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The Consultant-Client Interface – A Theoretical Introduction to the Hot Spot of Management Consulting

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**The Consultant-Client Interface – A Theoretical Introduction
to the Hot Spot of Management Consulting**

Matthias Tomenendal

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Abstract

The interaction of clients and consultants is frequently characterized by misunderstandings and conflicts. On the one hand, this is not surprising as consultants and clients play different roles before, during and after consulting assignments. On the other hand, it seems that consultants are being placed under increasing pressure with regard to the effectiveness of their work. Smoothing the consultant-client interface (CCI) is suggested as a way to improve consultants' performance.

This paper considers CCI dynamics from four different theoretical perspectives: Classical Organization Theories, Human Resource and Sociological Theories, New Institutional Economic Theories and System Theories. Their general theoretical concepts are first applied to CCI and then, on this basis, practical approaches to smooth CCI friction are elaborated. Taken as a whole, these different perspectives are intended to offer a range of alternative approaches – which it may then be possibly to integrate – to provide an orientation on how to act at the “hot spot” of management consulting.

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1. Introduction: Friction at the Consultant-Client Interface

There is an increasingly critical tone in publications about consultants, their work and their interactions with clients.¹ One hot spot in this context is the consultant-client interface (CCI), naturally characterized by frictions due to the different roles which consultants and clients play before, during and after consulting assignments.²

In this short paper a selection of theoretical frameworks will be presented in order to support the description and explanation of CCI frictions and to indicate ways that these frictions might be reduced. The specific views of four lines of management theories will be compared:³

- 1) *Classical Organization Theories* focus on “hard” factors for managing organizations and can be referred to the (standard) project management of consultants and clients.
- 2) *Human Resource-oriented and Sociological Theories* focus on “soft” factors in management and can be related to the individual or group behavior of consultants and clients.
- 3) *New Institutional Economic Theories* explicitly examine institutional arrangements in smoothing interactions between consultants and clients.
- 4) *System Theories* create general knowledge about the mechanisms within and between systems, which can then be transferred to consultant and client organizations.

The following chapter presents an analysis of the consultant-client interface from these four perspectives. In the final chapter, these perspectives are then summarized.

2. Management Theories: Different Approaches to the Consultant-Client Interface

While the four lines of management theory can be understood as alternative approaches to modeling organizations they also represent, to a certain extent, a succession of paradigms in management thinking: *Classical Organizational Theories* originated in early structural economic thought as early as several centuries ago; *Human Resource (and Human Relations)* oriented approaches were very popular until roughly the 1980s; *New Institutional*

¹ Cf. Engwall/Kipping (2003): 1 and literature cited there

² Cf. also Armbrüster/Kieser (2001): 705

³ These four lines of management theories constitute a rough summary of organizational theory paradigms as put forward by, e.g. Kieser (2002) or Schreyögg (1999). The following description of theories and their link to management consulting is necessarily brief and simplified; it is not intended to be a fully comprehensive survey and should only be taken to serve as an initial introduction into the subject. .

Economics are at the center of the theoretical discussion nowadays; in comparison, the general *Systems Theory* approach to economic problems is still in its infancy, especially as regards empirical research. As will become obvious in the following sections, the extent of research into consulting based on these four different theoretical backgrounds varies significantly.

2.1. Classical Organizational Theories: Managing Hard Factors

Classical organizational theories emerged in the early works of “classical” economic theorists. As early as 1776, Adam Smith was writing on the advantages of the division of labor; in the late 19th/early 20th century, Max Weber developed rules for the efficient organization of state bureaucracies; and Frederick W. Taylor and Henri Fayol were the first management theorists to develop rules for “Scientific Management” and effective line organizations.

Their publications share a common approach: using some empirical evidence to formulate “rational solutions”⁴ and, ultimately, practical rules. The authors try to reduce complexity and provide managers with suitable recommendations. Generally speaking, these texts combine highly normative claims with a rather ideological orientation.

