

‘Look girls, this is how you do it’: Exploring the dependence of managers on their consultants

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Abstract

Managers often need advice: management consultants are quite capable of giving advice. This may seem like the most elementary of transactions, but it is actually fraught with difficulties occasioned by the nature of information. In consequence, it rarely occurs. Instead, managers tend to make do with the pre-packaged and neatly labelled information that is management method. They are keener than ever to hire management consultants, but to explain and legitimise management method. This can lead to the dependency of the manager on the consultant, dependency hidden by a prevailing myth that an information transaction has taken place, that the consultant really has told the manager what the manager wants to know.

Introduction

Management consultants offer managers something they want; were this not so, managers would not purchase their services. Just what these services are is less evident. On the face of it, advice is what is sought and proffered. It seems that the management consultant is presented with problems to solve much as the garage mechanic is asked to determine what is wrong with a car. But the analogy is not robust: the garage mechanic is usually expected to fix whatever is wrong with the car while the management consultant is not expected to fix whatever is wrong with the organisation. And while value for money is demanded of the mechanic, the relationship between the benefits the consultant brings and the consultant's fee is harder to calculate. Often it seems that supply of consultancy services stimulates its own demand, even that the value of consultants rises with their fees.

Management consultants offer an information product of particular purity, something apart from the rough amalgam of information and other goods that is the common information good. Few information goods are quite so detached from the use to be made of them. The doctor accepts some responsibility for the treatment that follows his diagnosis; the landscape gardener is held to account if what he plants withers and dies. But the management consultant bears none of this burden. He is an information worker *par excellence*. This offers rare opportunity for those who study information transactions. Just how is an information product bought and sold when there is so little to indicate its nature and value? With difficulty, it would seem, but the difficulties of effecting an information transaction also present opportunities to management consultants and the managers who hire them. The paper pays particular attention to the importance of management method as an encapsulation and labelling of what the consultant is trying to sell. It looks at the personal relationship between consultant and client, and decides that it is in the interests of both to pretend that a simple information transaction takes place, to accept a myth. The paper explores why this should be so.

This paper is based on a research project whose purpose was to investigate the information transaction between management consultants and senior managers responsible for strategy in large organisations. Over a period of some years, managers who hire consultants were interviewed about their practices and experiences. So, too, were management consultants accustomed to working in the sort of large, UK-based organisations from which the managers came. Just occasionally, a manager and a consultant had been employed in the same organisation, though never had manager and consultant worked together. The research sought to discover how information so detached from tangible goods and services is bought and sold. Educational qualifications are easier to buy and sell than education itself; just as a book is easier to buy and sell than the knowledge it contains. Is the information transaction between consultant and client enabled by association with something more tangible than advice? If so, what? Just what is really being bought and sold? The argument is interspersed throughout with quotation from the interviews with managers and their consultants.

The information transaction

What do management consultants do? The question could hardly be more obvious, nor the answer more elusive. Neither consultant nor client is disposed to discuss the workings of the organisation with a stranger. Neither welcomes the intrusion of an outsider in what can be a very personal relationship. So, while there is a considerable literature on the theory of consultancy, and prescription galore on what consultants and clients should do, the body of writing based on empirical work inside organisations in which consultants are active is slim. In consequence, theory dominates the understanding of consultancy, theory rarely checked by practice, or brought to heel by reality (Sturdy *et al.*, 2009).

Fundamental to this theory is a very basic assumption - that organisations hire management consultants to solve their problems. But does this actually happen? Can it happen? The manager may know that he needs to know more to solve a problem, but he cannot know just what more he needs to know (otherwise he would no longer need to know it). Even if the manager somehow did know what he needed to know, and resolved to acquire this very information from a consultant, the manager would still have no means of knowing what the consultant knows. How can the manager be sure that the consultant knows what the manager needs to know, whatever that is? And even if the two of them could somehow circumvent this information *impasse*, how should they go about fixing a fee? What is the information worth? The buying and selling of information always presents problems, problems caused by the characteristics of the good (Macdonald, 1998). There is nothing for buyers to see or feel and they can have little idea what it is they are buying. If sellers of information tell buyers what they have for sale, they give away the very information they are trying to sell. Even if sellers could somehow give buyers samples of what they have to sell, and succeeded in making sales, they would never actually surrender the information they had sold. The seller of information retains what the buyer of information acquires.

