Schein: Process Consultation

Introduction

Schein's work[1] belongs in the tradition of US approaches to the organisation of change. The primary concern of the Addison-Wesley series in 1969 was to write about consultation processes concerned with bringing about change in organisations. These processes had evolved through the practice of such people as Schein, Beckhard and Bennis in the 1950's as a response to the cold (war) rationalism of the management science of the post-war years. The crucial importance of Schein's work was founded on the assertion of a *difference* - a difference between structure and process - which could be worked with through the interventions of the consultant.

This difference was echoed in this country by the notion of socio-technical systems, but proceeded down a 'human science' path elaborated in the National Training Laboratories which paralleled that associated with the Tavistock Institute and its psycho-analytically oriented approach to groups and organisations in this country.

A rough characterisation of the other five books[2,3,4,5,6] in the series will give a sense of the relationship each author had to this difference. These varied from educationist (Bennis) through whole-system interventionist (Beckhard) to re-programmer (Blake & Mouton), with Lawrence and Lorsch being more concerned with the basis of the intervention in how the whole system worked, and Walton focusing more on the research strategy of the interventionist:

- Bennis: "*Organisation development* is a response to change, a complex educational strategy intended to change the beliefs, attitudes, values, and structure of organisations so that they are better able to adapt to new technologies, markets and challenges, and the dizzying rate of change itself..... it holds promise for developing the "real knowledge" about our post-modern world."

- Beckhard: "Enterprise managers today are deeply concerned with the dilemma of how to (a) fully mobilise the energy of the organisation's human resources toward achievement of the organisation's performance objectives, and (b) at the same time, so organise the work, work environment, the communications systems, and the relationships of people, that individuals' needs for self worth, growth, and satisfaction are significantly met at work.

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[1]Edgar H. Schein. Process Consultation: its role in Organisation Development. Addison-Wesley 1969

[2]Warren G. Bennis. Organisation Development: its nature, origins and prospects. Addison-Wesley 1969.

[3] Richard Beckhard. Organisation Development: strategies and models. Addison-Wesley 1969.

[4] Robert R. Blake & Jane Srygley Mouton. Building a Dynamic Corporation through Grid Organisation Development. Addison-Wesley 1969.

[5] Paul R. Lawrence and Jay W. Lorsch. Developing Organisations: diagnosis and action. Addison-Wesley 1969.

[6] Richard E. Walton. Interpersonal Peacemaking: Confrontations and Third-Party Consultations. Addison-Wesley 1969.

To resolve this dilemma in our rapidly changing environment, new organisation forms must be developed; more effective goal-setting and planning processes must be learned, and practice teams of interdependent people must spend real time improving their methods of working, decision-making, and communicating. Competing or conflicting groups must move toward a collaborative way of work. In order for these changes to occur and be maintained, a *planned*, managed change effort is necessary - a program of *organisation development*".

- Blake & Mouton: "We deal here with the fundamentals of planned change. The point of application is the corporation. This book describes the principles and concepts of Grid$_{®}$ Organisation Development and its method of planned change. It presents techniques, instruments, and phases of development essential for inducing change and achieving desired results in an orderly but rigorous and controlled way. The same principles with only slight modifications apply with equal impact to government agencies, the military, hospitals, school systems, and various other organisations that are service-rendering rather than profit-seeking."

- Lawrence & Lorsch: "An organisation is the co-ordination of different activities of individual contributors to carry out planned transactions with the environment.... organisation development is concerned with finding ways to change the organisation from its current state to a better-developed state.... the term has been adopted primarily by specialists in industry who are associated with modern versions of human-relations training, such as sensitivity training. Because of the association, the term is in danger of being synonymous with these educational methods...."