This tradition has spawned many publications that formulate direct and indirect rules for successful consulting. Such “practically oriented literature”⁵ can also be termed “implicit consulting research”⁶, to contrast it with explicit research directly detailing objects, methods and premises. Implicit research is frequently packaged as a “how-to-guide”, tending to stress the subjective experiences of the individual authors, which may, in turn, have some useful intersubjective applications. For example:

- In his “guide to the profession”⁷ Kubr presents a comprehensive picture of management consulting, placing it within the management perspective, defining the consulting process, introducing consulting in various areas of management and describing how to manage a consultancy. Kubr categorizes approaches to the consultant-client interface and gives advice to consultants on how to act, for instance:

⁴ Kieser (2003): 180

⁵ Armbrüster/Kieser (2001): 691

⁶ Jeschke (2004): 33

⁷ Kubr (1992)

- “to determine how the assignment will be conducted by the two parties (what) roles will be played”⁸, “who holds the real power for making decisions”⁹ at the client and how to act accordingly as a consultant.
- to differentiate between the “technical (and) human dimension”¹⁰ of change and to be prepared for both dimensions.
- to create and maintain a “true collaborative relationship” which “is a golden rule of consulting”.¹¹

Finally, Kubr concludes that “the link between the consultant and the client is a highly individualized one”¹² which makes it difficult to formulate general “golden” rules.

- Block offers a number of rules on “successful” consulting - sometimes even “perfect” consulting¹³ - mainly structuring his recommendations around a phase concept of the consulting project. He uses checklists, recommendations and prescriptions for the consultant on how to deal with specific situations, e.g. how to handle client resistance or give feedback. Weiss follows the same approach for “million dollar consulting” in his “professional’s guide to growing a practice”, detailing, for example, how to write a “proposal that closes business”.¹⁴ Maister et al. give hints on how to become a “trusted advisor”.¹⁵
- Standard textbooks on consulting, e.g. by Heuermann/Herrmann¹⁶, Niedereichholz¹⁷ or Bamberger¹⁸ mainly implicitly follow classical organizational theories in giving practical advice how to consult in the right way.

In terms of CCI, the texts generally seem to stress that potential frictions can be reduced by clear and “professional” project organization and management. This involves

- clearly defining and separating consultant / client tasks.
- defining the project organization in detail, separated from the client’s line organization.
- employing a linear consulting process with clear goals, milestones, and responsible managers.
- elaborating possible adaptations of the project structure to specific project types or situations.

⁸ Kubr (1992): 40

⁹ Kubr (1992): 43

¹⁰ Kubr (1926): 12

¹¹ Kubr (1992): 41

¹² Kubr (1992): 339

¹³ Block (1997)

¹⁴ Weiss (2003): 183ff.

¹⁵ Cf. Maister et al. (2000)

¹⁶ Cf. Heuermann/Herrmann (2003)

¹⁷ Cf. Niedereichholz (2001), Niedereichholz (2003)

¹⁸ Cf. Bamberger (2005)

Although it seems that many practitioners appreciate such publications for the simple rules and quick orientation they offer, the general lack of theoretical foundations limits the range of their scientific contribution.

2.2. Human Resource and Sociological Theories: Managing Soft Factors

The different theories considered here under the heading of *Human Resource* and *Sociological Theories* share a primary focus on the individual, group, and/or their relations, in an organization. The basic theoretical frameworks derive from psychology and sociology and, in organizational theory, would be classified under organizational behavior and organizational development. As such, the frameworks and concepts they elaborate can also be applied to the consultant-client interface.

Organizational psychology is concerned with how personal conditions influence performance in an organization. The factors considered relate to, for instance:¹⁹

- personal motivation and satisfaction.
- the technical and organizational infrastructure.
- leadership styles.
- the qualifications and skills individuals have for certain tasks.

Hence, relating these points to CCI, individual best performance requires both consultants and the clients being optimally prepared and supported in these areas. This might be achieved by:

- personal incentives for good project results, i.e., bonuses or improved promotion chances.
- providing sufficient capacity and resources for a project.
- aligning consultant and client styles.
- ensuring that both the consultant and client regard the people on the project as competent.