Such characteristics must surely pose problems for the buying and selling consultancy services. If neither sellers nor buyers can declare themselves, how are the normal rules of demand and supply to operate (see Drahos and Braithwaite, 2002)? The answer may be that they do not: there is little evidence of market transactions in information flow between manager and management consultant (Huczynski, 1993;

Clark and Salaman, 1996). And because the market fails, intervention seems to be required if anything at all is to happen. This occurs, for example, when the manager realises that the organisation is in trouble, but does not quite know why. The consultant is hired as much to say what information is needed as to supply it.

“I had a problem, but I was not quite sure what the problem was – something to do with general management competence. There was not a lot of life in management. If you don’t know what to do, get in consultants.”

Senior manager

Such intervention helps an imperfect market to work, but it may also encourage the use of management consultants for purposes beyond basic information transactions. For instance, many managers seem to look to consultants less for new information than to increase the value of information they already have by, for instance, confirming preconceptions (Ginsburg and Abrahamson, 1991), or supporting decisions already made (Schwenk, 1986).

“I can join with consultants. If I am not selling my own cause, I can sell through consultants. When you prepare consultants, you can sell your own idea. It looks like someone came in and thought of it.”

Senior manager

In such circumstances, an ostensible information transaction may mask the real reason for hiring management consultants. And because the real reason can be conveniently hidden, the value of consultants increases. This may explain why consultants can earn their keep even though their methods do not always work (Fletcher, 1997), even though the client’s struggle to keep up with the latest methods may itself be damaging (Carson *et al.*, 2000).

Their reputation notwithstanding, consultants do not foist new methods on managers. Managers have as much interest in change as consultants (Woodworth and Nelson, 1979). They are attracted to new methods less to solve problems than because new methods capture the spirit of the times (Grint, 1994). The manager who adopts them shows himself to be progressive, anxious to embrace change, enlightened and up to date – a very modern manager (Gill and Whittle, 1992).

“BT were sitting ducks for every notion that was going. In the early stages, managers could be seen with Dale Carnegie books sticking out of their pockets. They all knew that they had to adopt the buzz words and the jargon because they were now in the private sector. They embraced every fashionable management nostrum.”

Senior manager

While the problems of the organisation concern the manager, they may weigh less heavy than the problems confronting the manager himself (Macdonald, 2006). Senior managers may be interested in new methods less to improve the competitiveness of the organisation than to improve their own competitiveness (Sturdy, 1997a).

“I have to explain my predicament in a way [the management consultant] will understand, explain from a personal position and in an organisational context.”

Senior manager

The consultant caters for managerial need as much as organisational need.

The manager's needs

In satisfying the manager's need for new methods, the consultant stimulates demand for yet more methods (McGivern, 1983). The adoption of each new method seems to confirm the inadequacy of the manager's own skills while at the same time generating ever higher expectations of the manager (Abrahamson, 1996). Plummeting self-confidence and soaring expectations send managers scurrying back to the very management consultants who helped induce their confusion (Sturdy 1997a; 1997b).

“I recognise that look of complete joy on their faces when I say after a couple of days. ‘Look girls, this is how you do it’. The look of huge relief on their faces tells me I have failed. Daddy has told them what to do.”

Management consultant

Faced by unrealistic expectations, the manager can become desperate (Abrahamson, 1996). Consider, for example, the expectations set by re-engineering: “We must have the boldness to imagine taking 78 days out of an 80-day turnaround time, cutting 75% off overhead, and eliminating 80% of errors. These are not unrealistic goals. If managers have the vision, reengineering will provide a way” (Hammer, 1990, p.112). Consider the plight of one of Robert Pascale's managers: “In the past eighteen months, we have heard that profit is more important than revenue, quality is more important than profit, that people are more important than profit, that customers are more important than our people, that big customers are more important than our small customers, and that growth is the key to our success. No wonder our performance is inconsistent” (Pascale, 1990, p.19). As Jenny Stewart observes: “Any organisation seeking to follow these various forms of guidance would have had a confusing time of it. Over the past ten years, it would have been successively downsized, flattened,

shamrocked, strategically planned, diversified, concentrated, re-engineered and, in all probability, bankrupted” (Stewart, 1996, p.30).

