

A BETTER APPROACH TO CONSULTING VALUE

Sensei's approach to consulting revolves around engaging human performance. It is an evolution of an approach called *process consulting*. The "process" refers to "human processes".

The approach of linking human performance to business results is not just a collection of techniques to be compared to some other set of techniques. It is a fundamental paradigm about how consultants can actually confer value to clients.

The central belief is that no matter the technical aspects of any problem or opportunity, whether it relates to strategy, customer acquisition or retention, talent, finance, marketing, R&D, IT or anything else, human beings are involved! In fact, not only are human beings involved, but they create the processes by which these things are addressed and deployed. *And the primary way human beings process anything is by interacting with each other.*

So to us, human performance translates into human processes which are underwritten by human interactions. This is why truly nothing can be built and sustained that is larger than the relationships on which it is based.

Consultants have to realize that our job is to help our clients to legitimately succeed in ways they value and which in turn increase the value of their company. Genuine help occurs when you help a person, group or system to *help itself*. Anything else is a graft.

No consultant can ever adequately know the culture, the realities or the industry to offer specific

recommendations of such towering insight that value is conferred simply by virtue of these insights being shovelled out.

But the consultant *can* and *should* add real value by helping the client to actively diagnose the challenge in question and generate appropriate solutions or actions, and to grow and adapt jointly and collectively in order to be able to do so.

It can be argued that the fundamental value of the consultant is therefore the **creating of the helping relationship itself**, leveraged in a way that it can add client value.

When that is present and anchors the work going forward, there is credibility, execution, trust. Absent that, it is an expensive waste of time.

Consultants have to help clients, through this "helping relationship" to select the right potential to enable and the *right priorities* to execute.

Many times a problem is stated lucidly, but then a solution is embarked upon that actually undermines what we wish to accomplish. That is often due to how we do what we do, as much as by virtue of *what* we do.

THE ESSENCE OF ORGANIZATIONAL IMPROVEMENT

In a nutshell, the essence of organizational improvement lies in *creating a situation in which vision-relevant and strategy-furthering learning and change can take place* by individuals and groups.

There is a fiction that this can only be ignited if a client clearly knows what they need and then asks the consultant to respond to that clearly articulated need.

But when dealing with an issue of complexity, most often the person asking for help is aware of an outcome they wish to further yes, *but not necessarily what's impeding it*. They may have assumptions, but these are dangerous, as they can be or become blinkers.

Or even if they know the issue, they may not know why it hasn't been organically and internally resolved. So succession planning is an issue, and it's been one for a decade. Why has it not been addressed? That may be more valuable to understand than just to say, "We need a succession plan developed."

Locating with the client, the issue, problem and/or opportunity is a critical aspect of consulting value. Additionally we have to remember that if the **human dimension** to that problem or opportunity isn't identified and highlighted, we'll never break through.

CONSULTING MODELS

The first model is the "sell and tell" model. In this model, the client purchases "insight" gathered via expert services they are unable or unwilling to provide themselves. This is quite typical.

A company wants to know something, say what a certain demographic of consumers thinks or feels about them, how employees might respond to a new HR policy, the quality of morale in a certain department, how to organize a shared services function by benchmarking with leading companies, etc. A consultant is hired to find out by creating surveys, or doing interviews, or studying the market or other companies. By this means, the issue is, for some time, "delegated" to this external expert.

For this to deliver any real value, certain things have to be true, as has been pointed out by more than one expert observer:

- The client has correctly diagnosed the thing to be studied and to what end.
- They have correctly communicated this to the consultant, who has understood them.

- The capabilities of the consultant are in synch with that which is to be studied.
- The consequences of presenting such information or the consultant's recommendations will be salutary without other preparation or enrollment of the organization.
- The data will actually reveal what is being sought, rather than an anomaly, a distortion, or a partial view (based on things we may *not* know to study).

Perhaps the frequent and abundant dissatisfaction with consultants may have something to do with how unlikely it is for the majority of these conditions to be fulfilled in tandem. Moreover, this is a model whereby the client *disempowers* themselves.

Then, detached from the work and the process, if presented with difficult recommendations, it is easy to be defensive, or dismissive, or at least hostile. Then energy that should go into acting on what we've learned goes instead into shuttle-cocking competing world views back and forth.

Finally, the consultant is likely to see what they are inclined to see in the data, and thereby conclude and sell what they are best at, not necessarily what is really needed there.

The Sensei Alternative: We believe that creating the helping relationship is critical. We believe the client has to stay empowered and involved. We can indeed do the "heavy lifting" in terms of work, but there has to be a joint responsibility in agreeing who is surveyed or questioned for example, and a joint diagnosis should be arrived at, partner to partner.

Rather than rushing to have someone state what they want done, consultants provide real value by ensuring energy is actual goes to those things **most** likely to improve the client's condition, *as defined by them*. This requires fleshing out, challenging, eliciting, exploring.

Any system, any set of processes, can be made more effective. The trick is to locate those aspects that can make the biggest difference to a client's overall performance – and decide what would in turn make the biggest difference to the success of those factors.

The problem though is ultimately the client's, and must remain so. To seek to pluck the problem away is self-aggrandizing idiocy. Our job is to increase competence – not offer panaceas... or crutches.

At the outset consultants have no idea what is really being asked underneath whatever is first superficially expressed, nor what would actually help. Great consultants should be *energized by their initial ignorance* and access it as a way to explore with wonder, inquisitiveness, rigor and openness, so that they and the client arrive at a richer insight and understanding, together.