- Walton: "Third-party consultation (by organisational members or outside consultants) can in many ways increase the likelihood of constructive outcomes from conflict.... While the potential exists, in practice third-party roles in the organisation setting have not been recognised and legitimated as they have been in other settings such as labour mediation services, the UN Secretariat and its peace-keeping units, and marital counselling. This book seeks to accelerate the emergence of third-party consultation as an integral part of organisation development programs.... the learning strategy is one of being both actor in the third-party role and the observer of the third party's behaviour."

In what follows, I want to look closely at the way Schein starts his book in order to get at two questions:

- how does Schein position process consulting as a form of consulting?
- what is the *object* of process consulting?

By making a Lacanian 'take' on the answers which emerge, I try to reframe the nature of process consulting in a way which raises questions about the basis of 'authority' from which the process consultant works, and about the challenges this leaves us with in thinking about working with groups and organisations.

Positioning process consulting

Schein's introduction (pages 3-9) starts out by problematising the ability of the manager-as-client to know what he wants from a consultant:

> "Managers often sense that all is not well or that things could be better, and yet do not have the tools with which to translate their vague feelings into concrete action steps."

The positioning of the consultant is very much concerned with his relationship with this not-knowing:

> "The kind of consultation I will attempt to describe in this book deals with problems of this sort. Process consultation does not assume that the manager or the organisation knows what is wrong, or what is needed, or what the consultant should do. All that is required for the process to begin constructively is some *intent*[7] *on the part of someone in the organisation*[8] *to improve the way things are going."*

Schein uses this not-knowing as a basis for distinguishing between this and other forms of consultation:

- the *purchase* model, in which expert information and/or service is being bought by the client. For a successful outcome, Schein argues that this model depends on:
  - "whether the manager has correctly diagnosed his own needs;
  - whether he has correctly communicated these needs to the consultant;
  - whether he has accurately assessed the capability of the consultant to provide the right kind of information or service; and
  - whether he has thought through the consequences of having the consultant gather information, and/or the consequences of implementing changes which may be recommended by the consultant."

  In essence, this model assumes that the transaction between client and consultant is taking place within a client context which can manage the transfer of knowledge/practice.

- the *doctor-patient* model, in which a consultant or team of consultants are brought in by executives to "look them over", much as a patient might go to his doctor for an annual physical. The consultants are supposed to find out what is wrong with which part of the organisation, and then, like a physician, recommend a program of therapy. Apart from the difficulties of finding out what is actually going on, Schein points out that there are difficulties also in the client accepting the diagnosis.

- *Process consultation*, by contrast to both of these models, focuses on joint diagnosis, and the passing on to the client of diagnostic skills. The key

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[7]This notion of *intent* can be read as something-as-lacking - as *desire* being operative. I come back to this later.

[8]"Someone in the organisation" raises interesting questions about whose desire it is, and on the basis of what authority this desire can be assumed by others.....

assumption is that the client sees the problem for himself, shares in its diagnosis, and is actively involved in generating a remedy.

How are we to 'read' this three-way distinction? Using terminology borrowed from Mintzberg in the 2x2 below, the purchase model gives rise to the 'bird' model of consulting. Here the consultant is an expert in products and packages which are bought within the context of a shared (although not necessarily articulated) understanding of the what-the-problem-is. (Bird because of the way the models left behind by these consultants build up layers of 'solutions' which have to be set aside if the problems are to be seen clearly.)

The 'guru' is the doctor-patient model, where the guru is able to provide a context and framework within which the clients problems can be formulated and understood; and the 'fool' is the process consultant. The shaded box is an 'apprentice' position, in which the consultant is learning from the context given by the client. Action learning often operates from this position.

What is interesting here is the meaning of "knows". It relates to the diagnostic framework/context/milieu within which problems are being encountered. What is distinctive about the process consulting approach it is the forms of 'knowing' tacit within the organisation's processes which are what-is-being-intervened-on.

The *object* of process consulting

Schein's definition of process consulting is

> "a set of activities on the part of the consultant which help the client perceive, understand, and to act upon process events which occur in the client's environment."

