaining 17,000 employees using a cascade process.

The first step in the change process was again the formation of a steering group, this time chaired by the Member of the Board responsible for Production. The steering group also included individual plant managers and representatives of the central divisions. It was coached by two consultants (one from each of the approaches).

The production system envisaged five sub-systems, each aimed at a specific aspect. It also included over one hundred individual tools. The steering group's first task was to define the new production system and sub-systems in greater detail and allocate the necessary tools.

Five working groups were then formed to work on the concepts planned for each individual sub-system. They were each to produce a manual explaining the effects and interaction between the various processes in clear and concise terms; a task which took around four months. These interdisciplinary working groups also included representatives of each of the individual plants, thus ensuring that the acquired know-how would later be available at a local level. Work began with a kick-off meeting to present and discuss aims and objectives.

In this phase, progress was presented to the steering group at four-weekly intervals; any open issues were discussed and resolved in these meetings. Weekly telephone conferences were held between the consultants and the sub-project leaders to clarify and define the links between the individual projects.

Once the manuals were ready, a workshop lasting several days was organized for all involved to communicate what had been learned in the working groups. Implementation teams were formed for each plant, each made up entirely of local staff involved in the conceptual phase. Pilot areas were selected for the introduction of the system in the plants.

Results

The first measurable effects were achieved within a very short period of time. Quality levels improved tremendously. The system was subsequently introduced company-wide.

Lessons Learned

One factor in the successful completion of this project was the fact that the systemic and business process consultants worked together harmoniously from the outset. The client was not really aware of any differences between the two approaches during the actual consulting process. Any decisions on what, when and how things were to be done were taken jointly by the entire consulting team. Both sides had a good understanding of the other approach and respected each other's work. Some additional factors that contributed to its success included: mutual acceptance of the agreed architecture; the definition and implementation of the process by the clients themselves with the support of the systemic process consultants (an approach the business process consultants found quite unusual) and the parallel coaching for the management team.

7.3 Project C (successful)

Background

The client for this project is a highly profitable Swiss company, which enjoys near-monopoly status in the country's retail market and is regarded in Switzerland almost as a national icon. However, its cooperative-like structure and high vertical integration also brought with them a decentralized autonomy, complicated cost structures and slow decision-making processes. Changes were urgently needed if the company was to retain its leading position in an increasingly competitive market. The situation boded well for a combined approach: our sponsor in the largest division (Purchasing and Marketing) was a holistically-minded, highly respected manager, while the project leader was a systems thinking-oriented "doer" with a strong influence on the choice of the consultants.

Project Goals

- To introduce a competitive, efficient, forward-looking structure: the company should retain its leading position in the home market and, at the same time, expand its international activities.
- To develop a strategic vision that reflected the new corporate self-image.
- To cut costs by 15 % and increase efficiency by 20 %.
- To introduce a culture of empowerment and develop the competences required both at a corporate and at a personal/role level to reach these ambitious goals.
- To bring about a change in mentality and attitude amongst all employees.

Architecture/Design

A system diagnosis (addressing professional and cultural issues) was carried out using group interviews and other analysis forms. The results of this diagnosis were mirrored to key corporate players in a two-day workshop. The conclusion: a great, friendly company that nonetheless demonstrated a tendency to bury its head in the sand with regard to the future.

Goals were agreed and set in cooperation with the clients, the process architecture was defined and the following sub-projects agreed: structure, cost cutting potential, identity and leadership. Six months down the line, when it became apparent that the goals could not be achieved without job losses, a further sub-project was added: dealing with uncertainty and change.

The sub-project leaders met every four weeks in the steering group, which was made up of representatives of all – at the time nine – hierarchical levels. Two members of the six-person consulting team (three business and three systemic process consultants) coached and guided the steering group, the project group and the conflict-ridden sponsor group. The groups were very motivated and the feedback they received was positive: they were “doing a great job”; their work was courageous, innovative and taboo-breaking yet mindful of corporate culture and identity. The consulting team provided support in the form of scenarios and decision-making options and introduced reflection loops not only in its own deliberations, but also in its work with the client, thus reducing blind spots, raising awareness and heightening alertness.

One peculiarity of this project was the involvement of a group of “special experts” from an international consulting firm. They had been given a very specific brief and allocated very specific roles (e.g. calculating models) by top management, a fact that, as it later transpired, had somewhat “hurt their pride”. Consequently, they found it difficult to cooperate with us as process leaders and coordinators and were very critical and dismissive of the whole process, commenting at one stage: “The groups will never make it without our help.” But make it they did. Our particular role was “limited” to professional and process coaching and guidance.

Results

Over a twelve-month period, the company underwent a process of radical systemic change. Of the nine original hierarchical levels, only six remained. Efficiency was indeed increased by an estimated 20 %. Cost cutting measures were identified to achieve the targeted 15 % in savings, with more in reserve for further investments. The workforce was reduced by 10 %. Everyone faced and dealt with their grief, anger and uncertainty together.

The process of changing mentalities and attitudes is still ongoing.

Lessons learned

This project highlights the importance of co-development and a good understanding of the chosen approach on the part of the client. In this case, both the project leaders and the sponsors supported the integrated approach and were convinced of its benefits from the start. The consultants and clients worked together to co-develop the project. The mixed consulting team, whose members all shared a similar mindset, trusted and respected each other and were very motivated by the prospect of developing this model further. As a consulting team, we also benefited greatly from the inclusion of a supervision for our own work and an evaluation of our own processes during the project. However, we had not expected to encounter such a feeling of mistrust and lack of respect from the “special experts”. Despite all our best efforts, we were unable to establish any common ground between us and them.

