



Center for  
Applied  
Research

**Briefing Notes:**

**The Challenges of Helping Depleted or Overloaded Systems**

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Clients often espouse the need for consulting help, but are too overloaded to metabolize the assistance. Arriving to help a client increasingly resembles driving up to the gridlocked New York City Midtown Tunnel at rush hour, offering to help and getting the response, “the best help you can be at the moment is to back out your car—you are part of the problem.”

Busyness is both an objective and a psychological state (Gilmore and Smith, 1994). Indeed, leaner organizations, constantly connected technologies such as e-mail, cell phones and the web, higher service standards and less slack in production systems have created a greater overload. However, people collude with the busyness to remain in Don Schon’s phrase “dynamically conservative”—actively fighting to remain the same (1971). To stop and reflect and make choices that might significantly alter the crisis-reactive climate often confronts one with difficult choices and fears about one’s understanding, courage and competence to make a major change (Heifitz, 1998; Hirschhorn, 1988).

At its most extreme, organizations can enact what Seligman (1975) termed “learned helplessness.” In animal studies, when subjects have been constrained from adapting to particular stimuli, even when those are removed, the subjects have lost some fundamental belief in the efficacy of doing anything. They remain, passively, in the bad situation without learning. Often, in organizations, people become cynical because of their perception that they are constrained (from above, from outside, from below) in creating significant change. As people locate the agency outside of themselves for action, they become depleted (Ashforth, 1998).

Analogizing from the dynamics of co-dependency, helpers have been alerted to the dangers of overfunctioning, of becoming part of the problem, of becoming an enabler. The advice is to hold to one’s boundaries and not become enmeshed. Help can be counterproductive in preventing a person from hitting bottom and taking responsibility appropriately for his or her own behavior. Ray and Bronstein writing on teams, note that,

“Managers are tempted to jump in and solve the problems, but such an intervention teaches a dangerous lesson to teams. They soon learn to become helpless, so that management will continue to intervene and rescue them.

Management must remain neutral by teaching systematic problem solving skills ..." (Ray and Bronstein, 1995)

Yet sometimes the conditions are such that the objects of help are unable to avail themselves of assistance. Working from an analogy of the Coast Guard's rescue swimmer, we will explore some of the implications of such presenting situations.

### ***The Coast Guard's Rescue Swimmer Program***

The Coast Guard is charged with assisting ships in distress. Too often, they were able to get assets (helicopter, men, and equipment) to the scene of a disaster but the depleted condition of those in distress did not enable them to take an active role in their rescue. There is a Chinese saying that captures this dynamic:

"The wood does not have inherent magical properties which will automatically rescue the swimmer. Whether the swimmer is ultimately saved depends on how he utilizes it." (Yeung and Tung, 1996)

In 1982, a particularly tragic case spurred the creation of the rescue swimmer program (Beard, 1996; Junger, 1997).

"A Coast Guard HH-3F arrived on the scene to find the ship's crew scattered, floating and swimming in chilling heavy seas. The waves were too high to allow the amphibian helicopter to alight. The ship's crew, all suffering from exposure, were no longer able to assist themselves into the rescue basket. ... Three survivors were rescued; thirty three people died ... Crews in a powerful rescue machine could only watch as victims died just a few feet below them." (Beard, 1996)

In reviewing the patterns of previous cases, the Coast Guard realized that in situations in which there was a trained Coast Guard person in the distressed situation, with the ability to communicate with helping resources, it significantly changed the dynamics. The same asset (a skilled person) on the other side of the boundary was significantly more effective than if on the helping team.

In the rescue swimmer program, when the help arrives, a highly trained swimmer is ready to leap into harm's way, to amplify the distressed system's capability to make use of the help. The first intervention is often to calm and reassure those in distress, to provide "the human link ... between exhausted, terrified and often injured sailors and their only ride to survival" (Beard, 1996). Simply containing the panic can help those in peril recover aspects of their own coping skills. The rescue swimmer, with communication links to the helicopter and others, can make more effective use of whatever resources are still present in the distressed situation. Often in panic, people have neglected local measures that can stabilize the situation, such as pumps or the use of emergency survival resources, such that the crew does not have to abandon ship. They can also administer first aid. Finally, they can actually link up people in distress one at a time to the rescue basket,

often having to oversee each person abandoning the vessel (containing their anxiety to take additional risks in the service of being rescued).

This work is embedded in a complex team with a strong support infrastructure (Beard, 1999). Often an airplane communication command post is overhead, a helicopter with the rescue swimmer and other key personnel is over the distressed situation and all are linked to the home base, other ships and refueling capabilities that can extend the range of the helicopters. Some of the most challenging dilemmas have resulted from the helicopter needing to return to base, with the rescue swimmer still in harm's way, perhaps with others still requiring rescue.