The aspect of aligning styles has led to the important finding in interaction theory that marked similarities or congruence between a consultant's and a client's personal attitudes, expectations, age and status is likely to generate a positive project outcome.²⁰ Ensuring a personal fit between consultants and clients on these points can therefore be regarded as both effective project preparation and an essential contribution to reducing CCI friction. The personal relationships between consultants and clients develop over the course of the

¹⁹ Cf. Kieser (2002): 117

²⁰ Cf. Jeschke (2004): 179f.

project:²¹ Consultant-client-relationship quality is shaped by each personal contact between them, every information exchanged or held back, and every immediate or mediate event connected to that relationship. The main factors in ensuring a smooth CCI are the development of reciprocal trust, commitment and satisfaction .

According to the embeddedness approach, “the role of concrete personal relations and structures of such relations in generating trust and discouraging malfeasance”²² is significant: People are embedded into a network of social relations that determines, to a large degree, their individual behavior. Smoothing the CCI would therefore mean:

- for the client, preferably choosing consultants from an existing network of business partners, i.e. a partner he already knows or who a business partner knows or who is known to have a good reputation.
- for the consultant, establishing a reputation, being integrated into a large network and acting in line with the expectations in that network.

Social psychology research has indicated how, due to changing tasks and power distributions, the expectations and roles that clients and consultants have of each other vary in the different phases of a consulting assignment (i.e. problem definition, consultant selection, concept development, implementation).²³ This holds equally true for different types of interactions, and consultants and clients need to be aware of the differences here too:

- problem solving interactions are about specific issues in the project context – communication and dialogs are important, and expectations about these need to be aligned between consultants and clients; tools for effective communication and group development can be applied.²⁴
- learning interactions are characterized by the generation of know-how for both consultant and client; their respective willingness and ability to learn is key to how well these interactions function.
- conflicts appear to be due to the differing interests of the consultant or client, or unsatisfactory results for either party – hence, the aim should be to actively manage these situations by rationalizing the individual causes of conflicts and potentially changing them; tools for conflict resolution are suggested.²⁵

To sum up, human resource and sociological theories suggest that smooth CCI is supported by:

²¹ Cf. Jeschke (2004): 188ff.

²² Granovetter (1985): 490

²³ Cf. Jeschke (2004): 180f.

²⁴ Cf. Kieser (2002): 121f.

²⁵ Cf. Kieser (2002): 123

- good personal relations between individual consultants and clients.
- a clear understanding and management of personal motivations.
- individual considerations for the people involved.
- managing group interactions as organizational development processes.

2.3. New Institutional Economics: Coping with Conflicting Interests

The theory of *New Institutional Economics* is based on the assumption that individuals strive to maximize their economic benefits in incomplete real market situations, i.e. “in the face of cognitive limits, incomplete information, and difficulties in monitoring and enforcing agreements”.²⁶ Here, then, concepts are being developed to explain and cope with information asymmetries and opportunistic individual behavior between economic transaction partners.²⁷ The central concepts are institutions supporting individuals in incomplete market situations. The main question is which (alternative) institutions in which specific economic transaction situations are efficient, and this in turn helps identify the factors in efficient institution design.²⁸

Institutions are defined as systems of norms that steer individuals’ behaviors into a certain direction in pursuing specific goals.²⁹ Examples of institutions are rule systems, such as markets, enterprises, associations, parties, constitutions, contractual agreements and action systems, further defined as trust, commitment, brand names, and business relationships.³⁰

Consultants and clients are specific transaction partners. Frictions may arise because of asymmetric information and the resulting uncertainty about potential opportunistic behavior of the partners.³¹ For instance, the consultant could exaggerate the client’s problems when starting the project; an insecure client could keep information to himself during the project; either the consultant or the client could over/under-evaluate the project results in the performance evaluation phase.³² In each of these examples one partner could use additional information for his/her own advantage in the cooperation.

