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Briefing Notes: **Integrating and Leveraging Outside Advice**

Introduction

Increasingly in our consulting practice we are asked to address a particular aspect of a company's dilemmas in the context of other consultants already at work—either on the same or different issues. As organizations have substantially downsized and decreased internal resources, there are more areas in which they are looking to external consultation for help with issues that, in the past, might have been handled on the inside. Paradoxically, one can discover that the typical organizational dilemma of integrating separate functional departments or divisions that used to lie *inside* the company has developed its counterpart in the world of consultation as *external* consultants are increasingly asked to build on each other's work rather than duplicate and interfere. Internal organizational rivalries can be exported out and, being outside the direct control of the client, can muddy the consultant's work if underattended.

Some organizations will have multiple consultants hired either at different levels of the organization (senior vs. divisional) or by various functional groups. Rather than the consulting resources helping the company *as a whole* and genuinely contributing to the overall value chain, the consultants sometimes simply and unwittingly increase the sophistication with which different units or levels do battle with one another. In some cases the work of different consultants becomes fragmented and compartmentalized across time. Different consultants may be involved in predictable sequences. For example, in an executive search capacity one firm is hired to do the search and a new executive is hired. The new executive will then bring in a different consultant to work on strategy or with the top team on team development. The new consultant will have no contact with the search firm that has probably learned a great deal about the nature of the executive's challenges. In other cases the strategy effort will have one consultant and be followed by an organizational structure team, implementation or training consultancy that begins with a few months of reviewing or redoing what the prior consultant already did.

These issues raise questions about how consulting services could be better integrated across time and efforts. Because consultants see themselves (and often are) in competition, they are reluctant to share openly with one another. Information, even though it has

been developed on the client's clock, is withheld and used as an asset in power plays. Clients can often excessively hold consultants apart thinking that their work is completely separate or that they are receiving different perspectives on a common issue, believing the extra time it would take for consultants to understand each others' work will cost more than it is worth.

Some Alternate Approaches

In the course of our work with these issues, we have come to develop a variety of strategies for better leveraging and coordinating the consulting resources. These approaches are aimed at helping consultants and clients think about the best ways to capitalize on the investments that are being made. Collaborative approaches can be categorized as follows:

1. Coordinated, One-stop Shop
2. Hub and Spoke
3. Handoff or Relay

Below are some examples.

1. *Coordinated, One-stop Shop*

Creating a senior advisor group for the CEO. In one organization, a large closely held company, we were asked to help the client determine the appropriate ownership and capital structure for the future as the current generation of owners was approaching retirement. In closely held businesses there is considerable interplay among strategy, legal, tax and accounting and estate planning. This client had a variety of advisors already working on many of the technical, legal and financial issues related to ownership, all reporting individually to the CEO. We proposed and the CEO accepted the idea of a senior advisor group consisting of the firm's outside counsel, the senior accounting partners managing the account and two of the CEO's most senior executives, along with us, their strategy consultants (a total group of nine including the CEO).

We discovered that the outside advisors needed to be treated with great care as they saw the group as a demotion, having to work with others rather than having unrestricted access to the CEO. A few things helped:

- Differentiating the charter of this group from the work each of the advisors would continue to do separately—this effort would require more, not less.
- Preparing agendas and notes prior to and after each meeting helped with expectations and accountability.
- Making room for each advisor to demonstrate his expertise helped clarify the differential contributions desired. Often group members come to accentuate their sameness, even when they are brought together because of their difference. Where consultants bring very different skills to bear,

meeting design that features their unique perspective but also asks that they imagine the implications of their perspective for others seems to reduce the jockeying for air time.

- Allowing enough time for real work, with the client at the center (for example, rather than have reporting out which features the facilitator, have the client ask the questions).
- Having a strong client, the CEO, who made clear he wanted coordination among advisors, and having advisors who are seasoned enough to know when and when not to compete.

Surprisingly, though members of the group already knew each other, they had never actually sat together in the same room. In the first meeting we formed temporary subgroups and asked the groups to work through some alternate structures of ownership, recommending their pros and cons to the CEO. While the group exhibited a great deal of resistance to begin (to the task and to our structuring of it), the subgroups became quite animated in their work. Over time (with day-long meetings scheduled at four- to six-week intervals) group members began to call on each other outside the meetings. The CEO continues to use the group (in full or in part) on an ad-hoc basis on other matters.

While not always possible or appropriate, for high stakes efforts like strategy, coordinated advice reduces the burden on the CEO who typically will do all of the integration across perspectives by himself. The CEO is often already overloaded and rather than helping him, the advisors can paradoxically make the overload worse by keeping it segmented.

2. Hub and Spoke Coordination

In this approach various consultants are typically working with the client on different but related efforts. Both consultants and clients benefit from periodically huddling (hub of coordination) and then going off and doing their separate work (spokes of activity). Meeting frequency will depend on the nature of the varied consultancies and how related they are.

This approach has been piloted in an integrated delivery system in a health care setting. In this situation various consultants were each touching different aspects of an extraordinarily complex organization: top management and strategy, operations and finance, labor relations and patient-care services. We discovered that there was an analog among the outside consultants to what was happening inside the organization. Inside, different middle executives were getting encapsulated and were not staying connected to actions underway in sister divisions or were feeling unlinked to an integrating strategy at the top. One of the senior consultants who served as coach to the CEO and the top team (and with the CEO's concurrence) took the consulting lead by devising monthly meetings of the four consulting groups that were working on the four aspects of the organizational change effort. These meetings turned out to be enormously valuable by amplifying and integrating the resources *inside*

the organization. As a result of the meetings the four consultants began sharing perspectives and understanding some of the disconnections in the hospital.