8. Critical Success Factors

There are many aspects that contribute to the success of an integrated approach to organizational consulting. Based on our own practical experience and drawing on the conclusions of the research reports based on our consulting projects (e.g. Froschauer and Lueger 2003), we would like to draw particular attention to the following critical success factors:

- Mutual acceptance and respect
- Basic know-how of both approaches
- Common values
- A reflective approach to consulting activities
- Seamless transitions to suit the individual situation.

These success factors have, in turn, helped us to determine the main conditions that we feel have to be met to ensure the success of an integrated consulting project:

1. A clear contract must be established with the client system, which defines expectations and sets them as goals that are clearly understood by all concerned.
2. The client must be in favor of an integrated approach and recognize the added value it provides (method and effect).
3. The project must be carried out in close collaboration with internal experts and involve the people who will be affected by the change.
4. Relevant stakeholders and interest groups (e.g. custo-

- mers, shareholders, management, suppliers, employees) must be involved in the project and there must be a constant review of the correlation between process decisions and economic aspects (benchmarking).
5. Professional expertise should be made available if required (what, when, how much, where development is needed, where to implement change).
 6. Any decisions made and their consequences must be clear to all concerned.
 7. Reflection loops should become standard practice.
 8. Consultants must work in close collaboration with the project leaders who, in turn, recognize and personify the logic behind such an integrated approach.
 9. The project must be based on an architecture that inspires confidence and facilitates dealing with uncertainty.
 10. The work carried out by the consulting staff must be of a high quality and must factor in enough time and capacity for reflection, for decisions concerning any interventions, for supervision. Responsibility for the project as a whole must also, of course, be shared by all concerned.

It will take some time yet for this integrated model to reach maturity, for clear concepts and terminology to emerge and for the design principles to evolve and become communicable. After all, it is very much a work in progress. This article is intended merely as an interim report, a contribution to the discourse.

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By Ulrike Froschauer | Manfred Lueger

Reflective-Differentiating Organizational Consulting

Reflections on Combining Systemic and Business Process Consulting

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1. Introduction
2. Approaches to Consulting
3. The Problems of Combining The Two Different Approaches
4. A Bridging Function
5. Reflective-differentiating Consulting: Developments To Date
6. References

1. Introduction

For their work with client systems, organizational consultants must have deep-rooted prior theoretical knowledge of a) how organizations work in general, (b) how interventions can work in organizations and (c) how consultants as outsiders can acquire knowledge about an organization. It is this threefold understanding that enables them to develop suitable consulting strategies. However, it is precisely in this basic understanding that the various consulting approaches available on the market generally differ. Against this background, an empirical study was carried out to determine the differences perceived by clients between the various consulting approaches. Among other things, the results of this study show that clients are critical of the differentiation between the various consulting forms that currently prevails. They expect an external consultant to provide their organization with customized consulting services that meet their specific needs and effectively amalgamate both business and systemic process know-how. The reasons for these expectations are clear: clients expect to be able to benefit from the individual strengths of each of these two approaches.

The key seems to lie in finding a “happy medium”, i.e. in combining the different approaches in actual consulting practice. To establish a better understanding of what a combination of different consulting approaches entails, an accompanying study of the implementation of a combined approach was carried out in cooperation with a consulting firm. However, this accompanying

study shows that there is little to be gained by simply trying to combine the different approaches and that the resultant problems can have a serious effect on the consulting process. Nonetheless, the analysis of such consulting processes not only provided a better understanding of the difficulties involved in combining the different approaches, it also offered a good opportunity to look at possible alternatives.

However, there is also another important factor to be considered: when management turns to consultancy, it often expects high quality results as quickly, reliably and cheaply as possible. This hope and cry for help from management in dealing with a perceived loss of control in a complex, ever-changing world might well result in a booming consulting market (cf. Kieser 2002: 59ff), but also assumes that social processes can be steered or controlled rationally (if this were not the case, there would be little need for consulting), an assumption that is difficult to reconcile with more sophisticated approaches to organizational theory (from Weber 1980 through Simon 1981 to Weick 1985, Türk 1995 or Luhmann 2000). Any critical discussion of consulting must therefore also bear in mind the difficulties and underlying rationality involved in steering organizations.

This article begins with a discussion of the differences between the various consulting approaches identified in an initial study of clients' experiences with consulting processes (see Point 2.). It then goes on to elaborate those specific issues identified in the subsequent

accompanying study as particularly obstructive to a combined approach (see Point 3.). This is followed by some general reflections on a “reflective-differentiating” consulting approach and its attempts to deal with the problems raised by the contradictions in the different consulting philosophies.

2. Approaches to Consulting

2.1 Typical Differences

Consulting firms often ask themselves how their clients, i.e. the companies they provide consulting services to, perceive the differences between the various consulting approaches. In cooperation with three consulting firms – Beratergruppe Neuwaldegg, C/O/N/E/C/T/A and Hernstein International Management Institute (through R. Königswieser) – a research project was set up to examine clients’ experiences with consulting processes (for methodological, methodical background see Froschauer and Lueger 2001). Interviews were held with companies who had practical experience of two or more different consulting firms and approaches. The information obtained was interpreted and the preliminary results discussed at a one-day workshop with representatives from both the participating companies and the consulting firms. Following an analysis of the workshop proceedings, further interviews were held with the companies, and the results interpreted and compared with the personal experiences of consultants from different backgrounds and approaches. The study produced a type reconstruction of consulting approaches, which revealed a dichotomy of contrary views on the purpose of consulting, the principles behind it, the relationship to the client and the type of interventions required. The main characteristics of each of these two views or approaches can be summarized as follows:

a) The first approach (incidentally very heterogeneous in content) – referred to here as “business process consulting” or simply “business consulting” – concentrates its activities around its own expertise in the specific problems to be resolved in a given organization. In this sense, the consulting activities serve to determine existing external and internal problems, provide detailed recommendations for resolving these problems and help the organization to implement these recommendations from a management perspective. This fits well, for example, with the McKinsey guiding principle: “Take a top management perspective.” As long as the organization implements the recommendations as suggested, there is no reason why they should not produce the desired effect (cf. the standard paradigm in Moldaschl 2001a:139). Behind this concept lies the notion of a rational process, i.e. we have a

problem; this problem can be resolved using specific measures (for rational decision-making see Simon 1981).