The management consultant works in the organisation on the organisation’s problems: he works for the manager who hires him. Both may be driven by self-interest, but effecting an information transaction is easier at the personal level than at the organisational level (Macdonald, 1993). This is not to say that senior managers necessarily look to their consultants to inform the decisions they have to make (see Gattiker and Larwood, 1985; Washburn, 1991). The seasoned decision-maker tends to be wary of information. Information has many uses and knowledge is not always one of them. More information may increase rather than reduce uncertainty (Weedon, 1990), rendering decisions yet more difficult. When this happens, the consultant’s information is actually creating problems for future solution. This future solution will require other information, which explains, though just in part, the constant churn of new methods from management consultants (Huczynski, 1993).

“Success for consultants means giving something different. All the time successful consultants are searching for something different to say.”

Management consultant

Actually, it is not absolutely essential that these methods be novel; the organisation has little memory and managers and consultants alike have done what they can to erase what it has. What is re-engineering but the deliberate deletion of corporate memory (Pollitt, 2000)?

The manager must walk the line between knowing at least as much as his peers of what the gurus of management have to say without actually becoming bogged down in information (Huczynski, 1993). Senior managers expect their consultants to help them keep a balance between knowing too little and knowing too much. The manager is always in danger of acquiring too much information, or the wrong information. Hence the need for filters that will admit only essential information; not just method, but distilled method (e.g., Boyett and Boyett, 1998). One publication provides managers with “the latest management thinking in just 16 pages a month” (*Bulletpoint*, 1996). Another “packs into just 8 easily absorbed pages, a mountain of business wisdom distilled down to just the purest essence” (*Independent*, 1994). One reviewer of a compendium of the works of 34 gurus describes the result as 201 pages

of “painless pith” (Hammonds, 1993). The management consultant is a better filter still.

“Everyone knows the what now, but not the why..... Everyone has read the book, but they are still not sure how to do it.”

Management consultant

Quoting Kenneth Burke in his review of *A Passion for Excellence*, Charles Conrad makes clear the real purpose of reading: “..... the appeal of a book like *A Passion for Excellence* lies in its *mythos*, in its capacity to transport readers symbolically from a world of everyday experience to a mythical realm.... ‘I’ll wager that, in by far the great majority of cases, such readers make no serious attempt to apply the book’s recipes. The lure of the book resides in the fact that the reader, while reading it, is then living in the aura of success’” (Conrad, 1985, p.428). Reading, then, is not necessarily a literal activity for managers; it can be a metaphor for something else. Nor is reading necessarily a literary activity for management consultants.

“I occasionally recommend the books in airport bookshops. I don’t read them myself.”

Management consultant

Powerful they may be, but senior managers can be rather isolated (TenEyck, 1989), frightened (Jackson, 1996), bored (Huczynski, 1996), and ignorant (Macdonald and Simpson, 1998). With a management consultant by his side, the manager is no longer alone, his fears may be calmed, his interest aroused, and his confidence in what he is doing, and why he is doing it, reinforced.

“I think MDs must lead a lonely life. They have no one to talk to.”

Management consultant

Many senior managers want comfort, security, reassurance, someone to hold a hand. This is why the relationship between management consultant and client is so often portrayed as a doctor-patient relationship (Tilles, 1961). Though pejorative, nanny-child might be more accurate. Even the most tolerant nannies occasionally crack under the strain imposed by the problem child.

“People know damn well what the problem is, but they haven’t got the moral fibre to do anything about it themselves. Consultants are used to doing what management should do themselves. Management would rather act vicariously.”

Management consultant

“It’s all Emperor’s New Clothes. It’s a con trick. Consultants go in because senior managers cannot be bothered to get off their backsides and do it themselves.”

Management consultant

While the macho world of the corporation tolerates no other leader than the CEO, it does permit the senior manager an offsider, a Robin to his Batman, a Tonto to his Lone Ranger, a loyal and trusted ally who will fight alongside the manager (McGivern, 1983; Jackson, 1996). As Maid Marion, the consultant can play both nanny and partner roles nicely.

