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THE INITIAL INTERVIEW:

ASSESSING CLIENT NEEDS

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INTRODUCTION

In times of confusion and uncertainty, organizations often turn to organization development (OD) consultants for help in addressing troublesome problems. The consultant's first task is to understand the exact nature of the client's concern and then to assist in selecting appropriate strategies.

This could be a model of Initial OD Interview Questions, that provides a basic set of initial interview questions for a consultant to ask.

1. What is the problem or the reason that you called me in?
2. What is the impact of this problem?
3. What factors contribute to perpetuating the problem?
4. What have you tried so far to address the problem? What have been the results?
5. Ideally, what would you like to happen?
6. What interventions might bring about this preferred solution?
7. What forces support this intervention?
8. What forces inhibit this intervention?
9. What are you (the client) willing to invest in finding a solution?
10. What do you want from me (the consultant)?
11. Is there anything else that I need to know in order to understand the situation?
12. What are the next steps we need to take?

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The importance of this first interview lies in the fact that it forms the basis for the continuing relationship. To help ensure a successful first encounter, the questions from above focus specifically on key areas that build the foundation for the helping relationship.
One major task for a consultant is to help the client to reflect and to clarify concerns. Simply leading the client through the sequence of thought in this first interview may be an important intervention. By the end of the initial interview, the client may have found a solution that he or she is fully empowered to enact without further consulting assistance. On the other hand, this first interview may well be the beginning of a productive long-term consulting relationship.

PURPOSE OF THE INTERVIEW

The first client interview has the following basic purposes:

1. To build rapport with client;
2. To gather information; and
3. To form an agreement for proceeding.

Typically the initial interview is not intended as a complete diagnosis of the client system. Furthermore, the initial interview may not necessarily result in a contract for conducting an OD intervention. Instead this first interview is designed to help the consultant get a sense of how to approach the overall client system in order to move forward with diagnosis or intervention. Therefore the consultant and the client both need to be clear that the interview is a preliminary stage of the consultant's involvement with the client system.

THE CONSULTING STANCE

Certain basic elements in the consulting stance can help to build rapport, gather information, and form agreements. These elements are outlined in the section that follows.

1. **Be supportive.** In order to establish an optimal relationship, clients must feel safe enough to be vulnerable. Autonomy is a key to maintaining a person's self-esteem; the

very act of calling in a consultant sometimes can threaten that sense of autonomy. Therefore it is important for the consultant to communicate a general message to the client that it is perfectly acceptable to ask for help and that the client will not be judged, blamed, or criticized for the information he or she is about to share.

2. **Be attentive**. Although the twelve questions suggested provide a basic progression of thought, consulting should be fundamentally client centered. Therefore the consultant needs to be aware of the client's progress through the discussion. That may mean following digressions, tolerating apparent irrelevancies, and sharing control of the interview process.
3. **Be definitive.** Much of the initial interview consists of the consultant's "taking in" the client's reality, and it is essential that the consultant understand how the client sees and experiences the world. Having done that, the consultant must establish his or her own identity and role in the process. A healthy consulting relationship requires an explicit and concrete understanding of the client's and consultant's mutual expectations.

Although each of these principles is important, their relative emphasis may shift at different phases of this initial interview.

OVERVIEW OF THE QUESTIONS

Each of the twelve questions is quite simple. Understanding the rationale for each question will enable the consultant to concentrate on its intent rather than simply to complete a rote sequence of information gathering. Understanding the objective of each question is also important in being able to generate appropriate follow-up questions and probes.

1. *What is the problem or the reason that you called me in?* This is the obvious starting place, inasmuch as clients call consultants to help solve problems or address issues. This question opens the door to understanding the source of the discomfort, pain, or unfulfilled potential with which the client wants assistance.

Sometimes the answer a client initially gives takes the form of a solution, as if the interviewer's question had been "What do you want to do about the problem?" For example, one client was

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asked what the problem was and replied, “We need a team-building session.” A natural follow-up question could be to ask about what had been happening that led to that conclusion. It is important that the consultant have a clear picture of the current situation that the client wants changed and not simply the mechanism the client has established for making that change.

2. *What is the impact of this problem?* After exploring the client’s perception of the problem, the consultant examines the dimensions of the problem:

- Where is the problem occurring or not occurring?
- To whom is the situation a problem?
- When does the problem occur or not occur?
- When the problem occurs, what is the result?

The nature of problems is that they cause pain; inasmuch as most people prefer to avoid pain, they often choose to avoid looking closely at problems. This question (along with follow-up probes) is intended to support the client in taking a closer examination of the problem—perhaps in new ways.

3. *What factors contribute to perpetuating the problem?* Once the consultant understands the basic dimensions of the problem, it is important to know the client’s perception of why the problem is occurring. Despite asking the client to assess the forces contributing to the situation, the consultant must be aware that the client may well bring his or her own sources of distortion to this assessment. The consultant must remind the client that this is a preliminary interview and that in most instances there will be additional data gathering prior to the consultant’s drawing any conclusions. In this way, the consultant also opens the client to the possibility of forces other than those that have been previously identified.

This may also be a time for the consultant to offer other possible interpretations, not as conclusions but simply to test ideas and help the client expand the range of possibilities. Note that the phrasing of this question assumes that problems are multi-determined. Although this premise sometimes may be argued, the consulting stance here is one of open inquiry into possible explanations or interpretations without prematurely closing on a single explanation.