b) The second approach centers its activities on designing of processes that encourage organizational development and is referred to here as “systemic process consulting” or simply “process consulting” (this kind of approach is often systemic in nature; cf. Nagel and Wimmer 2002; Groth 1999; Königswieser and Hillebrand 2004; for various forms of organizational development see also Trebesch 2000). Its particular expertise lies in the design of organizational development and/or problem-solving processes, whereby it also assumes that any necessary business expertise will be available in the organization itself (cf. the proceduralist paradigm in Moldaschl 2001a:140). The paramount question here is how to empower consulting clients to activate and make best possible use of system-inherent potential and resources. Consulting becomes a self-help guideline. Behind this approach lies a concept of momentum (autopoiesis) found in a particularly elaborated form in modern sociological systems theory (Luhmann 2000, Baecker 2003).

A careful examination of the differences between business process and systemic process consulting uncovers a number of levels. These are compared in detail in the following table.

 Principles

Consulting is oriented around a specific business issue in the organization and provides appropriate professional expertise regarding effective interventions. It offers quick results that can usually be measured in economic terms.

Consulting follows a clear goal: it should help to resolve existing problems. Project goals must be clearly defined if consultants are to be able to propose detailed measures for reaching these goals.

The consultant system develops appropriate concepts based on these goals and proposes measures for their implementation. In this way, it makes decisions for the organization.

The consultant system steers the organization and assumes a kind of leadership function.

Consulting focuses on the development process in determining the requirements placed on the organization and therefore provides process know-how. Promises that clients will be better able to deal with problems in the future.

The consulting process orients itself on the dynamics of organizational development requirements. As a result of its open procedural approach, the status of the development is checked at regular intervals.

Consulting supports the organization in its decision-making processes, whereby responsibility remains in the organization. This requires a permanent process of negotiation and reflection.

Consulting is seen as a process of co-construction in which goals are negotiated.

 Practice

The consultants introduce specific, content-related knowledge into the organization. The client must therefore strive to acquire and apply this knowledge.

In this respect, consulting not only stabilizes existing organizational structures, it also improves certain structures and promotes problem-solving competences.

Business consulting follows the logic behind the way the organization thinks and acts. It uses language the client system understands and orients itself on the economic rationality of organizational processes.

The high level of standardization enables firms to deploy junior consultants after a relatively short training period. This is important for larger consulting firms, who compensate high consultant turnover through elaborate knowledge management efforts. The consulting firm plays the central role in the consulting services, the consultants can be replaced as required. This enforces the need for a stylized corporate identity.

Consulting encourages the organization to mobilize its problem-solving competences, thus promoting active learning and self-initiative on the part of the client.

Consulting questions the dynamics of the organization in question and thus promotes its ability to design development processes.

Process consulting maintains a greater distance to the client system to enable it to uncover the organization's specific blind spots. It orients itself on the social logic of organizational action with a strong focus on communication.

The limited opportunities for standardization in consulting processes and the highly tuned social skills that consultants must have for the negotiation processes with the client require the use of highly experienced consultants. As a result, process consulting firms are generally smaller in size and their consultants are older. The personalities of these consultants play the central role.

Relationship between Client and Consultant System

The relationship between the client and the consultant system is based on the difference between their respective levels of knowledge: the consultant system has the particular knowledge required to fill the gap in knowledge or skills identified in the client system. This difference creates an asymmetrical relationship of cooperation.

Business consulting introduces already existing knowledge into the respective organization. An initial analysis is therefore oriented on any adaptation requirements.

The client system is dependent on the professional expertise of the consultant system and basically elects the level of consulting required when it awards the contract. The consultant system defines the consulting procedure within the framework of this contract.

The client system is dependent on the professional expertise of the consultant system and basically elects the level of consulting required when it awards the contract. The consultant system defines the consulting procedure within the framework of this contract.

The consultants focus their contacts at management level, often with the aim of establishing a permanent relationship between the client and consulting firms.

Different forms of expertise are used in the consulting process: the client system provides the business knowledge, while the consultant system contributes sophisticated process know-how. It is the combination of both that guarantees success. Consequently, this form of consulting is based on a symmetrical relationship.

Process consulting explores the skills already available in the organization and the way things are done in its initial analysis phase. The results of this analysis are used to develop appropriate process strategies.

The goal of consulting is to strengthen the independence of the client system. As a result, the client system assumes responsibility on its own and cooperates with the consultant system in its organizational development process.

Consulting takes care to include contact to as many members of the organization from as many different units as possible and keeps the need for consulting to a limit.

The relationship between the client and the consultant systems is one of mutual respect.

Table 1: Differences between Business Process and Systemic Process Consulting

2.2 Deficits of Polarization

Behind these consulting principles, their associated practices and the relationship developed in the consulting process between the client and consultant systems lie specific assumptions about the way organizations work. A more mechanistic understanding of organizations based on economic rationality dominates on the business consulting side, while its systemic counterpart favors a more dynamic understanding of organizations using the images created in social processes as the basis for the way people act. Nonetheless, both approaches limit the options open to clients, who must choose between two conflicting alternatives. They can concentrate either on resolving functional deficits (and thus on externalizing the justification for planned rationalization measures) or on ensuring the sustained development of the company's own problem-solving competences and potential.