The market offers a world of heroes and villains, black hats and white hats, us and them, a world in which it is easy to take sides (Huczynski, 1993). In its unequivocal militarism, the language of the organisation reflects this simplicity: the competition is the enemy, which has to be beaten to win market share or whatever. Reality of course is very different. After all, the professional manager is a mercenary, loyal to whichever organisation is paying and only as long as it is paying. And the management consultant is a prostitute, rendering personal services in return for payment. The organisation is no more than the stage on which both perform.

In catering for managerial need as much as organisational need, management consultants increase demand for yet more methods with which managers can compete among themselves (McGivern, 1983). Clearly this demand is largely independent of the success with which methods are applied in the organisation, which may go some way towards explaining why there is so little interest in measuring this success. But the whole system is dependent on the acceptance of a myth, the myth being that management consultants provide the advice that organisations need to solve their problems.

The myth

The key distinguishing feature of myth is that belief in it is not contingent on whether the myth is right or wrong (Joseph, 1989). There is no point questioning a myth. We know that managers do not seek advice from management consultants to help them

manage better - the characteristics of information make this quite impossible. Yet we can still believe that management consultants really do tell managers what they need to know. Even where experience casts doubt on the soundness of methods, myth allows defects to be overlooked. Thus, there is no embarrassment among managers that re-engineering and total quality management (Grint, 1994) and quality circles (Pascale, 1990) were accepted with such unquestioning enthusiasm. It hardly matters that empowerment of workers has turned out to mean just the opposite (Collins, 1994; 1997), or that the original opus of Peters and Waterman (1982), *In Search of Excellence*, has failed the test of time (Nikiforuk, 1995; Guest, 1992; Berry, 1983; Pascale, 1990). Ideas are what excite Peters: “There are a lot of charlatans about. There’s a lot of bullshit around. I have no reason to believe that I am or am not either one of the bullshitters or one of the charlatans, nor am I very interested. What’s simply fascinating to me is that it’s a time of ideas. The fact of the matter is that the average manager is buying lots of books. He or she is not an idiot and these people are desperately thirsty for ideas” (Dwyer, 1993). And it matters not a jot if Peters fabricated the data in *In Search of Excellence* (Byrne, 2001; Peters, 2001). Accuracy plays no part in myth.

Senior managers are less disturbed by flaws in management methods than by revelations that there are flaws, revelations that risk driving a wedge between manager and management consultant. Nick Oliver is an academic whose research has questioned the contribution to firm profitability of such Japanese methods as lean management and just-in-time (Oliver, 2008). Publication of the results in three *Financial Times* articles was followed by media interest and then by coverage in engineering and business journals. Much of the last poured scorn on the findings: “I’m boiling mad about the way what has been disclosed by Cambridge University research has been presented by the press as if the whole production management profession were a load of gullible wallabies responsible for their firms’ loss of profit.” Indeed, the authors received a good deal of hate mail for their troubles, a lot of it from consultants: “To use a religious metaphor, the reactions suggested that the report was a piece of blasphemy rather than fresh evidence in a developing and complex picture.” It is just not appropriate to question myth.

Maintaining the myth

Accompanying the growth of the consultancy industry has been the transition of the manager from bumbling amateur, self-taught in the art of management, to professional manager, trained in business studies and sporting an MBA (Pascale, 1990). The typical senior manager of the 1960s was qualified to manage nothing (Mant, 1977): the modern manager is qualified to manage anything. Management education has transformed management from art to science (*Economist*, 1993a; 1993b). The business school has provided the manager with a language with which he can relate to both management academics and management consultants (Poulsen and Payne, 1994).

“I keep myself up to date with exposure to consultants. Working with academics, I can keep up to date with the best reading.”

Senior manager

Despite its claims to be a science, there is little tradition of testing in management studies (Hubbard and Armstrong, 1994; see also Macdonald and Simpson, 1998). Indeed, there is not much tradition of criticism either (DeNisi, 1994; Hubbard and Lindsay, 1995; Pfeffer and Fong, 2002; Grey, 2004; Ghoshal, 2005). The culture of the organisation has prevailed over that of the common room (Macdonald and Hellgren, 1999). This culture places little value on dissent or reservation: it does value - and reward - commitment and unquestioning loyalty. The world of the organisation, just like that of the hive, requires joint effort and conformity. Significantly, the language of the organisation is redolent with this requirement - team people marching to the same drumbeat, singing from the same hymnsheet, pulling together. There are other similarities, perhaps the most relevant being that managers occupy what Eccles and Nohria (1992, p.9) call a ‘rhetorical universe’, a world of hype in which the role of language is as much to persuade as it is to communicate.