## **The Lessons for Consulting**

There are two broad categories of implications. First are the types of services available in the social field that would be analogous to the intervention of the rescue swimmer for the coast guard. Second are learnings relevant to when helpers join depleted systems.

### ***Field Implications***

1. *Think about possible "missing institutions"* (Perlmutter, 1965). As venture capitalists experienced the struggles of companies that they were backing because of the lack of capabilities, there have emerged temporary help services such that an entrepreneurial company can acquire a CFO or a human resources executive or an IT executive, often for part time. For the duration of the contract, they actually become a contracted employee of the organization. There are even temporary CEO's who can step into a distressed situation, such as work out managers in bankruptcy situations. This is different from consulting services in that the resource actually becomes part of the system, sometimes even compensated in ways that create shared risks for the individual or firm in the fate of the organization being helped.
2. *Create a cache of interim managers.* Several religious denominations have a practice of creating a stable of "interim ministers." These ministers go into troubled parishes and run the church for a year, with a specialized set of skills to help the community take stock of their situation, stabilize the dynamics and support the search for and selection of a new leader. One key feature of these arrangements is that the interim minister cannot be a candidate. Often, being the source of much needed help can create dependencies and distorted judgments so that the rule prevents the helper from crossing the boundary permanently.
3. *Create a deeper cadre of "turnaround" specialists.* Informally, in various industries, and even in social services, there are managers who have developed the reputation of "turnaround specialists." However, the number of situations in which social services have reached some crisis state,

approximating the private-sector condition of bankruptcy, far exceeds the supply of such individuals. Just as the Coast Guard experienced distressed systems unable to use resources that were brought to the scene, many social-service systems are incapable of effectively using consulting resources or experts who may be made available in the wake of litigation. These new capabilities might be linked to foundations that specialize in particular sectors of social services or linked to the professional associations that are relevant to those areas.

A feature of these situations is the clarity regarding the helping resource being located inside the boundary of the organization that needs help. From that vantage point, like the rescue swimmer, they can link up to other external helping resources in addition to their direct assistance in their area of expertise. Court appointed masters who are appointed in legal proceedings may have some of these features, yet are often seen as outsiders by those in the system.

4. *Consider co-management options.* Co-management can be a source of sustained influence and change in which an outsider pairs effectively with an insider to identify and make changes. This can take the form of actually doing the work, often in a behind the scenes way, such as drafting a new set of policies, crafting a plan or identifying the elements of an implementation plan. The willingness to pitch in can lead to credibility and trust. Early interventions with families in the Homebuilders Model have this character (Gilmore and Tobis, 1994). Via this process, the advisee can often learn how to handle similar situations in the future and in the present, appreciates the direct extra hands because these situations are so overwhelming. If the extra help creates a success, often the reinforcement that the insider receives from others can deepen their commitment to the approach.

The downside of such stances can be dependency rather than development. If the proposed responses from the consultant encounter hostility and difficulty from others, it can be too easy for the insiders to distance themselves. Inevitably, underneath dependency is anger at the need to rely on the other. In the co-managing model, the outside resources need sophisticated strategies for disengaging in ways that keep the client able to sustain and further the changes. If this model is implemented in an overfunctioning way, it has frequently caused someone inside to underfunction. This has the effect of atrophying rather than building up the skill and commitment needed to do the work on a sustained basis.

At its worst, co-management can mean essentially running the department behind the scenes in ways that people have come to deplore in politics—where people increasingly are “scripted” by someone else and may not be truly committed. Another variation is when the outside consultant becomes the major conduit of difficult messages that the leader does not want to deliver directly. This creates a dysfunctional culture in which direct talk is rare and people operate on innuendo and rumor rather than honest feedback.

## ***Consulting Practice Implications***

1. *Assess the absorptive capacity for help.* The capacity of any system varies along a continuum from the rare state of complete helplessness to the equally rare state of needing no outside help. Any consultant can fruitfully ask in advance of entry what is the “carrying capacity” of the system in which one is intervening. In ecology, this term indicates how much of a community an environment can support without degradation (Hardin, 1993). By analogy, given systems can absorb varying amounts of help, depending on the level of stress, organization, sophistication and leadership inside the system. For example, CFAR (Center for Applied Research) was asked to the budget office of a state to be more strategic in their work with departments. Despite their espoused wish to be more strategic, our analysis revealed that the limited resources of the office were stretched to overload simply to complete the agencies’ budgets for legislative action. The only temporal period when they had “slack” for thinking was after the budget had been submitted (when most took vacations). Thus the window for strategic thinking had to be immediately following one budget, looking ahead a year.

A dimension of capacity is an assessment of the resources within the system. Trist (personal communication) used to remark, “Some times the group has the key resource it needs within itself and sometimes it does not.” Too often consultants divide into ideological camps, one of which always sees the need to do for the client (the expert, the extra pair of hands), the other, never (the process-consulting stance). Ideology can be an escape from making a judgment that has real risks with consequence for error on both sides. “Strength-based perspectives” are popular and are a useful corrective to how frequently intervenors are biased only to see deficits. But one still has to make reality-based judgements about the mix of assets and liabilities in the system one is assisting.

