

Consulting Groups: A tool for sharing vision and building alliances

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ABSTRACT

In this paper we describe consulting groups, an effective tool used with great impact in different organizations to foster shared vision and the development of alliances. Through this tool, executives have the chance to present projects they want to strengthen, dilemmas of leadership and communication they want to understand or resolve.

Consulting groups are successful tools designed to allow members of an organization to have a forum of colleagues give suggestions of improvement, help redesign projects and obtain a different perspective to dilemmas of leadership and communication.

The group is formed by six to eight members of the organization, invited to participate in a learning process. The emphasis is in team learning, building and maintaining alliances. The group meets for one and a half hour, the same time and day every week. This requires a high degree of commitment from the participants.

There are two roles, rotated each week: **the presenter** and **the designated authority**. The role of the presenter is to prepare a personal dilemma for the group discussion. This is a project he or she thinks the group could help develop or strengthen. A few days before the session, the presenter gives each participant an outline of the case to be discussed, so everybody comes to the meeting ready with possible suggestions. The designated authority's role is to direct the session according to his or her particular style. This is viewed by the participants, in itself, as a learning experience, since the group will also discuss the ability of each designated authority to direct the session. Comments are later given that address this issue.

It is important to emphasize that group membership is voluntary. The group is interdisciplinary and inter-hierarchical, to include people from all organizational levels in the creative process of change.

The consulting group meets for three consecutive weeks. Each week only one project is presented and discussed. Then, at the fourth week, the group meets with a facilitator for a debriefing session. During this session the group discusses one of the cases already presented. Systemic thinking is emphasized as a way of analyzing the case to reinforce the notion of building a learning organization and to avoid linear cause-effect thinking, looking for someone to blame or personalizing organizational turbulence in a few scapegoats.

From our experience, consulting groups have had a positive significant impact in the organization, confronting nevertheless in some cases difficulties and resistance. On one hand, people have had the experience that "a few heads think better than one", that people from different backgrounds contribute a great deal to other areas of expertise and that individuals from lower hierarchical levels have something important to say to higher levels of authority.

We would like to mention other examples of positive impact. In one occasion, a person not affiliated to any consulting group in an organization that was implementing this tool, asked to be received by one of the consulting group requesting help with the development of a particular project. In another occasion, three consulting groups joined efforts to strengthen a project that needed to be presented in the organizational headquarters.

On the other hand, we can also report some resistance to this tool. Part of it can be explained by the pressure of time in accomplishing day to day routine objectives. Resistance arises also from inhibition by people from "below" or from "above" in presenting dilemmas that could be perceived as revealing a vulnerable position. People from "below" feel at times inhibited to exercise the designated authority's role, to tell higher ups to wait their turn for feedback, not to interrupt, etc. Nevertheless and in spite of these difficulties, consulting group members have been willing during the

debriefing seminars to learn about cooperation, communication skills, exercise of authority and the necessity of building alliances.

One particular feedback we have had is the general perception of consulting group members that everybody has something to contribute to each other, independent of background, expertise or different mental models, provided the comments come from the perspective of strengthening the other's project or creatively solving the proposed dilemmas.

We have found that consulting group activities contribute greatly to practicing Senge's five disciplines of a learning organization¹. We have already stressed the importance of systemic thinking for successful group discussions. Building shared vision and questioning mental models come out naturally in these discussions. Team learning is exercised continuously and personal mastery becomes an ethical statement invigorated by the groups support of each member.

Note

¹ Senge, Peter. *The Fifth Discipline*. Doubleday, New York 1990.