For a company considering hiring a consultant to solve a problem, such a situation represents a make-or-buy decision, i.e. working on the problem alone (make) or engaging a

²⁶ DiMaggio/Powell (1991a): 3

²⁷ Cf. Schmitz (1997): 35

²⁸ Separate branches of New Institutional Economics like “Property Rights Theory”, “Agency Theory” or “Transaction Cost Economics” focus on different specific institutions and transaction situations

²⁹ Cited from Barchewitz/Armbrüster (2004): 29

³⁰ Cf. Schmitz (1997): 36

³¹ Cf. Barchewitz/Armbrüster (2004): 35, Schmitz (1997): 19

³² Cf. Schade (2000): 49-51

consultant (buy).³³ According to New Institutional Economic thinking³⁴ a consultant is hired when the “transaction costs” of this engagement are less than the equivalent make situation: A consultant is hired when “the benefits (are) greater than the transaction costs (that is, the costs of negotiation, execution, and enforcement)”.³⁵ These costs comprise methods to identify suitable consultants, meet for proposals, agree on and adjust contracts and control the consultant’s work.

New Institutional Economic thinking suggests several institutions along the consulting process to reduce transaction costs.

- In finding a suitable consultant the following institutions should be used by the client to ensure the consultant’s quality:³⁶
 - contractual rules to allocate risks between consultants and clients, preformulate reactions towards future developments, or define incentives for the consultant, i.e. success-driven variable consulting fees.
 - long-term business relations with consultants or with business partners to identify a trustworthy consultant (“know-who”³⁷).
 - consultant reputation (“being-known-of”³⁸) as a sign of his competence.
 - consultant signals, such as communication policy and style.
- During a project the client should manage for efficient project work by:³⁹
 - dynamic contract management,⁴⁰ adjusting tasks and responsibilities according to intermediate project results.
 - systematic and comprehensive project controlling to proactively handle contractual problems and conflicts.
 - formal and informal feedback sessions to avoid aggravated conflicts and last minute crises.

Accordingly, a consultant should manage for smooth CCI during the different consulting phases:⁴¹

- in marketing his services, he should stress his experience and build a strong network and reputation.

³³ Cf. Barchewitz/Armbrüster (2004): 33, Jesche (2004): 142; Kehrer/Schade (1995): 466, who term the decision “make-or-also-buy”; as a consulting project it is more cooperation than a pure buy for a client company.

³⁴ Specifically Transaction Cost Economics

³⁵ Cf. Barchewitz/Armbrüster (2004): 37-40

³⁶ DiMaggio/Powell (1991): 3

³⁷ Becker/Schade (1995): 330

³⁸ Becker/Schade (1995): 336

³⁹ DiMaggio/Powell (1991): 3

⁴⁰ Cf. Kaas/Schade (1995): 1072

⁴¹ Cf. Kaas/Schade (1995), Schade (2000)

- during the project execution phase, he should continuously build trust by fulfilling the contractual agreements, thus meeting expectations.
- after the project, systematic after-sales-management should be employed, including project wrap-up for improving client adherence and keeping continuous client contact – since a long-term relationship reduces a client's transaction costs in choosing this consultant again for follow-on projects.

To sum up, *New Institutional Economics* suggest that smooth CCI is supported by:

- efficient institutions to reduce information asymmetries and opportunistic behavior between consultants and clients along the consulting process.
- negotiating and adjusting effective terms of cooperation.
- comprehensively controlling the consulting process.

2.4. System Theories: Irritating the Client

Systems Theory can be understood as a new paradigm acknowledging the limits in deliberately steering and managing organizations. General systems theory has its roots in the natural sciences and aggregates abstract findings on the behavior and development of systems which can then in turn be concretized for organizations.⁴²

Given that systems are comprised of elements and their respective relations, defining any individual system always requires a contrast to its environment, i.e. the elements that do not belong to the system. In the context of consulting, there are at least two distinct systems involved: the client system and the consultant system.⁴³

The main insight of systems theory with regard to organizations is that only the elements of an organization themselves are able to initiate and implement changes in the organization – change is “self-organized” and can, hence, hardly be managed from outside. This insight is based on a “constructive” view of reality, with each individual system perceiving reality in its own terms based on the subjective observations by the system elements.