2. *Get the help on the right side of the boundary.* As in the Coast Guard example, all the assets in the world will make no difference if there is no capability of those in distress to link up with them. Often the choke point in help is in the capacity of the client system to metabolize assistance. Szanton (1981) has identified the “absorptive capacity” as a key factor in the success of hosts making productive use of offered help. His research suggests that often, the issue has more to do with the difficulties of the host in being an effective demander and user of help than it is in features of the supply of assistance. This might translate into whether or not there exist, in the system being helped, several top executives who are seen as capable of using the assistance. When that situation does not obtain, the situation more nearly resembles bankruptcy or receivership, with a master needed to place that capability inside the system.

Many successful people have underdeveloped skills in asking for and making good use of help, especially while continuing to be responsible for their decisions themselves. One way of conceiving of reflective practice is the ability of people to coach themselves—to be both in the arena and able to see themselves from the balcony to get perspectives and learn (Heifitz, 1994).

Some examples of how one might support the ability of the system to use help rather than adding to the supply of available help follow:

- ◆ In a child-welfare crisis situation, a crisis-communications expert actually becomes a part of the organization, mobilizes the responses and speaks for the organization to the key publics.
  - ◆ A governor's office sets up a high-level interagency task force to plan for a major change initiative. A consultant steps into the heavyweight project management role and is able to link the insiders with the outside resources.
  - ◆ In a technical area, a member of the consulting organization actually takes line responsibility for setting up a new information technology system or installing a financial accountability system.
3. *Take appropriate risks as the consultant.* To immerse oneself in a crisis situation places the consultant in harms way. They become players, not just advisors. In the rescue swimmer program, the risks are concentrated in the moment of greatest distress. In organizational work, the risks may be more extended, such as when someone from the consulting team actually joins the organization temporarily. Increasingly, the source of authority for leadership on many social issues has switched from expertise to experience—often suffering as well as having experienced success. Thus, the power of taking risks along side of the client is greater respect for the consultant.
  4. *Begin by assessing what the organization might stop doing to create more space for development.* One aspect of Jack Welch's effectiveness in leadership at GE was his emphasis on shedding as well as development (Tichy, 1999). In his first phase, he sold any entities that did not have the potential to be first or second in the world in their industry. This created focus on the remaining businesses. At the beginning of the Workout initiative, the emphasis was to stop doing "dumb things and on eliminating unnecessary policies, procedures, time, steps, etc." Again, before the push on quality and six sigma, the underbrush had been cleared to allow the systems to absorb new thinking. "Not to do lists" are as important as "to do" lists. Drucker (1999) has counseled "systematic abandonment" in which an organization imagines that it was not in each of its businesses periodically and asks would it make sense to get into this business under the current and future conditions.
  5. *Join with and amplify internal helping resources.* The careful selection of people to collaborate on particular initiatives in a consulting engagement can be a major mode of ensuring the "capture" of methods, skills and competencies from the outside consultant. Sometimes, deploying a person from inside the organization being helped to the consulting firm's team, even becoming engaged in other settings can be a powerful mode of development.
  6. *Put insiders in active, risk taking positions as much as their capabilities allow.* People develop through real assignments with stakes. Often, the high learning and development positions are overly controlled by the outsiders who leave when the engagement is over. For example, in bench marking or searching for

best practices it is the messy interviews and visits that carry the learning, not the polished reports. Too often outsiders do the former and insiders the latter.

7. *Actively resist overfunctioning for the client.* There can often be an unconscious delegation of the work of worry to the outsider who can be used politically to say that “we are working on this situation by having a consultant.” Then, when there are recommendations at the end of the engagement, the client may not have been active enough in their formulation to have learned what will be required during implementation
8. *Build in coaching and teaching along with the direct help.* Coaching is most powerful when the frameworks and ideas of the coach are internalized and feel available to the recipient even when the coach is not present. This is particularly true with the core skill of reflective practice (Schon and Argyris, 1974). Often, by working with a coach or a facilitator on a critical incident or in assessing what was valuable or ineffective in a meeting or an encounter, an executive is able to use this point of view in an ongoing way to see the situation through others eyes, to see patterns in the encounters and invent different approaches.

## Summary

We cannot rely on some ideological stance to escape making risky judgments about the capacity of a system to make effective use of outside help. There are risks in overfunctioning and risks in being too withholding. The dynamic may shift over time. The entry stage may truly resemble the rescue swimmer jumping into harm’s way to make effective the other helping resources that are available. At later stages, co-managing may be most developmental. Towards disengagement, the challenge may be to build the ongoing capacities in the system.

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