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4. *What have you tried so far to address the problem? What have been the results?* In general people like to believe that they can solve their own problems. This is especially true of managers, who are paid to resolve management issues. To preserve the self-esteem of the client (a key process goal of the interview), it is essential to acknowledge the client's efforts to address the problem and his or her perceptions about the results. These may be important data for what might not work in the future and for factors that must be considered for a successful intervention.

5. *Ideally, what would you like to happen?* After exploring the current situation, the client may well be ready to focus on the future. This is the time to assess and potentially to tap into the client's energy and enthusiasm for having things change. Although this may well not be the final goal statement, posing the question invites the client to a more empowered position.

In exploring this area, the client should be asked to describe the preferred situation as specifically as possible, using questions such as the following:

- If the situation were how you want it to be, what specifically would people be doing?
- How exactly would people be feeling?
- What would be happening in the environment? (For example, what would customers be saying/doing/thinking?)
- What specifically would the product or service be like?

6. *What interventions might bring about this preferred solution?* This brainstorming question is intended to elicit a range of possibilities. An underlying premise in much of OD is "equifinality"—in other words, there are various ways of doing things. More precisely, equifinality means that equally valuable results can be achieved through a variety of means. Therefore if the client provides only one option, a good follow-up question might be "What other options might be helpful?"

The consultant should also contribute expertise in terms of options and their likely consequences. If the client is overlooking an important option or is leaning toward an option that the consultant's experience has shown not to work, this is the time to speak. After all, the process consultant is being hired for his or her process expertise.

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7. *What forces support this intervention?* and

8. *What forces inhibit this intervention?* After a direction has been determined, it is important to detect any hidden mine fields and to identify additional support that could be enlisted to help ensure success. Examples of forces (either supporting or opposing) include the following:

- The motivation levels of the employees involved;
- The presence (or absence) of key allies within and outside the client system;
- The adequacy of resources, including money and time;
- The level of support for such activities within the organizational culture; and
- The timing of the activities and how they fit with other events or stages within the larger organizational context.

Once these forces have been identified, the client should be asked to reassess how reasonable the selected approach will be. Assuming it is still a "Go," these forces should be incorporated into any plans.

9. *What are you (the client) willing to invest in finding a solution?* By this point in the discussion, the client and the consultant will be much clearer about the nature of the situation, the potential benefits of addressing it, and the likelihood of success or failure. It is now time to address costs and risks.
For most interventions, the primary costs focus on money and time. Risks may include potential loss of the client's credibility in the organization, the situation worsening, or the emotional pain of going through the intervention.

10. *What do you want from me (the consultant)?* Assuming that the intervention is still a "go," the consultant can move toward exploring his or her role in the effort. Although in some cases the client will be ready to move toward formal contracting, other cases will need additional data gathering or a time lapse before a contract can be developed

This discussion needs to produce a mutually satisfactory agreement on roles and conditions for the future relationship, in which the following points are covered:

- The consultant's role is defined in a way that will allow successful performance; and

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- The client's role is defined in away that will ensure the necessary support and commitment.

11. *Is there anything else that I need to know in order to understand the situation?* This is a catch-all question. Experience also shows that human communication is not always a linear process; questions that are addressed early in a discussion might be answered in a different light or with different information later in the interview. This is a last check so that the client may reflect on the total discussion and add whatever additional thoughts he or she might have.

12. *What are the next steps we need to take?* Before ending, there need to be agreements about how and when further communication or contact will occur. If the results of the meeting need to be documented or contracts prepared, responsibility needs to be assigned.

In addition, this might be a time to recognize that a relationship has begun. Two or more individuals have come to know things about one another that may be quite intimate, perhaps exposing vulnerabilities that normally are not shown. There may be value in acknowledging the level of discussion that has taken place and reassuring the client that their problems and concerns will be handled with care. If appropriate, it may also help to offer whatever level of reassurance can be genuinely provided on hopes for improvement or on the likely success of what the client is attempting to achieve.

USING THE QUESTIONS

These twelve questions are intended as a general framework for discussion and are not meant to be restrictive or a prescriptive formula for success. Clearly there are variations on questions and avenues that either extend the questions posed or go off in other directions. The first rule is to follow the client. However, having so followed the client, the questions may help the consultant to reorient by providing a checklist of areas to have covered prior to finalizing an agreement for further work with the client.

The questions primarily focus on the client's perspective on the problem and what is needed. This is not to preclude the consultant from providing his or her own expertise and perspective in either suggesting interpretations or providing options for proceeding.

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Further, the questions are primarily intended to orient the consultant to areas of inquiry and do not necessarily represent the optimal phrasing or level of detail. For some areas, it may be necessary to employ numerous probes; in others, the simplicity of these questions may suffice. These questions should not preclude the consultant from following additional lines of inquiry based on the information the client is providing, nor from phrasing questions in a manner that is natural to the consultant and the situation.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Although the questions are presented in a set sequence, the interview may not flow in such a linear fashion. It may be necessary to jump around or cycle back through questions that were addressed earlier.

Finally, these questions are intended for use during an initial diagnostic interview; however, there may be situations in which the consultant might provide the questions to the client in advance of the interview. This might be particularly helpful under any of the following conditions:

- The presenting problem is particularly complex or requires extensive thought as to its roots;
- Time for the initial interview is limited;
- The organization's norms are more consistent with the submission of written questions in advance of meetings; and/or
- This particular client prefers to reflect in advance on the questions.

REFERENCE

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