It can therefore come as no surprise that clients are becoming increasingly critical of the one-sidedness of each particular approach. After all, when they opt for one of them, they "buy in" not only its strengths, but also its weaknesses. Successfully filling any functional or business gaps will be of little use if the workforce does not fully participate. Similarly, resolving any problems in communication processes will also be of little use if there are still functional deficiencies to resolve and the company is under economic pressure. Consequently, companies increasingly expect solutions which combine the strengths of both approaches. This is also linked to the management expectation that consulting will provide them with greater control in an increasingly complex and dynamic inner and outer environment, despite pressure from different interest groups, thereby helping them to negotiate their way through the jungle of different management trends (Kieser 2002:59 et seqq.).

In addition, there is also the question of how the consultant system obtains the knowledge required to develop its intervention strategies, and each approach has its own thoughts on this matter. Business process consulting tries to identify the gaps in knowledge and expertise in the organization that need to be filled through the consulting process. This requires an analysis of the problem at the start of the project and, ideally, a check that the goals have been achieved at the end. Systemic process consulting on the other hand tries to foster organizational self-development by identifying existing potential and barriers. An approach of this nature requires more than a simple one-off diagnosis of the organization at the start of the project: repeated analyses of organizational dynamics must be included as feedback loops in the consulting process.

But both forms of knowledge creation focus less on the client's existing situation and constraints and more on their own options for action. By integrating the peculiarities of that particular company into their own (one-sided) consulting strategy, they establish a connection with the client. In doing so, both approaches follow a logic of subsumption: you take a general strategy and look for points that fit this strategy in the company. If you are careful and adept enough, you are bound to find suitable points somewhere. That's why process consultants look to convince clients that successful organizational development can only be achieved through a continuous and lasting furtherance of internal problem-solving skills and mobilization of acceptance. Business process consulting on the other hand offers the prospect of a quick solution to the problem by providing the company with access to the necessary know-how. However, what's missing in both cases is a reflection on the suitability of general consulting strategies and individual interventions for the actual situation in the company in question. This includes, for example, the interests promoted by a particular approach, how the consulting is embedded in the organization's power system, the extent to which a specific positioning of consulting in the organization could restrict its scope. Yet it is exactly this reflective distance that is needed to enable development that satisfies the company's different requirements, regardless of the internal combination of interests.

3. The Problems of Combining The Two Different Approaches

Consulting approaches that ignore this polarization therefore have to overcome two central problems. Firstly, they have to find a way of combining the two approaches that, despite their incompatibilities, increases the options open to the client consultant system. Secondly, they have

to find a way of promoting internal reflection that maintains a critical distance to the client and prevents individual interest groups in the client system from subliminally monopolizing (often in the interests of management) the situation and obstructing the view of processes in the company.

To establish a more accurate indication of how systemic and business process consulting can be combined in practice, a two-year research project was set up in cooperation with a consulting firm (Königswieser & Network) to analyze their experiences of working with a combined strategy in a number of ongoing projects. For this purpose, interviews were held with consultants working on these consulting projects. The interviews were interpreted, and the intermediate results mirrored to the consulting firm and participating network partners in a workshop setting. A total of five such workshops were analyzed and also used to plan the next steps in the actual consulting projects.

3.1 How Differences are Viewed and the Result: "Muddling Through".

At first glance, launching a combined consulting project using experts from both approaches seems easy: all you have to do fulfil the client's wish and combine the two sets of knowledge and expertise. The expected advantages of a combined approach are also plausible: all the strengths, none of the weaknesses and, an added benefit, it is very much in the client's interest.

What in theory sounds like such a promising "happy medium", turns out in practice to be a totally unrealistic hope. Popular descriptions of the two approaches and their integrability are often based on three common, misleading myths which highlight the actual problems encountered in any attempts at combination:

Myth 1: process consulting focuses solely on processes. In practice, typical process consulting cases are often confronted with demanding content-related issues that have to be resolved on site. To satisfy client demands, some way of dealing with these issues is usually found. Consequently, most systemic process consulting projects also involve some elements of business process consulting. But it is in precisely this combination that a very particular problem can arise: organization's have very high expectations of such solutions and thus increase their pressure on the consultant system to accelerate delivery, when, in fact, it is deceleration that is so important in systemic process-oriented consulting (Wimmer 2004:140 et seq.). If the necessary time and space cannot be created, process-oriented consulting finds itself increasingly pushed into a legitimizing role. This can then sometimes lead to the criticism that process

consulting (usually systemic consulting) will throw its principles out the window if the situation requires.

Myth 2: business process consulting focuses solely on business issues. This is not even the case in projects with precise, predefined goals, where business consulting assumes a decision-making and implementation role. In many cases, acceptance of the project by the workforce is also required and, for this reason, some process components will always have to be included if the project is to succeed, particularly when it comes to convincing people of the benefits of any planned measures. It is through this combination with process consulting that new goals or issues affecting the project as a whole are often identified in the course of a consulting project. In such cases, business process consulting may even find itself overtaken by development dynamics and must adapt to the changes.

Myth 3: If consultants embody both approaches, successful integration is guaranteed. In practice, this usually turns out to be a false assumption because each approach ultimately pursues its own, distinct intervention strategy. The divergent philosophies behind these strategies mean they can only ever be semi-compatible. Furthermore, consultants in ongoing consulting processes usually find themselves under pressure to perform and have to resolve conflicts ad hoc. In doing so, they tend to orient themselves pragmatically on concrete situations and not on the systematics of the individual approaches. This, in turn, leads to short-term monopolization by any dominant management intentions.