He argues that

> "the various functions which make up an organisation are always mediated by the interactions of people, so that the organisation can never escape its human processes. As long as organisations are networks of people, there will be processes occurring between them. The better understood and diagnosed these processes are, the better will be the chances of finding solutions to technical problems which will be accepted and used by the members of the organisation."

What are these "processes" and "process events"? The distinction Schein makes is between structure and process:

> "Early studies of organisation were dominated by the "scientific management" school of thought leading to an almost exclusive preoccupation with the "structural" or static elements of organisation:
> ° what is the correct division of labour?
> ° who should have which responsibilities?
> ° should the production department report directly to the president or through a product organisation involving other functions?
> ° what is the right span of control?
> ° how many levels should there be in the hierarchy?
>
> This concern for organisational statics is understandable and appropriate because organisations are open systems which exist in an uncertain environment[9]. In order to survive as organisations they must conserve stability in the face of recurring disintegrative pressures from the environment. Just as total societies develop a social structure, laws, traditions, and culture as a way of stabilising themselves, so organisations develop and must conserve their structures and culture."[10]
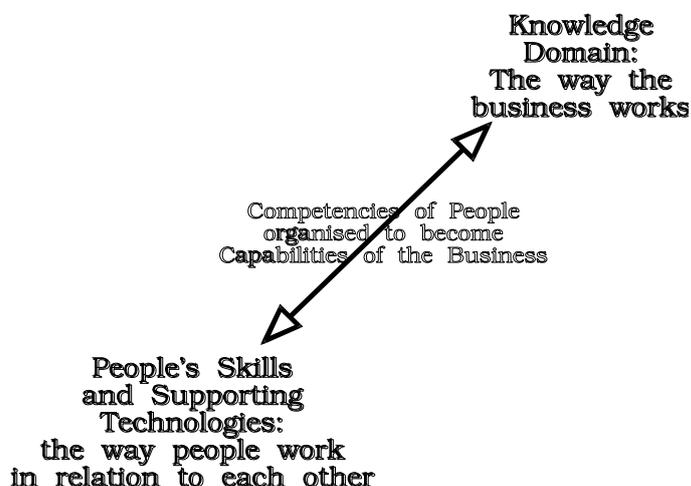
Schein points out that consulting organisations intervening on structure are incomplete. Because the network of positions and roles is occupied by people, people introduce *processes* which form an informal organisation which mediates the effects

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[9]This notion of organisation is very much the formal or codified organisation.

[10]This view of organisations later became know as "2nd order cybernetics", insofar as the forms of knowing embodied in the 'culture and structure were concerned with conserving both identity and viability ('fit' or structural coupling with the medium).

of the formal organisation. It is on these mediating relationships between people and groups - processes - which the process consultant intervenes[11].

A way of understanding this view of process vs structure is in terms of the following:

Knowledge
Domain:
The way the
business works

Competencies of People
organised to become
Capabilities of the Business

People's Skills
and Supporting
Technologies:
the way people work
in relation to each other

On the one hand we have the way the business works, normally described in terms of formal organisation. When augmented by descriptions of workflows and business processes, this becomes a "knowledge domain" in the sense that we find ourselves describing a domain in which the business is capable of 'acting' effectively. This knowledge domain contrasts with a description of the organisation in terms of the processes occurring between people, mediated by their own skills, knowledge, experience, expectations etc etc. This is more frequently described as the informal organisation, although as personnel managers and HR specialists seek to codify and formalise what it is that the people are supposed to be doing in relation to each other, this becomes spoken of more in terms of a relation between the competencies of people and the capabilities of the business.   These competencies and capabilities become the dual of each other, in which the approach of process consulting is very much through the processes taking place between the people.

This then is the notion of process vs structure. I have used this diagrammatic form because it lends itself to being developed to show a relationship to context. In this context, not only is the way the business works formed in relation to a "problem domain" - some domain in which customers or clients have some supposed needs and demands which the business is a response to; but also the way people work in relation to each other is formed against a backcloth of knowledge, experience and learning which pre-figures what it is that they know. This second context is the whole cultural backcloth against which the people coming into the business are being foregrounded by the business' needs and demands.

