

Managing Marginality The Internal Consultant's Dilemma

Internal and external consultants use many of the same techniques and tools, do similar work, but face very different challenges. Internal consultants work in a unique position. Their job role is to consult to the organization for which they work. It is not easy to be, at the same time, a part of an organization and function as detached and independent. Each position on the consulting continuum places different pressures on the internal than the external, making them either more or less a part of the organization. Couple with those pressures that the internal has a boss whose role is even more clearly linked to the organizational structure, politics, and rewards structure, and you have a set of forces effectively pulling the internal in different directions. Managing this position becomes paramount to success for the internal.

Here are some of the issues

- For an internal to espouse change and new processes, they must be seen as not buying into the accepted ways of operating in that organization. This sets them up to potentially fail in the intervention and subsequently fail in the organization because of the position they took.
- If the existing system does not accept the presence and influence of the internal, the internal essentially gets “fired” in his or her own organization, losing all client base without the possibility of building more.
- Internals are tied to the resource pool that they are trying to affect.
- An internal's personal job position and status is often widely known and limits his or her mobility in the organization.
- There is a wide-spread perception that there are no prophets in their own lands.
- Typically members of an organization see other members of that organization as having the same experiences, knowledge, and ability as they see themselves as having. This limits the credibility they will offer to an internal.

Marginality

The conditions described are known as marginality. Conceptually, the internal consultant has to be positioned in such a way as to add something to the system that is not already there. This can be described as representing an interesting difference. This difference should be pronounced enough to be noticeable, but not so much as to be antagonistic. Conflict is a natural result of representing this difference. By bringing out a difference in the system, members are challenged to either move towards that difference, move away from it, or ignore it. The dynamics of this movement are typically relative to the size of the difference. The presence of this difference is an intervention in and of itself.

Marginality presents a paradox for the internal consultant. If an internal consultant is positioned as the same as the system, the power and energy of difference is not present. This can only result in the internal being powerless to produce change, or be viewed as redundant to the system, subject to the

same strengths and limitations as the system. If the difference is too great, the systems power and energy will be directed towards ridding or protecting itself of the threat of the difference.

What are the forces working on the internal?

Managing the element of marginality requires a great deal of intentionality and energy from the internal consultant. This energy drain is a result of some natural psychological needs that exist in us all. These are primarily the needs for affiliation, achievement, success, and goal attainment. The issue for the internal becomes that all your psychological “eggs” get put “in one basket.” While this certainly gives you a stake in the game, it also tends to work against a marginal position. Getting all your needs met in your client system tends to force the internal to collusion with they system, playing to their strengths, and singing and dancing the party line. While this makes it easier to get your own needs met, it becomes increasingly more difficult to meet some of the roles offered on the consulting continuum.

Traps for the Internal

These present the potential traps for the internal. All in all, the internal can basically make errors of positioning, posturing, or preservation. The primary positional elements are from moving too close to the system or too far away. Move too close is often described as “going native.” This was the anthropologist’s dilemma, of spending so much time with the indigenous people that one’s own culture and objectives were forgotten, and all thoughts and actions were guided by the new culture. While this is a comfortable place to be, it tends to effectively wipe out the possibility of being effective as a consultant. Moving too far away tends to produce the effect of limiting the ability for the system to “take you in,” which is also very limiting to success.

Posturing errors tend to be ones where the internal defines themselves in the wrong role on the continuum for the particular client system in which they are operating. Working as a process consultant when the system wants a pair of hands will surely cause disappointment for someone. The other positional error comes from how the consultant chooses to impact the system. Because the internal is tied to the organization’s success for their own fulfillment, they will be far less prone to let the client stumble or fail. To truly be working to help a system grow and achieve, the consultant has to be at least somewhat indifferent to the outcome. In the consultant’s zeal to ensure success, they often become “defacto management,” where they begin to control the direction of the system much as the management system does.

The last error tends to be in personal preservation. As mentioned earlier, the biggest element of risk is in getting all your needs met in your client system. The internal must spend some energy in maintaining their ability to function long-term, in their own wellness. Primary causes for burn-out are in not getting the feelings of accomplishment of success. Internal client bases often seem to be endless streams of the same people with the same problems. The work can take on the feeling of never getting anything done, of not moving at all. It becomes essential to the internal to begin bracketing and defining their work, creating beginnings, middles, and ends. By noticing, honoring, and recording these events, you build a mental history of accomplishments that can be both personally and organizationally rewarding. It is important to balance these accomplishments in both your own goals and the organizations, so that the element of reciprocity is evident. The major element is, still, take care of

yourself so that the system does not have to. If you give up your own support, you become dependent on the system and powerless to help it change.

Here's how to use this

- Decide where you ultimately want to be.
- Plan your exits at the same time you plan your entries. How will you know you are finished with each piece of work? How will your client know?
- If you intend to stay inside an organization, set your expectations accordingly.
- If you plan to massively impact a system, creating great change and sweeping reform, consider where you will have to go afterwards.
- Carefully evaluate your place on the continuum. Technical help is typically more welcome from an internal to an organization than process consulting (but not always). Choose your activities carefully.
- Define your client base.
- Define the system. Know where you fit, but be careful not to limit yourself unnecessarily.
- Network. Decide where you will draw support, either from inside or outside the organization.
- Grow. Become part of something larger than yourself, larger than the system that you are living within.
- Contract Contract Contract

All of this is to say something very simple. The work of an internal consultant is incredibly valuable. The marginal position is a very good place to be. It forms the creative tension that propels positive change in an organization. Understood, managed, and embraced, it is empowering to the consultant and the client. Misunderstood, ignored, or denied, it is destructive and disempowering to the consultant and the client. Learn from it, relish it, and use it for positive change. The growth potential is always beyond the limit of our imagination.