The analysis carried out in the course of the accompanying study showed that consultants tend to see the “other” approach as an ideal type and therefore restricted to its own particular field, whereas their own approach is more universal, adaptable and can be easily applied in cross-border situations. Subliminally, they insinuate that their counterparts have much to learn, while they themselves are very open and, in fact, largely do what others demand: business consultants consider themselves to be integrated in a process, while process consultants, in turn, see themselves as helping to solve business problems. But in a combination project, both try to give their own particular ideas center stage and accord their counterparts only a supporting role. As far as the business consultants are concerned, their process counterparts carry out the work of winning acceptance for and minimizing resistance to the project (usually from the “stubborn” realms of middle management and the “reluctant” workforce). For process consulting, the “business” components are additional services that serve to ensure the success of the project. The result is a conflict-ridden hierar-

chical battle, at times even fought out through the client. On the other hand, consultants who feel equally at home in both approaches are faced with a structural problem: they cannot fulfill the requirements of each approach simultaneously.

Often the pressure to produce results on the spot prevents the systematic implementation of a combined strategy, and the combining of the two approaches generally takes place without any real reflection. This highlights two problems. Firstly, there is the risk that the two different approaches will undermine each other. Secondly, deviations from a particular approach can often emerge as a result of consulting situations requiring decisions to be made or resistance overcome. In situations of this kind, the “other” approach is often relegated to forming part of a workaround to overcome these difficulties.

This leads to a further difference between the two approaches: the closer the consulting ties itself to resolving organizational problems, the more it finds itself at the mercy of practical realities. These call for a maintaining of the principle of rationality as a rescue vessel in the middle of a stormy sea, because the management of a company finds itself caught in the crossfire of expectations and tries to delegate these to the consultants. As soon as social phenomena are separated from practical intentions in the consulting process and questioned separately, the problem of rationality immediately comes to the fore (cf. Froschauer 2002). From this perspective, process consulting projects might have less in common with urgent management demands (particularly in a crisis), but they are also more critical of what goes on in a company. However, it should also not be borne in mind that the linking of consulting activities to corporate interests can never be truly free from intentions and constricts the unrestricted view of organizational dynamics.

The linking of the two approaches thus turns into the kind of decision-making process referred to in a political or administrative context as the “muddling through” (Lindblom 1959) or later the “garbage can” model. According to this model, when people opt for a “small steps” policy, they orient themselves largely on current requirements without any real further reflection. However, this sometimes causes consultants to lose sight of higher goals and can make the consulting process a little erratic. This is compounded by the fact that pressure to deliver solutions gives business consulting the upper hand and, all of a sudden, a well thought out consulting strategy is circumvented. But there is also an unpleasant side to a decision-making “garbage can” into which all manner of decision-makers drop problems and solutions. If, for example, decisions are expected on specific occasions, the various participants can take advantage of the garba-

ge can to rummage around in the heap of available problems and solutions. Decisions are then used for the benefit of different interests, in attempts to gain influence, for defining problems or problem-solving strategies, whereby the actual decision-making process largely eludes any predictable calculation (March 1988). But the fact should also not be ignored that according to the garbage can model although a large number of rational processes take place, the context surrounding any final decision is nonetheless so ambiguous and contradictory that it can at best be referred to as bounded rationality.

3.2 Incompatibilities between the Approaches

The analysis revealed that in combined consulting processes, consultants try to adopt a patchwork strategy that is flexible both to their own approach and to that of their counterparts. This only works as long as there is no declared consulting strategy and everyone works to a tacit, unspoken understanding (which would otherwise be exposed as fiction). Although this enables them to uphold their own view of things, it is also a constant source of conflicts in the consulting process, conflicts battled out both within the consulting team and in the company itself – with unpleasant consequences for all concerned.

However, behind these practical everyday relationship strategies lies a methodological problem: each approach has a different understanding of consulting. The study revealed three fundamental areas of incompatibility which question the suitability of a simple combination of the two approaches for consulting projects:

a) Incompatible concepts: as shown above, the two approaches are clearly incompatible on a number of counts. The business process approach with its mechanistic understanding of organizations has satisfactory solutions to offer for many problems. That's why both the process and the expected results are clearly defined and form a major part of the consulting agreement. If the organization then still does not function properly, the reason must lie in its poor implementation of the proposed solutions. Conversely, there are no clear problems or obvious solutions in the systemic process approach. Problems are identified collectively in the client consultant system and then looked for using a strategy loosely couple to existing organizational dynamics. In the process, the organization should learn to recognize and deal with both current and future problems on its own. Whereas in business consulting the journey from problem to solution is clearly mapped out, in process consulting not even the road to the problem is totally clear, and the

quest for the solution is more complex still. Integrating the two approaches would require each to concede some ground: business consulting would have to give up its linearity and process consulting its openness. The lack of compatibility in basic principles would mean each side revealing its strengths, yet receiving no adequate compensation in return.

b) Incompatible expectations: clients who favor the business process approach generally expect the consultants to tell them what to do next. The advice they receive is often linked to cost-cutting and rationalization measures. These issues are stabilized by the work of the consulting team, whereby a large proportion of consulting projects are follow-on projects. Conversely, when clients with prior experience of process consulting contact a consultancy, their expectations center around the assumption that any solutions will be developed as a joint effort between the consultant and client systems. In this sense, although clients criticize the shortcomings of each approach, they themselves also foster one-sided expectations of consulting. In practice, attempts to represent both approaches often ultimately involve an analysis of what the client actually wants and the implementation of the approach that best suits these wishes. This is not integrated consulting, it is simply a decision on the part of a consultant system to use one particular approach and, at the same time, incorporate some aspects of the other into the consulting process. In many cases, the client is not even aware that these are two conflicting consulting strategies and that they cannot really be combined without friction.