When applied to the above mentioned systems in the context of consulting, the client and consultant are then viewed as having distinct ways of “making sense” of the world; they have different ways of describing and evaluating problems, and both of them self-organize to cope

⁴² Cf. Klein (2002): 5-65 for a comprehensive introduction into systemic theory and its application to organizations, consulting and especially internal consulting.

⁴³ To simplify the discussion here, the third system involved, the consulting system, i.e. the system of actual interaction, has been omitted.

with them. From this perspective, managing the consultant-client interface is a major challenge since it obviously involves finding common ground for the different systems.

A consulting project can be understood as the consultant system intervening in the client system, pursuing a specific goal which may entail changes in the client organization. Successful change processes depend on the client system self-organizing, i.e.

- defining the project goals itself.
- rationalizing its approach towards the project goal.
- making its own sense of the project situation.

In this process the consultant's only possible role is as an irritation in the client system, providing the impulses for its self-organization.

The German speaking literature especially offers a multitude of publications on how a consultant can put this "systemic consulting" paradigm into practice.⁴⁴

Some tools suggested for the consultant are:

- observation and support in self-observation of the client system.
- support in reformulating and redefining problems or ways of operation so that the client system finds new ways to act.
- circular questioning to help identify non-obvious and indirect causes and effects of specific actions by the members of the client organization.
- Socratic moderation techniques, i.e., constantly mirroring discussion contributions seeking to find agreed definitions and solutions of problems as defined by the discussion participants.

The popularity of applying systems theory to consulting projects is driven by some frustration with the questionable results of many consulting projects. Systems theory provides a basis for an explanation of the circumstances that lead to successful projects: projects are successful whenever they connect to the meaning structures of the client system; practically, though, targeted systemic consulting is difficult to apply, as can be seen from the scanty empirical research and the, as yet, limited commercial success of this type of consulting.

⁴⁴ Cf. Walger (1995), Mingers (1996), Kolbeck (2002) and the literature cited there.

3. Summary: Theoretical Concepts for Smoothing the Consultant-Client Interface

Classical Organizational Theories focus on hard factors in organizing consulting projects; publications are often practical how-to-guides. *Human Resource and Sociological Theories* are concerned with individual behavior and basic psychological factors. *New Institutional Economics* is based on the opportunistic behavior of consultants and clients and suggests ways to channel this behavior for effective cooperation. *Systems Theories* propose that consultants can only irritate client systems and that there are limits on management consultants steering and organizing those systems.

The different contributions these management theories could make to smoothing CCI can be summarized in the following table:

Different Approaches to the Consultant-Client Interface
 Four Lines of Management Theory

Theories Elements	Classical Organizational Theories	Human Resource and Sociological Theories	New Institutional Economic Theories	System Theories
Some classical authors	• “Classics”: M. Weber/F.W. Taylor/H. Fayol	• Mayo et al.; Granovetter	• Williamson/Coase	• Luhmann
Main focus of theories	• Division of labor • Line organization • “Good practice”	• Psychological factors for high performance • Individual behaviors	• Institutions for coping with opportunistic behavior	• Limits of management actions
Transfer to consulting	• Mostly implicit • “How-to-guides”	• Communication tools	• Negotiation of terms for cooperation	• Systemic consulting
Learnings for the consultant-client interface	• Practical project organization and management	• Management of interpersonal relationships	• Comprehensive consulting controlling	• Irritations and self-organization of client system by consultant system

Seen as different paradigms for describing and explaining consulting, the lines of management discusses are incommensurable. Nonetheless, it seems they all offer their own specific foci on the client-consulting interface which could serve as distinct elements in an integrated theory of CCI that has yet to be developed.

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