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[11]The paper on structure//process explores this notion of process in terms of codified vs tacit processes, both of which are formed 'under' structure - but the structure here is the structuring effects of the signifier. The paper goes on, therefore, to question what it is that makes the desire of the leader the leadership of desire. The answer (which is not in that paper!) is that what transforms the desire of the leader is that he desires the desire of the Other... the definition of the ethic of psychoanalysis.....

Looked at like this, the structure//process shaded axis occupies/embodies a position from which it competes with other, differently positioned, organisations. The full Z-form, however, shows this positional axis as mediating between the problem domain defined by what-the-customer-wants and the potentialities of the cultural backcloth[12]:
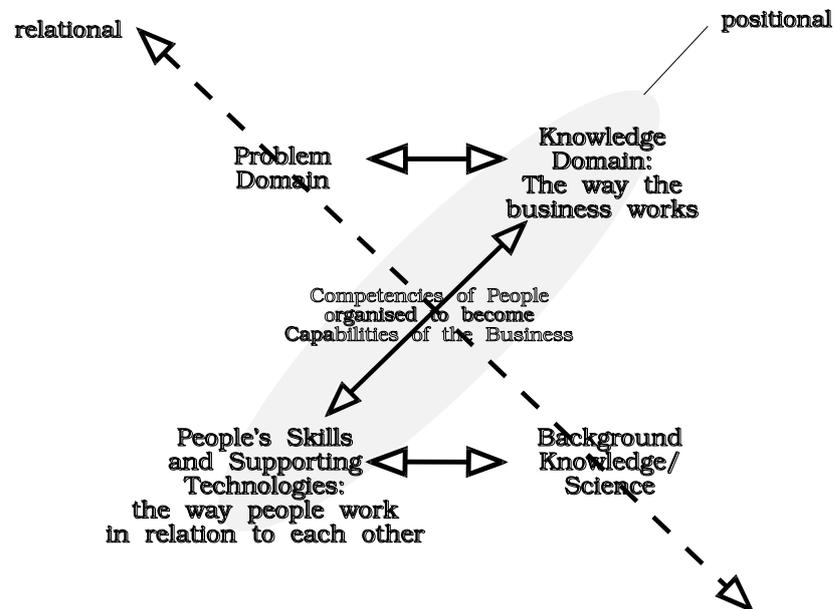
This 'take' on the *object* of process consulting enables us to return to the question of what is taken as being "known" by the process consultant. It raises the question of the context(s) which the consultant introduces in the way he works with the client organisation.

The Process Consultant

In talking about the role of the process consultant, Schein summarises the key assumptions of process consulting as being:

- ° "managers often do not know what is wrong and need special help in diagnosing what their problems actually are;
- ° managers often do not know what kinds of help consultants can give to them; they need to be helped to know what kind of help to seek;
- ° most managers have a constructive intent to improve things but need help in identifying what to improve and how to improve it;
- ° most organisations can be more effective if they learn to diagnose their own strengths and weaknesses;
- ° a consultant must work jointly with members of the organisation who do know the culture intimately from having lived within it;
- ° the client must learn to see the problem for himself, to share in the diagnosis, and to be actively involved in generating a remedy; and

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[12]This Z-form is based on Lacan's schema L and the whole question of the big Other. In going on to use this form for considering the relation between the consultant and the client system, I introduce the notion of this big Other as being divided insofar as something is always left-to-be-desired - the basis of the manager's 'intent' to make things better...

      ° it is of prime importance that the process consultant be expert in how to diagnose and how to establish effective helping relationships with clients."

It would be fair to assume that working with these questions opens up an awareness of processes between people which can address the relations the manager has with the-way-the-business-works.