“I think what consultants do is selective content analysis, picking up words which fit with their understanding.”

Senior manager

The very language of management makes information transactions difficult (see Huczynski, 1993). Take this from the *British Journal of Management*:

“The guru of action learning is Professor R. Revans. Revans has been an Olympic long jumper, a Cambridge physicist and is a follower of the Bible; he is not a traditional production manager.....he initially worked for the Essex Education Service, bridging mind and body in the examination of nurse recruitment, and then in the mining industry noting the duality between matter and spirit.....there is within action learning a desire to move on the higher

plains. As managers are self-developed they reflect more and are challenged to take a broader view of the world, seeking enlightenment or a 'oneness' which denotes not only self-awareness but union with all living things." (McLaughlin and Thorpe, 1993, pp.23-5)

This shared language of manager, academic and consultant is not that of the philosopher; it is simple and unsubtle, more suited to lists and bullet points than to prose. It serves to prescribe rather than enable consideration, to describe impact rather than explore implication. Equally characteristic of the language is absence of humour, of irony. This is not a language for communication so much as a means of establishing exclusivity and discouraging the scrutiny of those who lack fluency (Jackall, 1988).

"It's like people who use medical terms with doctors."

Manager

So, the churn of new methods from management consultants goes unchallenged. Indeed, so many methods have been allowed to proliferate that it is now quite impossible to impose any discipline on them (Chatterjee and Yilmaz, 1993). Within the myth, the methods that consultants sell are immune from criticism. So, too, is continuing failure to quantify the impact of management consultants (Gill and Whittle, 1992). It should be possible, even easy, to calculate the benefit from hiring management consultants. When the consultant's world of science and method is applied to the manager's world of performance indicators, some sort of measurement of the result should be almost inevitable. Apparently it is not. Now why is this? What work has been done seems to suggest that the organisational benefits from consultants are not great (Schaffer, 1997), even that random behaviour achieves results that are just as good (Pascale, 1990). Consultants themselves tend to blame poor results on the client's failure to implement properly. They are not keen on payment by results, arguing that success is in the client's hands, that the client must believe in the project, that the client must have faith (Alvesson, 1993) - which is precisely what myth requires.

Concluding thoughts

There is little evidence of an information transaction between manager and management consultant (Huczynski, 1993; Clark and Salaman, 1996). The conditions essential to such a transaction are simply not fulfilled. Their absence is disguised by

myth, belief that the manager really does seek advice and that the consultant really does give it (Farrell, 1993). The more that is expected of the manager, the more likely the manager to resort to the management consultant. With growing dependency comes increased uncertainty and the progressive need for more and more consultancy (Sturdy 1997a; 1997b).

“Dependency is increased by using consultants. You can get hooked on consultants. You can become consultant-happy.”

Management consultant

Maintaining this confusion is the uncritical belief which is fundamental to all myth. Inject criticism, doubt, irony, cynicism, humour, and the myth evaporates. Examination of the language of management would be a step in the right direction. The language is not fit for intellectual purpose (Alvesson, 1993). That a language which communicates so little should have been tolerated for so long, especially by management academics, suggests that it has another purpose. It is certainly not a language conducive to information transactions.

“I am developing gain sharing as a concept in the organisation. [The consultant] put me onto that.

Senior manager

It’s all about people learning the organisational approach to organisation.

Senior manager

Dispelling myth is always discomfiting, but harsh reality would be refreshing. Without this particular myth, managers might be taken more seriously than management methods, valued as talented individuals rather than as masters of method (Eliasson, 1999).

“The defining feature of the best management is to allow their managers to fail. The right to be wrong more than once is disappearing.”

Management consultant

Managers would still hire management consultants, of course, but less as loyal sidekick than as court jester, the fool reminding even the most senior and powerful of managers that he is human and fallible (Kets de Vries, 1990).

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