

Exploring a Definition of a Consultant

By Rainer Busch

I want to explore the late Carl Ally's definition of a consultant:

"A consultant is someone who borrows your watch to tell you what time it is."

This definition is sometimes used as a derogatory description for consultants that are seen as not having fulfilled client expectations. I know many consultants who cringe when someone quotes this definition. On the surface the definition does indeed seem unkind. Given that almost every person wears and knows how to read a watch, it seems quite ridiculous to get someone else to read your watch for you and tell you what time it shows.

However, when I started to look at the definition as a metaphor and compared it to my own consulting work I began to see that this definition in many ways resembles what I do. - Let me explain:

As a consultant to organisations and individuals I spend much time observing and studying organisations and their people. Using my own senses and perspectives I construct images of what is going on in an organisation. This work can be compared to 'borrowing the clients watch'. The 'watch', in this case, becomes a metaphor for the organisation with its people, infrastructure and systems. However in other consulting situations the 'watch' may be restricted to a particular part of an organisation or process. By going into the organisation as someone who does not know what goes on there, I borrow and observe the 'watch'. I study shapes, colours, sounds, movements, behaviours, practices, dynamics, interactions, processes, spaces and functions.

Based on my observations I provide feedback to the client. This part is like telling the client the time from his/her own watch. Presenting the client with my observations may or may not match with the client's own perceptions. Whatever the situation may be, the tricky part is for both, the client and the consultant to explore what these observation actually mean. We need to ask 'so what?'

For example, "There are no visitor car parks and there are no visitor chairs in the lobby - So what?" or "It is 10.53 AM on the clock in the warehouse - So what?"

As I compare my observations with my perceptions and experiences from other organisations I worked with (other watches) I may come to the conclusion that this organisation is moving at a different speed to others or that certain behaviours or systems seem odd to me. As the consultant it is my responsibility to share these observations with my client in a constructive manner. I may say that: "I would feel more welcome, if there were some visitor car parks and chairs available. Maybe other visitors and customers feel this way also?" or "Your clock in the warehouse says it's 10.53 AM, however the official time is 11.12 AM. Do you feel that this may have an impact on your goods delivery times?"

It is important to note here that I do not see my role as telling my clients what I believe to be right or wrong, or what to do or not to do, but to report my observations together with 'so what' responses. It is my role to raise the client's awareness on alternative views and perspectives. Having raised the client's awareness, it now becomes his/her choice to decide what to do with this new awareness. I will remain with the client to encourage, support and assist in the quest to find meaningful, practical solutions. This methodology ensures the empowerment of the client to make responsible choices. The client remains in charge. This is important as I do not want to create a situation where the client may feel dependent on me to make a decision; a situation, Bion describes as "waiting for Godot".

In my work as a consultant I do not only borrow the client's watch and tell him/her what time it is, but I also help him/her to have a critical look at his/her 'watch' and to make sense of the significance of the 'time' it shows. For a client to obtain real value from a consultant, both, client and consultant must be prepared to ask the pertinent 'so what?' questions and explore possible answers and solutions.

References:

- Bion, W. R.; (1971) *'Experience in Groups and other Papers'*, Tavistock Publications, London.
- 7 October 1965, Bedford (IA) *Times-Press*, pg. 4, col. 1: Carl Ally's definition of a consultant: A man who borrows your watch and tells you what time it is.