The second model is the "Physician" Model. Clients come to consultants to have some aspect of organizational health or performance "looked over". So we may have symptoms like dropping sales, high turnover of talent, stalled projects, high numbers of customer complaints, and the client wants someone to dish out the medicine, so to speak.

Perhaps there is a new fad or remedy being touted and they want the consultant to administer the remedy (Re-Engineering, Balanced Scorecard, 360 feedback, CRM, APC, whatever). What's the newest "cure" or organizational "therapy" we can download?

Consultants who have products in tow love this. It allows them to assess, administer, evaluate, all decoupled from the particularity of that business.

Say competencies are written for each job category, a gap analysis done, and career development programs created. And these competencies are often called "best in class" so no one wonders how precisely they were created, and their relevance to this organization.

If someone then finds the gaps shown to be jarring, they'll challenge the whole "orthodoxy" if presented as a remote system they think is trying to pigeon-hole them. The reaction will very likely be far more constructive if, for example, they are asked to participate in an assessment that is positioned to help them better express their potential – when it's about "feedforward" and "raising the bar" rather than showing how they don't fit the "model". If it's about realizing potential, then as we do with a tennis coach, we'll work on the poor backhand passionately, rather than trying to hide the fact the problem is there.

The "health check" consultants are asked to provide, has other issues. If there is already a climate of distrust, people may hide damaging information. Others feeling this is an invasion of privacy, may reply in generics. If on the other hand there is a more positive culture, people may use this as an opportunity to vent, and may *exaggerate* what isn't working.

In short, even if in the context of a methodological "cure", if the consultant does the diagnosing, while the client awaits a read-out and prescription, a gulf of communication will arise that will make the recommendations often irrelevant or at least highly unpalatable (for the same reasons as before).

Even real physicians enroll patients in deciding on a course of treatment. Oncologists in the treatment of breast cancer for example will consult their patient to consider many available options and plans of attack depending on their goals, pain thresholds, age, self-image and more.

It is fascinating, as a side-bar, how we have to keep assuring people their replies in such studies will be "confidential". The paranoia about anonymity shows more about the culture than any set of responses possibly could.

And finally, recommendations given with no sense of the culture or political realities of a company may mean they have no chance at all of being implemented! The numbers of consultant's reports that gather dust or are relegated to the back burner testify to the truth of this.

The Sensei Alternative: The client must understand and take responsibility for the decision to conduct whatever is embarked upon. They must become conversant in the methodology or approach and gain some facility with it. They must help frame it, sell it, explain it, and validate a credible intention behind it. Consultants should coach and facilitate their doing so.

Consultants should involve clients in the process, while sharpening diagnosis and educating them as to additional ways forward. A consultant is not absent distinctive expertise – but they have to deploy it judiciously and in partnership.

Arguably content expertise is less needed (as it can be purchased readily on the market) than the process skills of helping a client conduct effective self-

diagnosis and create enthusiasm to move the goalposts forward, from the people whose commitment we need for success.

If specific additional expertise is required in a field, the consultant can help the client as a "trusted advisor", to help them think through how best to get and apply the help they will source from these additional experts.

Consultants must remember, potentially everything we do in this regard, is an intervention...it's not a preamble. The active inquiry and collaborative alignment already begins to precipitate constructive change. The process of effective, interactive diagnosis with a clear commitment to ensuing action in a team or organizational setting is already a catalyst.



Sensei is an international consulting firm that helps their clients deliver business results by improving human performance and optimising the value of team and leadership interactions.

We focus on areas where companies can raise the bar on performance, productivity and profit. We ensure that any work we do has clear line of sight to specific business outcomes of value to the organisation, so that a solid return on time, energy and investment is realised.

We are experts in the process of unlocking potential and focusing this in the right ways on the right aims; and we excel at emotionally engaging leaders and teams to own the change, take accountability for it and deliver it. In short ... **'We do the really hard part of the soft stuff.'**

THE DIFFERENCE THAT MAKES THE DIFFERENCE

The typical models are "remedial" models, while human engagement is a "generative" or "double loop" model. One of the key aims is to help the client learn how to learn.

There are times consultants can just provide a "fix" for a problem. But we add far more value when we increase the capacity of a team say to solve its own problems and be able to reel in greater future opportunities by building real capabilities.

Once the diagnosis is done, the question will become whether a technical fix or an adaptive response is needed. That will depend on the degree to which the clients will have to change attitudes, values, habits, actions and interactions to make a positive difference in this area.

The aim for us therefore is to create a relationship with the client that enables and strengthens the client to perceive, understand and influence those aspects of performance (particularly human performance) in their internal or external environment that can improve their strategic business results in the identified area or areas.

Organizations are fundamentally networks of people engaged in achieving or furthering common goals...our job as consultants is to help our clients study and improve the processes that occur between these people and networks. Management itself is ultimately a "social technology".

A consultant has to shift roles too – from "human process" to "telling" or even "administering" – this works as long as it is done consciously, at the appropriate juncture, with an awareness that this is truly what is now needed...not as a shortcut, but as a real contribution.

Empowering clients to improve self-diagnosis and accountability, and to be supported in self-understanding and to be coached in execution in a way that builds both results and a sponsoring culture, is the essence of the value-addition we believe consulting should be all about.

Omar Khan, March 2010