Part of the benefit of the meetings is that they allowed the consultants to build rapport. After each meeting the consultants, as they took up their differentiated assignments, were more able to help their inside clients understand the larger strategic context and be sensitive to critical internal connections that needed to be strengthened. Secondly, this provided, like the above example of the advisors, an outside thinking perspective that the senior consultant could carry back to the top executive. Often the insights were from the front line and the middle of the organization—perspectives that would not easily make it up through the formal chain of command. Additionally, the consultants grew to know each other and the work each was doing in the hospital and could use this knowledge to affect necessary connection between internal groups.

One incident that dramatically demonstrated this integrating effect occurred as we consulted to the nursing department. At a meeting we heard about the problems nursing was having with pharmacy. As the units were moving to the new patient-care delivery system, they were experiencing major delays. Allegedly it was not uncommon to wait eight hours for Benadryl and meds were “notoriously” late. Later that day, quite by accident, our consultant spotted another consultant in the cafeteria. Having met regularly in their “consultants” meetings, they had come to know each other. The other consultant was involved with a hospital-wide operations improvement and process redesign initiative, and we knew he was doing work with pharmacy. We mentioned nursing’s complaints and were surprised how animated he became. He was clearly siding with pharmacy and proceeded to explain how nursing “had it all wrong.” The other consultant was so keen to help us understand the pharmacist’s perspective that he called the vice president of operations and asked him to come to the cafeteria to explain the process improvements underway in pharmacy. According to the vice president, nursing did not understand that the average performance time had improved, they (nursing) were focusing on the outliers and passing around anecdotes. As a result of this interaction we understood more about the perspectives of both nursing and pharmacy. This meeting was a prologue to putting a team of nurses and pharmacists together.

3. Handoff or Relay

This may be the most difficult to pull off successfully, as clients may not see the need for consultants who work sequentially on different aspects of an issue to be in communication. In addition, consultants who work sequentially on the same issue (strategy development, for example) are more likely to be competitors—why would a client have two strategy consultants unless one was out of favor? This makes communication improbable. How, then, can clients get the most out of their invested time and effort?

A modest approach with multiple consultants is to clarify with each of the consultants their groundrules about sharing materials and resources with others. Some consultants' codes of ethics and confidentiality frown on sharing client information without specific client authorization. Even with authorization, some are reticent to share more than minimally. In the same way that it is common in leadership transitions for a new leader to have few or stilted conversations with a prior leader—because of the feelings of success or failure that such conversations can provoke—when consultants work sequentially, there may be some awkwardness or disappointment that leads one consultant not to talk with his successors. However, much of the learning or insights that have been achieved by one consultant (particularly the first one) and have been capitalized and paid for are the most likely to be lost. One wholly appropriate solution is for the client to routinely ask in their contracting that consultants provide observations on their consultation as part of any ending or recontracting or spend a final day or two putting together key learnings, insights or advice that could be of use to the client but also to a subsequent consultant.

One idea we have not yet tried would be to have a “grand rounds” conversation with multiple consultants in the room much like a group of specialist physicians might have a case conference over a difficult patient. There are many organizations that seem to consume consultants in a fad-like fashion, moving from one to the next, in search of some holy grail. Perhaps when a new executive comes in, he or she might get people who know the organization from the vantage points of their different assignments to collaboratively put the different pieces of the puzzle together and jointly create a systems understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the organization. The closest we have come to this idea was in a school district where an internal organizational development consultant interviewed many of the different consultants that had worked (with varying degrees of success) with the school district over the prior two to three years and then summarized themes from these interviews. On another occasion, we were hired by a new executive of a public agency to review and summarize themes of a five-foot stack of prior reports that had been done and underused over a period of a decade. In another instance, our client was using four different consultants and told us that she was very aware of the strengths of each and often consulted with two or three on a similar issue and then combined the perspectives.

One thing that we have learned about working with multiple consultants, especially if they overlap at certain events or on certain initiatives, is to clarify the roles of each. We were helping an integrated health care delivery system with downsizing. This client, discussed earlier, was using multiple consultants, each working on a different aspect of the broad change effort. The consultant that was already working with the top team was asked to lead the design effort, do the department head meetings and lead in developing strategies for communicating the efforts to the workforce. We were asked to lead the effort to design a process whereby the decisions could be made in a distributive way. The effort was a success and the different efforts did not run into each other.

Summary

There are a variety of ways to create communication and dialog among consultants, with much to be gained by clients. While the cost of true collaboration can be high (in both time and money), there are also modest methods of coordination that can work. However, for such coordination to happen two things are required: 1) clients have to realize how much it is in their interest that there be better communication among consultants that have touched the organization—particularly consultants who are working simultaneously on different though related issues; and 2) consultants must be willing to cooperate. Consultants who are jockeying for who can be the closest to the top executive are often holding onto information as a source of power and leverage rather than realizing that, in the long run, they will do better when they are able to act in ways that will increase the value of their service to the client's organization as a whole. Our experience suggests that all parties can benefit from careful teaming with colleagues who represent different capabilities or who bring different perspectives from their own.

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