c) Structural conflicts in an integrated consultant system: consulting firms who offer a combined approach must have access to all the different competences required in their own consultant system. Furthermore, they must also be able to reconcile the incompatibilities described above. However, consultants who take their task seriously, find themselves confronted in this situation with conflicting expectations. For example, whereas business process consultants should resolutely seek clear guidelines, their process oriented colleagues might see this as totally counterproductive and try to torpedo this requirement. After all, it contradicts their own concept of what constitutes "reputable" or "good" consulting. As a result, the consultant system finds itself threatened by an internal siege, fought out in the worst case in the firm itself. This is further compounded by the issue of lead. Which approach should take the lead when no consensus can be reached? Should it be business consulting with its promise of quick solutions to actual pro-

blems (with process consulting in tow to ensure that the proposed solution wins acceptance)? Or should it be process consulting with its analysis of the roots of any concrete problems and subsequent cooperative search for ways to overcome these problems in the system (with support from business consulting)? The issue here is who should assume the leading role and who gets the supporting role. However, this would, in turn, require a decision on the fundamental approach to be taken to the consulting and thus run counter to an integration of the two approaches.

Experience of combined consulting processes indicates that these are not only confronted with problems in the client system, they also face internal difficulties in the consultant system as well. The client's often unrealistic expectations of what can be achieved through consulting cannot really be fulfilled using one single approach. Typical problems in a business process oriented project include: a lack of acceptance in the organization, resistance (often considerable) to certain measures; the limited sustainability of the imposed changes; a loss of trust; a rise in the number of conflicts and reduction in teamwork (cf. Kolbeck 2001:42 et seq.). In this case, some aspects of a process oriented strategy are required, although since they ultimately only remove the symptoms of a problem and do not offer any solutions, they can only ever have a partial effect. Furthermore, specific settings in a consulting process often tend to force one side into the background, a situation that becomes all the more likely if consultant(s) try to resolve ongoing, process problems using a business process oriented approach. This is also related to the criticisms of process oriented consulting, namely that it takes too long, offers few guidelines for the client, defines problems in an overly complex way and is totally unsuitable for crisis situations. To avoid these criticisms, process consulting finds itself in the awkward position of having to adapt to the current situation and thus no longer remaining true to its own claims. In this respect, it runs the risk of creating similar problems to business process consulting.

The business interests of the consulting firm also play a key role here. If a consulting firm is determined to win a contract at all costs, it will tend to accommodate client requirements as far as possible: a strong argument for connectivity. However, if it decides that irritations are required to induce a willingness on the part of the client to change, it will have to establish the necessary distance and thereby risk not only losing the contract, but also the possible continuation of a project and any subsequent economic consequences for its own company. Consequently, economic interests superimpose the choice of consulting approach. Consultants can only make a

free choice if they distance themselves from their business interests – an improbable scenario given that consulting firms also form part of the economic system and thus also need clients.

The situation is intensified by the fact that each of the two approaches lays claim to its own rationality. Business consulting claims to deliver a rational solution to a problem that can therefore be planned. Process consulting assumes that it can indeed use targeted communication to intervene rationally in the way an organization functions, causing it at least to move in a desired direction. However, it also emphasizes that neither the course nor the result of any interventions can actually be predicted (cf. Königswieser and Exner 1998:13; Nagel and Wimmer 2002:291 et seq.). In this way, the rational steerability of organizations remains unquestioned as a basis for legitimizing consulting activities. Neuberger refers in a consulting context here to organizational hypocrisy: "It creates the impression both inside and outside the organization that those responsible believe in rationality, control, predictability, transparency, efficiency, etc. and are trying to put things right, only then to turn round and do what realpolitik demands or allows." (Neuberger 2002:159). In this context, researchers, managers and consultants alike are all part of a symbolic "management" that conveys the myth of predictability and steerability.

Weick (2001; see also 1995) radicalizes this position in his retrospective model of rationality. According to this model, people act first, then understand and finally try to make sense of their actions. A weighing up of goals, options and purposes slips into the background, while rationality gains importance in meta communication on decisions and in legitimation strategies for safeguarding leadership. Thus, rationality not only provides orientation, it also assumes a legitimation function. In a consulting context, this means that when consultants want others to see what they are doing as sensible, they refer to it as rational. Decisions can then later be justified under the pretext of rationality, while the rhetorical reference to rationality serves to create room for further decisions. As a result, depending on the context, consulting might seem "rational" without actually being so.

4. A Bridging Function

If it is indeed the case that neither of the two approaches can be implemented in their pure form, and the rationality of consulting behavior is also precarious, how then can these two approaches be combined to ensure that they both support (not obstruct) each other and, at the same time, enable systematic, albeit not

completely steerable, organizational development? As part of the accompanying study, the concept of “reflective-differentiating” consulting was developed to address this question and places two components firmly in the foreground. On the one hand, it emphasizes the importance of permanent reflection in consulting activities for making sense of the inherent logic of an organization (also with respect to bounded logic) and the consequences of any interventions as well as systematizing the flexibility of the consulting process in the context of organizational dynamics (hence reflective). On the other, it assumes the differences between the two approaches cannot be surmounted and that a specific strategy is therefore required to deal with the different views (hence differentiating).

The following section provides an explanation of the image of organizations presumed by such an approach and is followed by a description of its idiosyncrasies.

4.1 Reflection: the Consequence of a Specific View of Organizations

Behind such a concept of consulting behavior lies a very specific view of organizations based on an interactive construction of reality (e.g. Shibutani 2000). Weick (1995) refers here to the sensemaking process in organizations, which enables people to act by lining the world with coherence as context and thus creating order and predictability. It is therefore assumed that, in the consulting process, this collective framing of reality is a basic condition for collective consulting action. This makes it all the more important to understand the particular views used by the members of an organization and which influence their behavior. Consequently, consulting cannot therefore assume the existence of a quasi “objective reality” for the organization. Instead, it must take into account the views shared by specific groups in the organization (also with regard to consulting). It must consider not only the bare facts, but also the way they fit into a particular sensemaking context. Not just the management perspective counts, but also the views of the workforce, who view certain issues from their everyday experiences in the organization.