But where is the process consultant 'coming from' in working like this? Schein places the basis of process consulting as being "anchored deeply in social psychology, sociology, and anthropology." Good diagnosis of this sort

> "cannot be achieved without a working knowledge of what these disciplines have contributed to the understanding of organisational phenomena. The understanding and analysis of human processes in organisations requires not merely an attitude or a decision to focus on such processes, but also a good deal of technical skill and knowledge of what to look for, how to look for it, and how to interpret it."
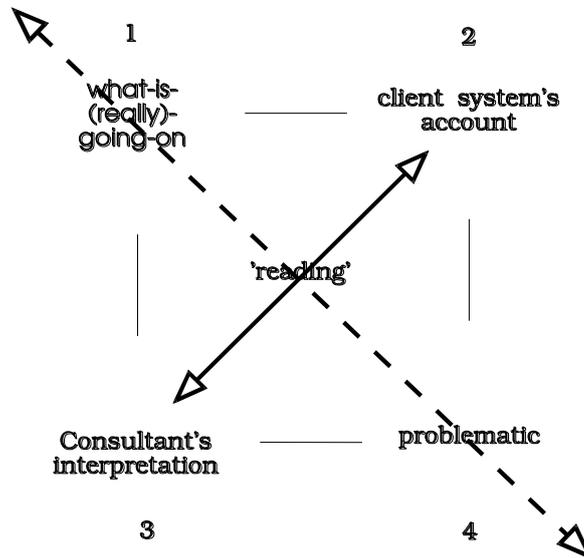
This backcloth of diagnostic skills against which the foregrounded problem and its diagnosis proceed are the basis therefore on which the contractual relationship rests. Does this focus on process enable the consultant to work with the larger dynamic of the Z-form?

It is difficult not to see Schein as a guru, regardless of the skill with which he was able to work jointly with his client organisations. Although it is clear that the approach produces effects in the larger dynamic, it is not clear that this is the explicit basis of the contractual relationship. Returning to the beginning, and Lawrence and Lorsch's comment about the tendency of process consulting to becoming identified with the educational methods of sensitivity training, I wonder if we haven't to consider the process consultant as pioneering a new form of knowledge domain... with all the same challenges of articulating its own processes[13]. This then is our question: what are the processes underlying the work of the process consultant.

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[13]From this point of view, what was being pioneered was the practice of a 2nd order cybernetics.... but without the explicit focus on languaging.

The intent of the consultant

If we look at the relation of the consultant to the client system in the same terms as we have used for the client organisation in relation to its context (the Z-form), then we get the following:

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        1                               2
   what-is-                      client system's
   (really)-                        account
   going-on

                    'reading'


   Consultant's  ————————  problematic
   interpretation

        3                               4
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The client system's account (2) in relation to what-is-going-on (1) is accepted by the client as presenting something being problematic in some way. Here what-is-going-on is equivalent to the problem domain, and the client system's account is the equivalent of the knowledge domain. The process consultant is introducing an interpretation (3) which he wishes to share with the client system. But how are we to understand the 'problematic' (4) - the equivalent of the cultural backcloth which manifests itself as some kind of insight into the problematic nature of what-is-going-on *qua* problem domain? It is not clear that Schein has a way of making this explicit, although it is very probably embodied in the practises at the NTL, and raised by Walton's work on third-party consultation.

In these terms, if we consider the consultant as 'reading' the client's relation to what-is-going-on, then there is a progression in how much of the Z-form is being articulated by the consulting process: from the bird (1-2) to the guru (1-2-3) to the fool (1-2-3-4). If we speak of the way this 1-4 axis is operative in the consulting reltionship in terms of the transference relation, then as long as it is not itself problematised in the consultant's relation with the client system, then the consultant will be pulled inexorably back into the guru position. In these terms, the process consultant's intent in sharing the diagnostic process would be in order to push towards a critical relation to the transference.... this makes process consulting difficult to sustain in practice. Where then does this leave us in relation to Schein's process consulting?