Communication plays a central role in this kind of approach. However, is it a common misconception that simply passing on information will be enough to transfer knowledge. Modern communication theories refer in this context to three different sub-processes (cf. Luhmann 1988:11): the selection of the information (“What I want to say!”), the selection of a communication form (“How I want to say it!”) and the selection of a sensemaking model (“How it will be understood!”). Accordingly, each

message or action can be interpreted in many different ways and, indeed, if communication is an expected part of a particular interaction, the very act of not communicating can itself be seen and interpreted as a form of communication (e.g. as an affront or as ignorance). If attempts to improve the flow of information in an organization oversee a lack of confidence in management on the part of the workforce, it is quite possible that any improvement in the information flow will only serve to exacerbate the communication problems: structuring the information could awaken the impression that important matters are being concealed: increasing the amount of information available could encourage the notion that staff are being flooded with information to prevent them from identifying important issues. Accordingly, the significance of interventions lies not in their intentions, but only becomes apparent when any reactions are also considered.

This, in turn, reveals a further characteristic of this understanding of organizations: to be able to act in an organization, the actors require an image of their own organization for orientation purposes, created by a reduction in complexity. Therefore, the planning of a consulting process should reflect the issues that command the attention of the actors in an organization and the way they order ongoing events to give them meaning and meet their own expectations. Only in this way will they establish connection points which make pertinent information accessible to the organization or open up opportunities for organizations themselves to discover alternative views and expand their options.

Established structures within the organization stabilize the social order and make behavior predictable. The structuring of an organization thus creates an order by which things, people and behaviors can be linked in a rule-based context. This order reflects cooperative relationships and stipulates patterns of behavior and, at the same time, creates principles which regulate communication and behavior in general. Consultancy finds itself confronted with these historically rooted structures and must take on the task of determining their meaning and consequences in order for the organization to reveal further opportunities.

These three components, namely communication, meaning and structure, show that organizations are not fixed, but constantly changing entities. As far as communication is concerned, this results from the fact that each observation has to be interpreted, which in turn opens up a multitude of options. With regard to meaning, everything is placed in a relevant time context, where expectations based on previous experience are drawn upon and, in turn modified to reflect the interpretation of the

current experience. This repeated, regular creation of meaning produces structures which, as a result of the fragile sensemaking process, are subject to constant change and which can be completely detached from the intentions of the members of the organization. This explains why problems frequently surface in organizations that are known to both staff and management and, although they are affected by these problems, they can nonetheless do nothing about. In cases like these, external help is needed to learn how such problems develop in the organization, the purpose they serve and what is preventing their successful resolution.

Consultancy cannot ignore the culture and the way things are done in an organization if it wants to understand what motivates specific client interests, what causes certain problems or why people react to interventions in a particular way. This should not be misinterpreted as a demand for the organization to change. The aim is not to gather hard facts, but to understand their context. Consultancy has to take the internal and external players in an organization seriously if it is to provide the support an organization needs in its efforts to sustainably master complex demands. This requires the commitment of the workforce, commitment that can only be obtained through reliable assumptions on what might be important to them and how this commitment and their identification with the organization can be fostered and channeled into a shared vision. Consultants therefore juxtapose their own observations, knowledge and behavior with the organization's perspective, knowledge and behavior and thus establish the context for any intervention strategies.

Such a view highlights the reflective nature of a consulting process, which according to Moldaschl (2001a:145 et seq.; also 2001b:164 et seq.) is determined by three criteria: an understanding of how it is embedded in a social context; a consideration of any unintentional results of its own actions; an application of grounded theories and methods to itself. This, however, applies to the complete client consultant system, namely the consulting firm and the organization receiving the consulting services. The consultant system must link its heterogeneous constructions of reality with those of the organization and constantly reconsider the significance of its positioning as well as the consequences of its activities in the organization. When applied logically to the client system, this means encouraging the organization to consider its own positioning in the client consultant system, since this is the only way of ensuring sustainability.

This applies in particular to heterogeneity in reality constructions and their consequences for strategies of action (and thus also the establishing of a consulting

process in the client's organization), but also to the distribution of influence (in the sense of power and control) or the way irritations are processed (e.g. organizational learning). To provide access to the information required for continual reflection on consulting activities and structuring the various consulting components, an accompanying analysis is required to help both the consultant system and the organization reveal blind spots and establish a better understanding of the consulting dynamics, on which basis a collective view of the organization can be developed. However, it is not the task of an accompanying analysis to force a particular view on the client consultant system. Instead, it suggests possible meanings which may (but do not have to) be taken up in the consulting process. Providing the client consultant system with reliable (consulting-independent) information on the state of developments requires as independent and critical a view as possible. The client system and the consulting activities form the two central starting points here. The client consulting system can then decide which use it makes of this knowledge. This also means that a single analysis will not suffice to design a consulting process (this would imply that it can be planned rationally). Instead, this reflection must form an integral part of the entire consulting process (in the form of self-reflection).

4.2 Differentiation: a Concept Beyond Polarization

Bridges between two poles are generally characterized by the fact that they establish a link and enable transfer between the two. The study on combining different approaches to consulting showed, however, that this alone does not suffice. The bridge itself must represent an independent place of action accessible from both sides (and not just a way from one side to the other). It then becomes a place where views are negotiated, a marketplace for ideas, a framework for intervention strategies and a place of reflection on those components brought from either side. If taken seriously, this metaphor raises the question of how such an independent concept would need to be constructed.

Firstly, it requires a stable grounding in both approaches, i.e. the consultant system must encompass both sets of competences. This means that the consultant system must be at home on both sides of the bridge (core competences in both approaches) to be able to meet as client consultant system on the bridge. However, this does not help to overcome their structural conflicts, which is why additional provisions also have to be made. These include at least some knowledge of the other approach. This might still not resolve the contradictions,

but it at least establishes basic understanding of why the other side acts the way it does in the client system and the strategies behind this behavior.

Secondly, the two different consulting approaches are not amalgamated, rather they are each used for different purposes depending on the context and their respective functions in the consulting process. This extends the options open to the consulting process, but also requires a two-track process architecture which reflects the different areas of responsibility. The required systemic or business process competences must be defined for each of the individual architectural elements. Here, coordination (in the sense of developing a consistent consulting strategy, not an homogenous approach) is a delicate issue in regulating areas of conflict.

Thirdly, the exchange of views between the two approaches is not applicable to the whole consulting project, but runs selectively through the entire consulting process. It surfaces at those points where decisions on the next steps are made. Accordingly, this kind of gap-determined consulting reflects and identifies its own strengths and weaknesses (and those of the organization) with regard to the issues or processes in question, thereby perhaps providing the organization with innovative problem-solving strategies.

Fourthly, to provide appropriate decision-making support, an accompanying analysis process will be required, which focuses on what takes place in the organization during the consulting process, in particular in relation to the consulting itself. This meta analysis examines what is triggered by the consulting and why this is the case. This kind of analysis is by no means restricted to an assessment of whether the desired effects have been achieved or not. Instead, it also attempts to take overall corporate development into account to obtain a picture of any accompanying symptoms (e.g. unintentional side-effects of interventions). The knowledge generated in the process forms the basis for the subsequent steps in the consulting process (formative evaluation).

All in all, the sustained development of organizational processes is a core component of this kind of combined approach. In this sense, it tries to harmonize the two consulting concepts so that in the event of the need to intervene in a crisis, short-term emergency measures can be introduced into a long-term development concept. This leads to a focus on the development of problem-solving strategies from current problems for future problems, whereby the process-oriented coaching helps define appropriate business-related support and to determine any need for external support (e.g. through a network of consultants or the introduction of a supervision arrangement for the consulting team).

5. Reflective-differentiating Consulting: Developments To Date

The key to combining both approaches lies in the introduction of structural provisions that offer a way of dealing with the conflicting requirements and strategic implications of the two consulting strategies. Continual reflection on ongoing experiences is an indispensable component in a differentiating process of this nature and includes:

- Repeated reflection periods throughout the intervention, which require both distance from any ongoing activities and a critical approach to the consulting process itself. This applies to the behavior of both consultants and organization alike.
- Reciprocal feedback loops within the consultant system and between the consultants and the organization, to handle any interaction between the two approaches in an appropriate manner and also to determine the “mood” in the consulting process.
- Regular definition of upcoming systemic measures and business components to enable a continual fine-tuning of any consulting activities. This should also provide an opportunity to address any unwelcome developments at an early stage.

Consulting orients itself around a vision of how the organization should develop. This allows it to distance itself both from any strong links to a particular situation (in the sense of ad hoc decisions) and rigid concepts. Constantly working on this collective vision is vital for the development of appropriate concepts, for reconciling them with the actual situation and/or constraints, as well as for verifying possible side effects for middle- and long-term development, without having to commit immediately to fixed goals. The aim is to encourage, support and guide organizational self-development, yet not try to totally control it.

Quality assurance in this sense means establishing a critical distance between the creation of knowledge of the consulting process and the actual consulting itself, thus avoiding any subsequent temptation to rationalize, explain or even convince oneself of the success of one's actions – an aspect of sensemaking explicitly referred to by Weick (2001). Only in this way can we keep our knowledge up-to-date and remain able to react sensitively to any internal views and problems. A supervision of the consulting process itself can offer valuable support (Buchinger 1998).

Through the accompanying research project, initial experiences with large consulting projects involving

combined consulting teams provided preliminary indications of the advantages and problems associated with such an approach. The following problems were identified: the complexity of the client consultant system, because working with two contrary approaches significantly increased the need for harmonization with a primarily consistent overall process (structural problems); functionalization by the client, which regularly pushed aspects of business process consulting into the foreground because of their rapid problem solving capabilities (speed of reaction), thus forcing the consulting team to conform to company expectations (short-sighted instrumentalization) at the expense of sustainability; the regulation of closeness and distance, since both forms of relationship blend into each other in reflective-differentiating consulting, thus creating different information flows, loyalties and perspectives within the consultant system (conflict-loaded).

However, these implementation difficulties are compensated for by the following qualitative advantages for the consulting process: the increased tapping of entrepreneurial potential through a linking of concrete business support with sustainable development of the company's problem-solving repertoire; the increase in acceptance in the company for change processes by building a strategy for the future together; the improvement in the company's internal capacity to reflect through an enhanced ability to observe.

Behind these positive effects lie the improved ability of organizations to learn and the advancement of corporate self-development and adaptability (cf. Wimmer 2004:190 et seqq.). However, effectively implementing a concept of this nature requires a combined set of values and views in the consultant system. This is not something that can be forced. The prerequisites for this, namely a relationship of mutual trust and respect for the other side's expertise and a striving for understanding of their procedures, similarly cannot be achieved through mutual assurance, rather only through a systematic internal information policy and continual harmonization of interventions in the consultant system. Reflection phases and an external supervisory analysis are a possible way of addressing the differences and thus enabling constructive collaboration despite the contradictions.

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